

A Novel World: The Writing of

# Ticking Clocks

Time flies when you're ...

by **A G Hansell**

Novels by A G Hansell

*A Novel World: The Writing of*  
Ticking Clocks (2024 ... My true story)

*A Novel World: Before*  
Angelina (2024)

# **Ticking Clocks**

by A G Hansell

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This story is true but seen and told only told from the author's perspective. The author has described events from his limited viewpoint and recollection, which may be inaccurate or influenced by his interpretation and reaction to said events. Some scenes are either entirely fictitious or representative of dreams or vague memories that cannot be corroborated and may be inaccurate. The names of people, characters, businesses, and places in this book, plus events and incidents, may have been changed. They also may be either the product of the author's imagination or described in a fictitious manner.

*We are but moments in an endless time—despite how never-ending  
that moment may feel at times.*

For my kids

Dedicated to my wife

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# PROLOGUE TIME

I had a vision once: a waking dream designed to frighten, it seemed. So gruesome that I dared not close my eyes in case I were sucked down into the darkness forever. But every dream tells a story and has a meaning, doesn't it?

Eventually, I figured it out and wrote it up in one of my books. It was a nightmare about the times before time existed for me, and just before the ticking clocks. The vision went something like this ...

*Curled up and suspended, movement restricted. I sense the darkness isn't because my eyes are closed. It's pitch black all around me. The pulsing, gurgling gush of fluids and gasses flood my ears, accompanied by the buh-boom, buh-boom of the life force that's both sustaining and destabilizing my maker's very being, dragging me right along with her.*

*Ah, I know where I am: Horrors I've fought to forget have hauled me through this place numerous times, despite my wish to avoid it.*

*It's hot in here, I think.*

*A foolish thought because it triggers the nightmare, inviting them in. They're always trying to get in. They line up behind me, neatly organized rows of pairs. Him and her, hundreds more, thousands, millions, trillions, arranged in a tree of life, becoming wider and wider the farther back it goes. Mops, Mohicans, wigs and crewcuts, curls and ponytails. Tribe leaders and members, bankers, pirates, and would-be royalty. Candlestick makers.*

*Surveying the impossibly wide line at the tree's top, I reel back when it erupts in a tsunami of violence, a rolling ocean of boiling blood that surges down through the ages. The murderous flood dries up at the back with time, first darkening, black, then fading, grey, ashes, devastation. But the crimson sea thunders ever closer at the fore. I hear the nearing waves of shock, and horror, and anger, and I see the spraying red splashes reaching out for me.*

*I try to turn and run, frantic, searching for escape from this sea of fury that's heading right for me. But I'm still restricted, and it's still pitch black except behind me, where the bright white flashes of their fierce clashes mingle with their blood and turn the sky pink. Their dying fingers discard handed-down weapons at the wayside, piled to the heavens along either side of the failing tree. Clubs and threats, knives and terror, swords and words, chains and blackmail: a never-ending arsenal of destructive tools perfected over eons.*

*The bright white flashes burn my eyes, and their scalding ocean of blood barbed with suffering consumes me, choking my soul to death and threatening to*

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*drown me entirely, to take me with them.*

*But I'm not ready to die yet.*

*I sense an opening, a chance to escape! Pushing, squirming, grasping, and kicking, I clamber free. Coughing and spluttering, I spit out their crimson barbs and suck in my first life's breath. Then, I pick up my weapons of choice from the piles along the wayside and brace myself for the grim road ahead, my own blood boiling within as I follow in their footsteps.*

*Someone must pay the price for all this pain.*

... and so, the clocks started quietly ticking, so faintly that I couldn't hear them above all the noise around me. Tick tock, tick tock. Ever louder, and louder, and louder still, until ...

Tick tock, tick tock ...



# FRYING TIME

Some memories frighten us so much that we lock them away forever, while others present themselves for us readily. I suppose we remember only those we ... choose?

But when instinct concludes that remembering isn't wise, yet *something* squeezes through, despite our attempts to block it, what do we do? We try to force ourselves not to think about it? Or we change it? Idolize it? Or we fantasize ...

