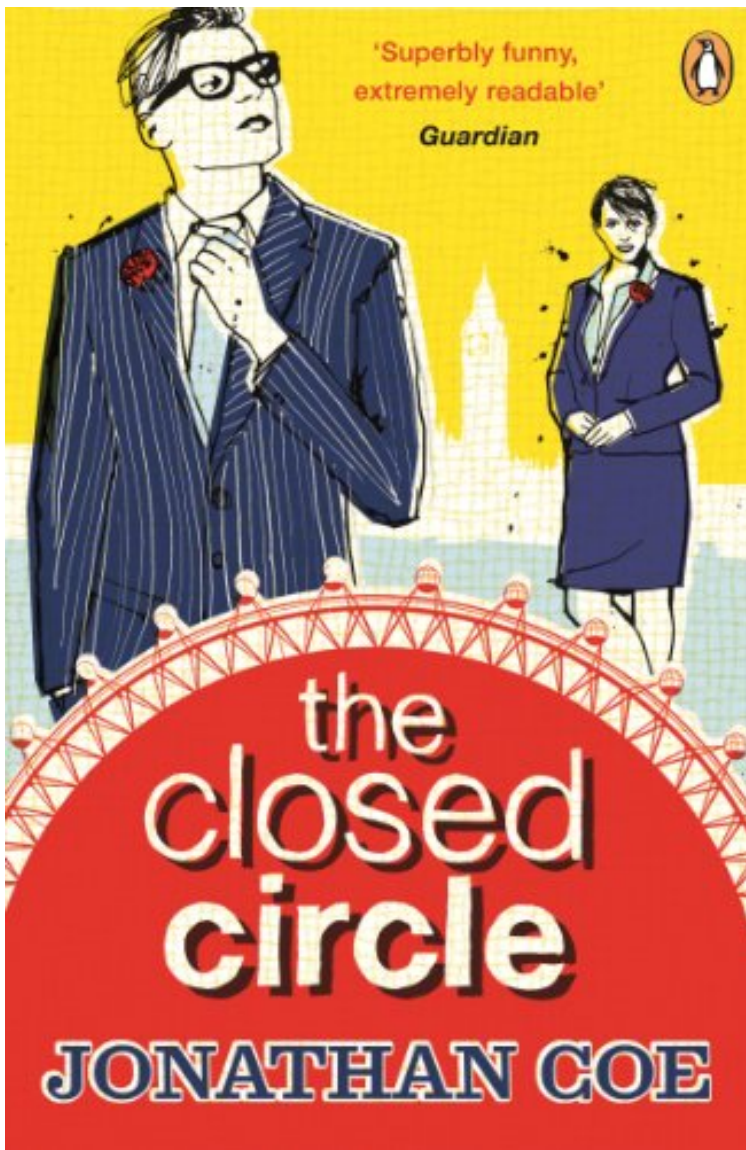


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# The Closed Circle



Par Jonathan Coe  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Closed Circle is Jonathan Coe's hilarious sequel to The Rotters' ClubIt's the end of the century and Benjamin Trotter and friends are all grown up. Life is a ceaseless whirl of jobs, marriages, kids - and self-inflicted angst. Despite the shiny optimism of Blair's Britain, youthful hopes and dreams feel betrayed. Is the Government (and by extension Benjamin's MP brother Paul) to blame? Or are the 'rotters' themselves - only passingly faithful to their dreams - really at fault?The Closed Circle - sequel to The Rotters' Club - depicts a group of former school friends as older, wiser and disillusioned in Blair's Britain at the turn of the millennium. It proves that the present can never truly be disentangled from the past. 'Terrific. An incisive portrait of Britain at the turn of the century' Spectator'Coe's finest achievement since What a

Carve up! Time Out' Popular fiction at its best' Daily Mail Jonathan Coe's novels are filled with biting political satire, moving and astute observations of life and hilarious set pieces that have made him one of the most popular writers of his generation. His other titles, *The Accidental Woman*, *The Dwarves of Death*, *The Terrible Privacy of Maxwell Sim*, *The House of Sleep* (winner of the 1998 Prix Médicis étranger), *A Touch of Love*, *What a Carve Up!* (winner of the 1995 John Llewellyn Rhys Prize) and *The Rain Before it Falls*, are all available in Penguin paperback.

