

Catherine Fox was educated at Durham and London Universities. She is the author of three adult novels: *Angels and Men*, *The Benefits of Passion* and *Love for the Lost*; a Young Adult fantasy novel, *Wolf Tide*; and a memoir, *Fight the Good Fight: From vicar's wife to killing machine*, which relates her quest to achieve a black belt in judo. She lives in Liverpool, where her husband is dean of the cathedral.

‘A delightful portrait of the follies and foibles in a contemporary Anglican diocese, written with wit, wisdom and impeccable liberal sympathies.’

Michael Arditti, author and critic

‘Clear-eyed, moving and mischievously funny, *Acts and Omissions* is at one with the deep linguistic and human resources that make the modern Church of England what it is. The novel brims with wit and heart, acknowledging the awkwardness and consolations of Anglicanism in the twenty-first century. Hugely entertaining and highly recommended.’

Richard Beard, author of *Lazarus is Dead*

‘Catherine Fox writes so well about the Church of England that she can make sense of a world in which the salacious and the sacred are intimately entwined. This is a novelist who is never frightened to enter ecclesiastical territory where bishops fear to tread. She writes not merely with affection but with love for an institution that is creaking under the weight of its own contradictions.’

‘*Acts and Omissions* will help people in the Church who already pray for one another daily to like one another a little more. It is also a great collection of intertwining stories that throw a welcome ray of light for those who find it hard to understand why an institution made up of good, caring people has become better known for hypocrisy than for happiness.’

‘The Diocese of Lindchester is full of people who bless one another, sometimes without realizing it. They blessed me.’

**The Very Revd Kelvin Holdsworth, Provost,
St Mary’s Cathedral, Glasgow**

‘This is a delicious novel: clever, witty and subtle – and as good a rendering of the Church of England as you could wish to read. I want to live in Lindchester. I want to visit the cathedral, drink prosecco with Fr Dominic, become friends with the Dean and marry the Archdeacon. Most of all, I want Catherine Fox to hurry up and write the sequel.’

The Baroness Sherlock

‘*Acts and Omissions* is brave and beautiful, devastatingly honest, mercilessly funny, fundamentally kind. It will make you think, laugh – possibly even cry. It’s one of those hugely enjoyable novels which has you racing on to find out what happens, but that you never really want to come to an end.’

**Dr Margaret Masson, Vice-Principal,
St Chad’s College, Durham**

ACTS AND OMISSIONS



Catherine Fox



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*For
John and Molly with love, and in grateful
memory of Kate Jones*

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Dramatis personae

Bishops

Paul Henderson	Bishop of Lindchester
Bob Hooty	Suffragan Bishop of Barcup

Priests and deacons

Dominic Todd	Parish priest
Marion Randall	Dean of Lindchester
Mark Lawson	Cathedral canon chancellor, 'Mr Happy'
Giles Littlechild	Cathedral canon precentor
Matt Tyler	Archdeacon of Lindchester
Martin Rogers	Bishop Paul's chaplain
Philip Voysey-Scott	Cathedral canon treasurer
Virginia Coleman	Deacon, curate to Wendy Styles
Wendy Styles	Parish priest, 'Father Wendy'

People

Andrew Jacks	Director of the Dorian Singers
Miss Barbara Blatherwick	Cathedral Close resident, former school matron
Becky Rogers	Estranged wife of bishop's chaplain, mother of Leah and Jessica
Danny Rossiter	Jane's son
Freddie May	Bishop Paul's driver, former chorister
Gene	Husband of the dean
Helene Carter	Diocesan safeguarding officer
Dr Jane Rossiter	Lecturer at Linden University
Janet Hooty	Wife of suffragan bishop
Jessica Rogers	Younger daughter of bishop's chaplain
Leah Rogers	Older daughter of bishop's chaplain
Mickey Martin	Danny's New Zealander father

Penelope
Simeon E. Dacre
Susanna Henderson
Timothy Gladwin
Ulrika Littlechild

Bishop Paul's PA
Poet, colleague of Jane's, 'Spider'
Bishop of Lindchester's wife
Cathedral director of music
Precentor's wife, voice coach

JANUARY





Chapter 1

When the Linden bursts its banks, the ancient city of Lindchester is safe. It rises from the sky-filled fields like an English Mont St Michel. Even when the river keeps to its meanders the place has an island feel to it. It is landlocked, though, as far from any coast as it is possible to be in Britain. There are no motorways near. Tourists never Visit Historic Lindchester because they are passing; they have to go there on purpose. Once upon a time the city lay on a busy coaching route, as the Georgian inns of the Lower Town attest. But when the stagecoach was superseded, it was twenty years before the railway came to Lindchester, and the city has never shaken off that backwater heritage.