A little boy stands in the middle of a dark room ... no, a field ... no, in the center of the universe, alone. The entrance to a snow tunnel appears before him as if he were looking through someone else's eyes. The eyes frantically scour the tunnel's black depths. Then the head with the eyes in it swings around.

Only unbearably bright light back there; almost a half-circle, as if trying to surround and blind him. Impossible to see. He faces forward again, but visibility down the tunnel is practically zero. Bitter-cold snow forms its outer edges. A terrible darkness fills the void inside.

An angry buzzing from beyond the harsh light behind him roars louder and fiercer, coming closer, getting more threatening and aggressive with each passing moment. The eyes look down and stare at scratched, bleeding legs dressed in short pants and sneakers, a dark, soaked patch on the front of the shorts. A wet line streaks down the inside of one leg, glistening in the fierce white light.

*My pants? My legs?*

*Seeing the dark blotch on my shorts and the wetness on my legs throws me into a panic, and I cross my arms and stuff my fists under my armpits, hugging my chest, squeezing hard with every fiber in my body.*

*This reaction, this feeling, I know them.*

*I'd been here before. When something bad happened.*

*Now, it's happening again.*

*Lost and whimpering, I stand at a tunnel's entrance, panting, sweating, hesitating; I've been running from something, looking for somewhere to hide. Now, there's no other way forward: The tunnel is dug deep into a mountain of snow, impassable on all sides. My rapid glancing backward and forward increases in*

*pace. Uncertainty growing. Eyes too frightened to linger long enough to see what's chasing me. But I hear it. And it's getting louder. The booming buzzing of an immense swarm of bees. Fear incarnate, crawling my flesh, scraping my bones like a screaming sharp knife scratching across porcelain. The humming sound forces itself into my head from all sides, pressing deeper and harder, louder and closer. Fear unstoppable.*

*I don't want to go down that dark tunnel. I've no clue what's in there, where it goes, or what I'll find at its end. But my head is ready to explode. And I don't want to get caught. But I can't decide, even though I know there's no choice. My breathing quickens with each new second. Unable to stop myself, I turn to check on the noise that's causing my bones to shudder, then take a half-step backward into the tunnel. I feel the roof not far above my head.*

*A new sound from close by shocks me into action, and I turn to run down the tunnel. But it's too late. The angry buzzing bees have disappeared, replaced by the thump of heavy boots stomping on a thin rug that barely covers an old wooden floor.*

*The tunnel is gone as if it had only existed in my head.*

*I look back, just in time to see a bulky hand with a thick gold ring on each finger swinging into the side of my face, and I'm lifted from the floor and thrown into the door of a cupboard. It's a double, sliding, folding door, and the hinges give way in one section. I land with my back on the floor between two open doors. Cowering back into the cupboard, I hope the hanging coats will protect me from the next blow as he raises his hand high again.*

*"Give the boy a break," a woman says gently, her voice shaking, her face swelling, a trickle of blood seeping down from above her left eye. "He just got stung big time. No wonder he pissed himself. I'll clean it up," she promises. "And you're gonna kill him if you keep hitting him like that," she says, whispering directly into one ear.*

*"This fighting's for out there, not in here," she says, handing him a bottle, pointing hers toward the army barracks. "Here, kiss 'n' make up," and she rubs his cock through the front of his pants, and then they're doing it again.*

*When they're not fighting, they're doing it. And they're always drinking. Fighting or doing it, no matter what, they're drinking.*

*I crawl further into the momentary safety of the cupboard, into hiding, but also, despite the stinging coming from my battered eye, I take a quick peek out. And even while he's humping her, she slowly fades away into nothingness and disappears. Somehow, I know that it's not just for now that she's gone, but she is gone from my life ... for good.*

*Blinking my eyelids, I look again, still hoping, eyes hunting for her in the small*

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*room. But she's not there. And she's not coming back. She's left us with him. How could she?*

*The man sits on the sofa, a heavy, black, old-fashioned telephone in one hand, and combs his other hand through his thick hair and beard. He dials a long number, talks on the phone, and, as simple as that, he also disappears. And as I realize that he, too, is gone forever, I hear the bees returning.*