Extrait Etretat Tuesday, 7th December, 1999 Morning Sister Dearest, The view from up here is amazing, but it's too cold to write very much. My fingers can barely hold the pen. But I promised myself I'd start this letter before returning to England, and this really is my last chance. Last thoughts, then, on leaving the European mainland? On coming home? I'm scouring the horizon and looking for omens. Calm sea, clear blue sky. Surely that has to count for something. People come up here to kill themselves, apparently. In fact there's a boy further down the path, standing dangerously close to the edge, who looks as though he may be planning to do exactly that. He's been standing there for as long as I've been on this bench and he's only wearing a T-shirt and jeans. Must be freezing. Well, at least I haven't got to that point yet; although there have been some bad moments, these last few weeks. Moments when it seemed like I'd lost my bearings completely, that it was all spinning out of control. You must have known that feeling, once. In fact I know you did. Anyway, it's over now. Onwards and upwards. Beneath me I can see Etretat, the wide curve of its beach, the pinnacled rooftops of the chateau where I stayed last night. I never did manage to explore the town. Funny how, when you have the freedom to do anything you want, you end up doing so little. Infinite choice seems to translate into no choice at all. I could have headed out for sole dieppoise and ended up being plied with free Calvados by a flirty waiter; instead I stayed inside and watched some old Gene Hackman movie dubbed into French. Four out of ten, for that. See me afterwards. Could do better. Is this any way to begin a new life? Am I really beginning a new life, in any case? Perhaps I'm just resuming an old one, after a long and finally pointless interruption.

On board the ferry, Pride of Portsmouth In the restaurant Tuesday, 7th December, 1999 Late afternoon I wonder how they manage to make a profit from this line, at this time of year? Apart from me and the man behind the counter--what should I call him, is he the steward or purser or something?--this place is deserted. It's dark outside now and there is rain flecking the windows. Perhaps it's just spray. Makes me want to shiver looking at it, even though it's warm inside, almost overheated. I'm writing this letter in the little A5 notebook I bought in Venice. It has a silky blue hardback cover with a marbled pattern, and lovely thick, roughly cut pages. When I've finished--if I ever finish--I suppose I could always cut the pages out and put them in an envelope. But there wouldn't be much point, would there? Anyway, it hasn't got off to a flying start. Rather self-indulgent so far, I'd say. You'd think I'd know how to write to you, after the thousands and thousands of words I've written in the last few years. But somehow, every new letter I write to you feels like the first one. I've got a feeling this is going to be the longest of all. When I sat down on that bench high on the chalk cliffs above Etretat, I hadn't even decided whether it was you I was going to write to, or Stefano. But I chose you. Aren't you proud of me? You see, I'm determined that I'm not going to go down that road. I promised myself that I wouldn't contact him, and a promise to yourself is the most binding of all. It's difficult, because there hasn't been a day for four months when we haven't spoken, or emailed, or at least texted. That kind of habit is hard to break. But I know it will get better. This is the cold turkey period. Looking at my mobile sitting on the table next to the coffee, I feel like an ex-smoker having a packet of fags dangled in front of her nose. It would be so easy to text him. He taught me how to send text messages, after all. But that would be a crazy thing to do. He'd hate me for it, anyway. And I'm scared of him starting to hate me--really scared. That scares me more than anything. Silly, isn't it? What difference does it make, if I'm not going to see him again? I'll make a list. Making a list is always a good displacement activity. Lessons I've learned from the Stefano disaster: 1. -Married men rarely leave their wives and daughters for single women in their late thirties. 2. -You can still be having an affair with someone, even if you're not having sex. 3. I can't think of a number three. Even so, that's not bad going. Both those lessons are important. They'll stand me in good stead, the next time something like this happens. Or rather, they'll help me to make sure (I hope) that there won't be a next time. Well, that looks good, on paper--especially this expensive, thick, creamy, Venetian paper. But I remember a line that Philip always used to quote to me. Some crusty old pillar of the British establishment who said, in his dotage: "Yes--I've learned from my mistakes, and I'm sure I could repeat them perfectly." Ha, ha. That will probably be me.