But backwaters escape the attentions of town planners, who focus their ruinous zeal on more important places. Places like Lindford, county town and seat of local government, its once-beating heart now concretized by 1960s improvement. Lindford still has its attractions. People must head there if they are looking for nightlife and shopping malls, for the Crown Court and council offices and someone to lambast about wheelie bins. Lindford is where you will find A&E and multi-screen cinemas, trains to London and signs saying The North, The South.

What does Lindchester have to offer? It is the sort of place where you take your American visitors and bored grandchildren to mess about on the river and get punt poles tangled in the willows. You can visit the History of Lindchester Museum, with its 1970s model Vikings and merchants in dusty periwigs. You can explore the cobbled streets, or climb the very steps John Wesley was tumbled down by a mob when he tried to preach here. This is where you finally find a present for someone impossible to please – in the specialist coffee merchant's, or the antiquarian book dealer's. Afterwards you

can treat yourself to Earl Grey and homemade scones in a tea shop with beaded doilies over the milk jugs, just like Grandma used to have.

But above all, on the summit of the island, Lindchester boasts a medieval cathedral. It is so perfect it looks like a film set; a toy Cathedral Close. You expect giant hands to reach down and move the canons in and out of their houses, lift off the cathedral roof and post the choristers into their stalls, then shake the spire to make the matins bell tinkle.

It is New Year's Eve. Light is fading. Before long the residents of the Close will be partying. Not the bishop and his wife: they are away in their little bolt-hole in the Peak District. He is a lovely, lovely man, but we can have a naughtier time without him, because he is an Evangelical. We can drink more than we ought, tell cruder jokes, be cattier about our colleagues when Mary Poppins isn't at the party. At midnight we will reel out into the Close and assemble in front of the cathedral's west doors around the giant Christmas tree, and wait for Great William to tremble the air as he tolls out twelve ponderous strokes. Rockets from the Lower Town will streak the sky. We will cheer and champagne corks will fly – or rather, the corks of special-offer cava, because these days canons aren't made of money – and we will busk our way through 'Auld Lang Syne', not quite knowing the words.

But that is still hours off. Let's while away the time somewhere else in the region. The diocese of Lindchester is not large, squashed as it is between Lichfield to the south and Chester to the north; so don't worry, we will not be travelling far. Tonight I want to take you to an ordinary parish and introduce you to its priest, someone who toils away fairly unglamorously on the coalface of the C of E, and seldom breathes the rarefied air of the Close, except when he's buying books or candles in the cathedral bookshop, or attending an ordination service.

Come with me. We will launch ourselves on the wings of imagination from the cathedral's spire, swoop down over the city to where the Lower Town peters out into water meadows. Do admire the river below, if you can still glimpse it in the dusk. There's the lake – an oxbow lake! that one feature of second-form geography we have retained, when everything useful has long since vanished – where herons stalk and shopping trolleys languish. We are heading south-east, towards Lindford, over fields striped with ancient ridge and furrow; cows and pigs, rape and wheat; this is gentle midlands countryside, with hedges not drystone walls, punctuated by mature trees. Soon these hedges will look like smiles with the teeth punched out. We

don't need to weep for the ash trees quite yet, but they are going the way England's elms went forty years earlier. Our children's children will never see their like.

Look down again: that's the dreary politeness of 1930s suburbia, the dormitory village of Renfold. This is where I am taking you. You will notice that they like their Christmas lights in Renfold. Twinkling Santas clamber over roofs like burglars. Blue icicles dangle from eaves. In every garden the magnolias and cherry trees are festooned with lights. We are coming in to land now. We circle a brick church, make a pass over the detached house next door just to be sure: yes, this is the one. St John's Vicarage.

Inside is Dominic Todd. He is seeing the New Year in with an old friend, Dr Jane Rossiter. I hope you will suspend judgement on Father Dominic. I am very fond of him, but I'm aware you will not be meeting him at his best. Go on in. That's his cassock hanging on a peg, and that pompom hat there is called a biretta. (Insiders will know from this that Dominic is no Evangelical.) Go straight past the study and the downstairs loo (which every vicarage must have). You will find them in his sitting room.

'Oh, rubbish! He is not gay.' Jane put her hand over her glass. 'I've had enough. You can always put a spoon in the neck.'