*I fear they will stay with me forever.*

*We sit in a minibus with "County Council" painted on the side. The bus driver takes us to our new home, our new lives, my brothers and I, all five of us alone in the world. Yes, we have each other, but that counts for nothing, for the sum of nothing is nothing, and that is what we've become: Nothing to everybody.*

*Our short past is over, and in its passing, our future endangered. My brothers and I hardly dare look at each other. Our stolen glances reek of fear as if we expect at any moment that one of us will take up the mantle, the bottle, the gold rings, and the hitting. Well, maybe not the two-year-old. Not yet, anyway.*

*That we are together now offers no comfort because we'll surely leave each other as they left us. But at least then, we won't have to look at each other in fear. And we'll know that no one will stay with us or truly be with us, ever. So no more need to pretend. No chance of false hope.*

*I look at one brother, and he fades away. And so does the next, and the next, until finally, I am alone. Except for the bees that are still buzzing. Forever buzzing. Except for me and the bees, the minibus is empty.*

*I feel like crying, but something is broken, and the tears won't come.*

Then, the little boy stands, walks to the door, and steps off the bus. The bees follow him, out into the center of the universe, into a scorching fire.

Tick tock, tick tock ...

# FIRE TIME

“Out of the frying pan into the fire” is almost five hundred years old, with roots possibly going back more than two thousand—to Aesop’s fables. But no one cares about all that when they’re burning in a ravaging inferno or have escaped one danger to find themselves in the arms of a wolf in sheep’s clothing. A monster. A devil.

When I was quite a bit older, I went back to visit the devil’s mansion, where that minibus had dropped me and my brothers off decades earlier.

The bees came with me.

The children’s home was close to a valley coincidentally called The Devil’s Punchbowl, supposedly created in an age long past during a run-in between Thor and the Devil. It was safe enough to go to the house: I’d heard the place was empty, closed down. No more orphans or battered kids. No devil. No bad man. Only an old house in grounds that were steadily overgrowing.

Just driving up to the building triggered a recollection of hidden moments of the kind I hoped my mind had locked away forever. But there were so many of these memories buried deep within me like a mass grave of undying demons that, from time to time, they still managed to force their way out ...

*The ivy-covered mansion comes in sight as I run, feet crunching on the long, gray-graveled driveway bordered by thick rows of dark-green rhododendrons and light-green azaleas, trees, and small pathways dotted here and there. It’s a beautiful old manor house, which might seem idyllic at another time—my new home. Now, however, I’m desperate to avoid it; I wish I could bury myself in the undergrowth, hide from him, or better still, disappear so he can’t get me into that building. But the big old home comes closer and closer no matter what I wish.*

*Despite my running, the bad man—as I secretly called him—stays close behind me, taunting in a fake sickly-sweetly voice and stepping on my heels, trying to trip me up, slowing me down so I can’t get away.*

*“Come on,” he says. “You’re not even trying.”*

*With my heavily laden school bag and short legs, I’m not fast enough to escape him.*

*But it’s not just the weight of the backpack or my small-boy steps. There’s something else I can feel. I can’t see it, or touch it, or even name it, but it’s there, all right. Something tying me to him, stopping me from getting too far from him, and I can’t shake it off. I’m stuck with it, and it’s my fault. I know that, and I hate*

*myself for it.*

*A bright ray of sunlight flashes through the thick covering of leaves, branches, and colorful blooms, momentarily blinding me, and I stumble over a stray branch and fall to my knees. The tripping feet behind me come to a standstill.*

*“Get up,” the bad man says, sneering. “Don’t be a baby. You didn’t even scratch yourself.”*

*I raise my eyes from the ground, look around me, and I see it and remember. A tiny opening. Without thinking, I turn, smile, and drop my school bag, calling out, “Can’t catch me!” Crouching low, I turn off the driveway and disappear through some azaleas to reach a secret kid-sized cave-like clearing in the bushes. But I realize my mistake as I stop at the edge.*