Fourth coffee of the day National Film Theatre Cafe London, South Bank Wednesday, 8th December, 1999 Afternoon Yes, I'm back, sister darling, after an interruption of twenty hours or so, and the first question that occurs to me, after a morning spent more or less aimlessly wandering the streets, is this: who are all

these people, and what do they do? It's not that I remember London very well. I don't think I've been here for about six years. But I do (or thought I did) remember where some of my favorite shops were. There was a clothes shop in one of the back streets between Covent Garden and Long Acre, where you could get nice scarves, and about three doors along, there used to be some people who did hand-painted ceramics. I was hoping to get an ashtray for Dad, a sort of peace-offering. (Wishful thinking, for sure: it would take more than that . . . ) Anyway, the point is, neither of these places seems to be there any more. Both have been turned into coffee shops, and both of them were absolutely packed. And also, of course, coming from Italy

I'm used to seeing people talking on their mobiles all day, but for the last few years I've been saying to everyone over there, in a tone of great authority, "Oh, you know, they're never going to catch on in Britain--not to the same extent." Why do I always do that? Bang on about stuff I know nothing about, as if I was a world expert? Jesus, everybody here has got one now. Clamped to their ears, walking up and down the Charing Cross Road, jabbering to themselves like loons. Some of them have even got these earpieces which

mean you don't realize they're on the phone at all, and you really do think they must be care-in-the-community cases. (Because there are plenty of those around as well.) But the question is--as I said--who are all these people and what do they do? I know I shouldn't generalize from the closure of a couple of shops (anyway, perhaps I got the wrong street), but my first impression is that there are vast numbers of people who don't work in this city any more, in the sense of making things or selling things. All that seems to be considered rather old-fashioned. Instead, people meet, and they talk. And when they're not meeting or talking in person, they're usually talking on their phones, and what they're usually talking about is an arrangement to meet. But what I want to know is, when they actually meet, what do they talk about? It seems that's another thing I've been getting wrong in Italy. I kept going round telling everybody how reserved the English are. But we're not, apparently--we've become a nation of talkers. We've become intensely sociable. And yet I still don't have a clue what's being said. There's this great conversation going on all over the country, apparently, and I feel I'm the one person who doesn't know enough to join in. What's it about? Last night's TV? The ban on British beef? How to beat the Millennium bug? And another thing, while I remember: that bloody great wheel that's appeared on the side of the Thames, next to County Hall.

What's that for, exactly? Anyway, that's enough social commentary for now, I think. The other things I wanted to tell you are, first of all, that I've decided to face the music, bite the bullet and so on, and go back to Birmingham tonight (because the hotel prices here are phenomenal, and I simply can't afford to stay here for another day); and also that I may have been back in England for less than twenty-four hours, but already I'm faced with a blast from the past. It comes in the form of a flyer I picked up at the Queen Elizabeth Hall.

There's going to be a reading there on Monday, the title of which is "Goodbye to All That." Six "figures from public life" (it says here) are going to tell us "what they most regret leaving behind or what they are happiest to see the back of, at the end of the second Christian Millennium." And look who's number four on the list: no, not Benjamin (although he was the one we all thought would be a famous writer), but Doug Anderton--who we are told is a "journalist and political commentator," if you please. Another omen, maybe? A sign I'm not making a bold foray into the future after all, but taking the first involuntary steps on a journey

backwards? I mean, for God's sake, I haven't seen Doug in about fifteen years. The last time was at my wedding. At which, I seem to remember, he pressed me drunkenly up against a wall and told me that I was marrying the wrong man. (He was right, of course, but not in the sense that he meant it.) How weird would it be now, to sit in an audience and listen to him pontificating about pre-millennial angst and social change? I suppose it would just be a version of what we all had to put up with more than twenty years ago, sitting

around the editorial table of the school magazine. Only now we're all developing grey hair and back problems. Is your hair grey yet, I wonder, dear Miriam? Or is that not something you have to worry about any more? There's a Birmingham train in fifty minutes. I'm going to make a dash for it. Second coffee of the day. Coffee Republic. New Street, Birmingham. Friday, 10th December, 1999. Morning. Oh, Miriam--the house!