'Put a spoon in my *arse!*' Dominic cried in horror. 'You do not spoon 1989 Veuve Clicquot!'

Jane gave in. 'Paul Henderson is not gay,' she repeated.

'Yes, he is.'

'Oh, you think everyone is gay.'

'Do not. I so don't.'

Jane recited a list of those prominent churchmen and politicians who, from time to time, had strayed into the cross-hairs of Dominic's gaydar. One by one Dominic re-certified them gay. A couple of them he had no recollection of ever identifying before. Perhaps Jane was testing him? That would be like her, the cow.

'Anyway, everyone knows Paul Henderson is gay.'

'Of course they do!' said Jane. 'Except *his wife*.'

'Even back in Cambridge we all knew,' said Dominic. 'In Lightfoot we kept a list of closet queers and Paul Henderson was right at the top.'

'You're making that up.'

Possibly Dominic was. He couldn't remember. But Jane was annoying him. 'Poor, poor Paul! He is so far back in the closet he's in Narnia! Always winter and never Christmas,' he mourned. 'I actually pity him, you know. No, really.'

'I preferred Narnia before Aslan came and melted the snow.'

'Oh!' shrieked Dominic. He was a great shrieker. He sounded like a duchess with mice in her pantry. 'You can't say that, Jane! Aslan is Jesus! Every time you say that, an innocent Evangelical dies!'

'Anyway,' Jane said, 'you're only saying it because you hate him.'

'I do not hate him.' Dominic took a prim sip of champagne. 'One does not hate one's bishop. He is my Father in God. And anyway,' – yes, they had reached the 'and anyway' stage of drunkenness, I'm afraid – 'you only think he's not gay because you're still in love with him.'

Jane sat back and tilted her head, giving this accusation proper academic scrutiny, for she was a university lecturer. Was Dominic right? Was she still in love with Paul Henderson? Or not? She turned the notion this way and that.

While Jane is pondering, I will provide a bit of helpful background information. Many years before, when she was an earnest young woman in her mid-twenties and God still seemed like a viable proposition, Jane Rossiter began training for the Anglican ministry. She spent two whole years at Latimer Hall Theological College in Cambridge. Paul Henderson was also there, with his young wife Susanna, being great with child. The Hendersons lived out, but Paul had a study next door to Jane's college room on G Staircase. They prayed together in Staircase Prayers, they attended lectures together. Together they waded through Wenham's *Elements of New Testament Greek*, in which blaspheming lepers threw stones into the temple. And yes, back then Jane was more than half in love with Paul Henderson. But as belief gave way to doubt, she needed ever more urgently to escape from the clean-limbed heartiness of Latimer to the loucheness of Lightfoot House, where the liberal catholics trained for ordination. The Lightfoot students rather pitied the boorish Evangelicals, metaphorically tapping fag ash on them from their far greater aesthetic and cultural height. This was where Jane got to know Dominic.

But that will have to do for now. Jane has reached her considered conclusion: 'Bollocks I am.'

'Are.'

'Am bloody not.'

I think we'd better leave them to it. They are not far from shouting aggressively how much they really, really fucking love one another, and conking out, so we may as well speed on fiction's wings back to Lindchester Cathedral Close.

An almost full moon hangs picturesquely in the sky above the spire. Wind stirs the branches of the Christmas tree, making the lights

dance. The lights are white. They are tasteful, because this is the Close, not Renfold. All around in the historic houses we can see windows – round ones, arched ones, tall, narrow ones – with pretty trees glowing. It is like a huge Advent calendar.

Down in the Lower Town there is some vulgar roistering. You can probably hear the shouts. Sirens tear the night. A rocket goes off prematurely. It is five to midnight. And now the big door of the canon precentor's house opens and people spill out. Next comes a troupe of lay clerks from Vicars' Hall. Stragglers from other houses join the throng and stand shivering on the west front. The precentor carries a jingling box of champagne flutes, his wife and sons have the cava. Here comes the canon chancellor, Mr Happy, and here's the dean, Marion Randall – yes, a woman dean! In deepest Lindfordshire! – with her supercilious wine merchant husband.

Someone asks, 'Where's Freddie?' Where's Freddie, where's Freddie, goes up the cry. Yoo hoo, Freddieeee!

Freddie woke with a lurch. What the fuck? He was up on the palace roof still. Ah, nuts. What time was it? The first boom of Great William rocked the air. He scrambled to his feet. Naw. He'd been so-o-oo going to enjoy this New Year, and he'd now fucking missed it?