*I see two kids kneeling on the leaf-covered ground, a girl and a boy, no older than me, five or six maybe. They are ... doing things to each other ... things they shouldn’t .... They look at me with wide-open eyes as a crashing sound warns them of the bad man with the tripping feet trying to break through the rhododendrons.*

*“What are you doing?” he shouts, poking his head between the leaves.*

*The kids screech, and, grabbing their clothes, they run away through the seemingly closed branches, the little girl’s tiny white buttocks defiantly flashing as she disappears from sight.*

*Oh my god, we were too young for those games, I think now, driving up the driveway at a snail’s pace.*

*“Home, boy,” the man snarls, pulling me with him as he exits the bushes onto the driveway toward the ivy-covered mansion, the one I was hoping to avoid. The race-me-home heel-kicking game has lost its fun: Finding the other kids in the small woods has spoiled his usual routine.*

*Today, it’s my turn.*

*The bad man had sent the other kids who were on the school bus with me up to the house ahead so he could “Focus on listening to what I learned at school today.” One of his safe patterns—safe for himself, so the other children’s home staff and kids wouldn’t interrupt him when he’s doing important things—like educating a child.*

*Bath night is another one of those times—when he does his health-check drill for all kids. None of us talk about it—not as much as a single word. For the rest of the week, bath night simply doesn’t exist. We don’t look at each other during bath time. We play, splash each other with water and soap bubbles, and wash ourselves, but we never look at each other. We don’t want to see our fear in the eyes of another. Fear of being last in line for the health check while all the other*

*kids read their goodnight stories in bed.*

*I often wondered how he could use so many different routines, year upon year, and no one ever did anything about them. Did the other adults not see what was happening?*

*Why don't the big kids say anything to the other adults? I know I'll eventually become one of the big kids, and maybe then I will say something, but right now, I'm too young. I'm also his favorite, so he watches me more carefully than the others, and he's hurt me before, and threatened worse. So, I can't do anything—it's too dangerous. Isn't it?*

*Eyes cast down as I climb the staircase up to the large attic, the bad man close behind me, I watch my feet as they stomp my dying heart into the hard waxed wood. Head drooping and tired of breathing, my life escapes me, taking me far away from here, just my cold, used carcass left behind. No one can hurt me when I'm dead, can they?*

*Living death is the only way I can survive this last part of the walk-from-the-bus routine, which, he says, is to "Teach the child important stuff, like counting," by helping him do one of his daily jobs.*

*In the attic stock room, an overpowering smell of shoe polish and cleaning things fills my head, but I could already smell them on the way up the stairs. I can smell them just by thinking about them. I smell them in my nightmares.*

*Sometimes, the fear and the panic are triggered by that strong smell of wax shoe polish. But often, it's anger.*

*Other times, it's the bees buzzing.*

*But anything can trigger the fear and the panic.*

*The bad man lies me down on blankets he's taken from a stockpile of spares and spread out on the floor. He pulls down my shorts and immediately a big black cloud bears down on me; it swallows me, fills my vision with such darkness, a flickering jagged blackness I know is going to totally ravage the remains of my soul.*

I slam on the car brakes as my mind thrashes so violently in my skull that it beats up the mother of all splitting headaches. Gravel crunches under the thin rubber tires as the vehicle grinds to an immediate stop.

Squeezing eyes tight, I raise my palms to my temples, pressing hard to counter the pain and stop my churning brain once and forever. I force myself to breathe deeply, slowly, quietening my thumping heart.

*Nobody here. Nobody here, I tell myself over and over.*

Then I open my eyes and look around at everything, focusing on nothing but fighting the memories back into their eternal burial place.

I had developed the ability to hide my memories at an early age. It was already a natural, instinctive defense mechanism before I went to live in that old mansion. I was so good at it that I could forget what happened the day before—if I wanted. And often, I did. So, my first seventeen years of life are mostly obliterated, and that which remains is just a blur.

I never went back to that place again. Never went quite that close to the past. But the past didn't let me go. It was and still remains relentless, chasing me down constantly, even to this day.

So, for the first few decades or so of my life, I lived most of the time in daydreams and nightmares ...

Tick tock, tick tock ...

# **DROWNING TIME**