That bloody house. It hasn't changed. Nothing about it has changed, since you left it (and a quarter of a century has gone by since then: almost exactly), except that it is colder, and emptier, and sadder (and cleaner) than ever. Dad pays someone to keep it spotless, and apart from her coming in twice a week to do the dusting, I don't think he speaks to a soul, now that Mum's gone. He's also bought this little place in France and seems to spend a lot of time there. He spent most of Wednesday night showing me pictures of the septic tank and the new boiler he's had installed, which was thrilling, as you can imagine. Once or twice he said that I should go over there some time and stay for a week or two, but I could tell that he didn't really mean it, and besides, I don't want to. Nor do I want to stay under his roof for more nights than I can help it,

this time. Last night I had a meal out with Philip and Patrick. Now--I hadn't seen Philip for more than two years, and I suppose it's pretty common, in these circumstances, for ex-wives to look at their ex-husbands and wonder what on earth it was that drew them together in the first place. I'm talking about physical attraction, more than anything else. I remember that when I was a student, and lived in Mantova for the best part of a year, back in 1981 if I can believe myself when I write that (God!), I was surrounded by young Italian men, most of them gorgeous, all of them as good as begging me to go to bed with them. A posse of teenage Mastroiannis in their sexual prime, gagging for it, not to mince words. My Englishness made me exotic in a way which would have been unthinkable in Birmingham, and I could have had my pick of that lot. I could have had them all, one after the other. But what did I choose instead? Or who did I choose, rather. I chose Philip. Philip Chase, whey-faced, nerdy Philip Chase, with his straggly ginger beard and his horn-rimmed specs, who came to stay with me for a week and somehow got me into bed on the second day and ended up changing the whole course of my life, not permanently, I suppose, but radically . . . fundamentally . . . I don't know. I can't think of the word. One word is as good as another, sometimes. Was it just because we were too young, I wonder? No, that's not fair on him. Of all the boys I'd known up until that point, he was the most straightforward, the most sympathetic, the least arrogant (Doug and Benjamin were so up themselves, in their different ways!). There is a tremendous decency in Phil, as well: he is absolutely reliable and trustworthy. He made the divorce so untraumatic, I remember--a back-handed compliment, I know, but if you ever want to get divorced from someone . . . Philip's your man. As for Patrick, well . . . I want to see as much of Pat as I can, while I'm here, obviously. He is so grown up now. Of course, we have been writing and emailing each other constantly, and last year he came out to Lucca for a few days, but still--it surprises me every time. I can't tell you what a peculiar feeling it is, to look at this man--he may be only fifteen, but that's what he seems like, now--this tall (rather skinny, rather pale, rather sad-looking) man and know that once he was . . . inside me, not to put too fine a point on it. From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly Starred . The Rotters' Club (2002), Coe's witty novel of teenage schoolmates growing up in 1970s Birmingham, England, introduced an expansive cast of characters. With echoes of Anthony Trollope and Anthony Powell, this wonderful, compulsively readable sequel explores the adults those young people became. It opens in 1999 and closes in 2003 and paints a satirical but moving portrait of life at the turn of the century. Claire Newman still mourns her sister, who vanished without a trace in *The Rotters' Club*. Benjamin Trotter still mourns his one true (teenage) love. His brother, Paul, is an ambitious member of Parliament in "Blair's Brave New Britain." Doug Anderton and Philip Chase became journalists, and the first book's other characters all reappear in some way or another (along with flashbacks to many of their teenage escapades). Coe cleverly works real events into the plot: London's Millennium Eve, the possible shutdown of a British auto manufacturer, the war in Iraq. The theme, as in *The Rotters' Club*, concerns the conflicts and connections between individual decisions and societal events, but while Coe's political sensibility is readily apparent, this novel, with its incredibly well developed characters and its immensely engaging narrative, is no polemical tract. It's a compelling, dramatic and often funny depiction of the way we live now both savage and heartfelt at the same time. (May 31)