Should auld acquaintance be forgot?

But just then: how silently, how silently! A flock of red Chinese lanterns floated up from some hidden garden and over the cathedral. Freddie watched them in wonder. They trailed wishes behind them. Prayers. Resolutions. This year everything will be different. I will be a better person. Let it be all right. Off and away they sailed into the night, carried by the wind.

And the days of Auld Lang Syne.

Then, sure-footed as Amadeus, the cathedral cat, Freddie made his way back over the bishop's roof to the window he'd left open.

At the last second a slate slipped under him.

He clawed at air. And fell.





Chapter 2

New Year's Day dawns meek and mild over the diocese of Lindchester. The dog-walkers are out in municipal parks and suburban streets, or squelching along the Linden's banks, armed with biodegradable scented dog-poop bags and tennis balls. Here and there we spot hungover parents trying not to vomit as they bend wincingly to push small people along on their Christmas scooters and tractors and bikes. It gets better, we want to tell them. Your babies will learn to sleep through, they'll grow up and leave home, and one day you will understand what all those kind old women meant when they admonished you to 'enjoy them while they're little'.

Father Dominic is awake. It's such a nice morning that he's taken his coffee and croissant out on to his rubbly patio – with 300 vicar-ages devouring money, the diocesan housing officer is not going to stump up for something as frivolous as a patio, unless Dominic makes a total nuisance of himself, and he won't, because he is cursed with empathy and can imagine how horrible it must be to be a diocesan housing officer – and after he's smoked a cheeky cigar, he will get out his iPhone and say the Morning Office, using the Common Prayer app.

The New Year is smiling upon him. Look at the sunshine on the birch twigs! And there's a little chaffinch! Well, considering how much he drank last night, he's got off rather lightly, he thinks; because he is still pished. He casts his mind back. Probably oughtn't to have slagged off Paul Henderson like that. Dominic holds the office of bishop in high regard, even when he does not entirely like or esteem the individual holders of that office. He does not for one minute believe Paul is a closet queen. Oh Lord, by the age of fifty-three he really ought to have grown out of promulgating that kind of mischief. I'm afraid my readers are not impressed: a parish priest quite seriously

having to make a New Year's resolution not to tell whoppers in the coming year! We leave him with his cigar and his conscience, and see what's been happening in Lindchester.

As dawn breaks, a little red car rumbles its way up the cobbled street and in through the gatehouse of the Close. It is driven cautiously, but well, by Miss Barbara Blatherwick – yes, that is genuinely her name – and she parks it in her designated parking space. She is seventy-eight and, *pace* the lusty chorus of seamen in *South Pacific*, she is remarkably like a dame, although in fact she only has an MBE. She reaches over to the passenger's seat to gather up her handbag, and tuts. There is blood on the headrest. Now she will have to postpone her cup of tea and tackle the stain with upholstery cleaner straight away, or it'll never come out. What a dratted nuisance.

Come, come, Miss Blatherwick! Don't you know this is AB rhesus negative, very rare? The people at the donor clinic get very excited about this blood you are tutting over. Until the would-be donor starts populating the questionnaire with rather too many 'yes's, that is. It belongs to Freddie May.

There, you see? You take fright far too easily. A novelist does not kill off her characters before the reader has had a chance to start caring about them. Freddie did not fall very far when the slate slipped under his foot up on the palace roof, because there was another roof ten feet below. He did knock himself out and split his head open, however. You missed the heart-stopping sight of him climbing from that lower roof on to the wrought-iron fire escape. Looking at the back of the house in daylight, I honestly don't know how he managed it. But he did: he has nine lives, that boy. Nine? He has forty-five! He is quintessence of cat! He then staggered, clutching his poor head, from the bishop's garden across the Close to the precentor's house, and hammered on the door.

The precentor, Giles Littlechild, was wrenched from cava-sodden sleep by the row. He wrangled a dressing gown on and cantered his long legs wildly down the stairs like a giraffe encouraged by a cattle prod.

'Argh! What bloody man is that?' he cried. (This is the Close. People quote under pressure.) 'What have you done to yourself this time, May? Oh, dear Lord! Come in! Are you all right?'

And Freddie, being English, replied, 'I'm fine,' and threw up in the precentor's lavender bush.

He was not fine; that much was obvious. It was also obvious that Giles was in no legal state to drive. Nor was his wife. Nor was anyone

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