

# *The Literary London Journal*



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## Review

**Kit Caless and Gary Budden (eds.), *Acquired for Development By... A Hackney Anthology*, 282 pages. London: Influx Press, 2012. ISBN: 978-0-9571693-0-2. £11.99.**

**Reviewed by**

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<1>The cover of *Acquired for Development By... A Hackney Anthology* carries a quotation from Stewart Home praising the collection for reaching 'the parts of Hackney Iain Sinclair doesn't reach'. It is a description that covers both the book's strength and its key weakness. For editors Kit Caless and Gary Budden the aim of the collection is to 'further the counter-narrative' of Hackney from a new perspective 'predominantly that of a younger generation' (9). The work of previous Hackney writers such as Alexander Baron (1930s to 1960s) or Iain Sinclair (1970s to 2000s) is all well and good, but they do not speak for this generation. However, there is the realisation that the book can only represent this current time – 2011/2012 – that it is a snapshot, things change, 'the centre cannot hold/Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world'.

<2>Quoting Yeats is apposite. This is the Hackney of the counter-culture, the landscape of alternative London with its vegan restaurants, anarchist collectives, squats, thriving punk scene and anti-capitalist ethic. If it sounds like Camberwell in 1983, Ladbroke Grove in 1975 or even Notting Hill in 1968, then you would not be mistaken. It is the fate of every generation to believe that theirs is at the cutting edge, and the writers in this collection are largely guilty of the same mistaken assumption. An irritating holier-than-thou presence pervades the collection, a belief in its own self-righteousness condemning it to be of Hackney, by Hackney, for Hackney.

<3>This is not to say that all twenty-five contributions are bad. The book comprises poetry, non-fiction and fiction. It is divided into six sections, each covering a different ward of the borough. The poetry is the strongest element of the book. Eight poets offer fresh and vivid uses of form to describe people, places and time. Gavin James Bower's 'Tara' and Sam Berkson with 'Hackney Numbers' are the strongest with their depictions of people and places, their poetical styles liberating what could be shady or mundane. 'Dark Island: Wallis Road 09.03.11' is Colin Priest's account of the eponymous road.

<4>Equally worthy of note are the four non-fiction pieces. Each develops most fully the idea the editors describe in the introduction – the sense of time passing by. Three pieces

seem requiems for the Hackney dream. Nell Frizzell's 'Rivers of Change' reflects the changes coming to the canal dwellers at Regent's canal, 'Dalston Kittiwakes' by Tim Burrows describes the rise and fall of a Jamaican music venue and 'Foucault over the Garden Fence' recounts Eithne Nightingale's memories of her neighbour. Why do these pieces work? Because they understand that there is a world outside of E8 and E9. There is an attempt to communicate and establish a connection with the greater readership; they encourage and celebrate the Hackney idea and welcome people to it. That three of the pieces are written by women may not be entirely coincidental. They manage to find new things to say about the area which previous writers have not. They encourage the reader to go and look for these places themselves, and in the case of this writer, they have succeeded.

<5>There are three honourable mentions in the fiction section: Gareth Rees, David Dawkins and Georgia Myers, although in all three cases the subjects have been covered before and better. Where the book is effectively torpedoed is in the three central stories, two of which are by the editors themselves.

<6>Predicting the future is never a good idea; far too much can occur between prediction and event. Describing 2012 as the 'great disappointment' (Budden) or relating the successful disruption of the Olympics 'by blockading the media and broadcast centres' (Ashlee Christoffersen) makes a writer a hostage to fortune. The sense of political naïveté is palpable in many of these stories. One thing you soon learn about the type of radical clique that Budden, Christoffersen, Caless et al represent is that there is no sense of another world outside of theirs. In some senses what *Acquired for Development By...* represents is less a continuation of the tradition of Alexander Baron or Iain Sinclair and more something based upon the sci-fi traditions of Ray Bradbury or later Stephen King. The individual dwells within a community which he or she believes to be the Utopian form made real. What is it really? A curiosity, a sideshow, a zoo, a glorified cage? They have built a castle in the sky but just do not realise it.

<7>'2061' by Christoffersen is emblematic of the problems the writers have here. The concept of a future London is often an interesting one and the initial set-up is both realistic and paced. What collapses the model are the political debates which constitute the bulk of the text. Christoffersen seems to defend the idea of Soviet collectivisation and to suggest that the proletariat can mobilise at will because they have developed underground networks the state cannot control. Christoffersen, a former trade union researcher and current LGBT organiser, cannot be faulted for her optimism, but sadly a sense of perspective is greatly missing. Her model for successful protest at the Olympics seems like so much wishful thinking rather than the product of valid analysis. The Hackney mind-set seems to have captured the writer and persuaded her that the opinions and values of those around her are universal.

<8>A more politically confused, and on a subtextual level slightly sinister, story is Gary Budden's 'The Finest Store'. Like '2061' it is set in a dystopian future. A man awakes in a flat which is part of a complex where all his needs are met by the same store (no name is given but it has as part of its design three blue stripes, reminiscent of Tesco). He lives in the finest section and is vaguely aware that there is also another part, 'the value side'. One day he is outside on the street when he eats a baguette from an independent store. Shortly after this he is knocked down and when he awakes he is a prisoner in a detention room where representatives of the company show him the truth of his life. There is no difference between the quality of the goods offered on either the finest or value side. He later wakes up in the value side with no memory of his previous life.

<9>The story has potential as a satire of consumerism. Yet what undermines it is a lack of thoughtful analysis. The finest brand is equated with one style of living which is selfish and solipsistic. When he eats from the value brand he is able to save and to think about

supporting a family. Budden's criticism of the supermarkets as selling the same quality material for different prices to different customers has a certain charm and also obviousness but is compromised by confusing the idea of economic value with social life. Which then is the best value? That which signifies quality and the individual or the one that represents value and the family? The introduction of the independent food shop on the streets in Hackney is meant to suggest that there is a real alternative to that of the supermarkets but again Budden misses the point. He equates such places with taste and true social value, which may have a point, but in Budden's hands comes across as so much moral arrogance, a form of 'I know the truth and you don't' type of thinking.

<10>What defeats the fiction writers of *Acquired for Development By...* is their lack of what the non-fiction writers and the poets possess: an understanding that there is a world outside of Hackney. Writers such as Nell Frizzell or Natalie Hardwick have found an area of the capital that has been passed by. Their articles offer an insight aimed at those not just in the city but outside as well; there is a sense of inclusivity present in their writing which sits at odds with the insiders' viewpoint which Budden, Casless (with his description of a punk scene well past its sell-by date and relevance) and Christoffersen adopt. To paraphrase Colin MacInnes, they have stayed in Hackney too long and developed Hackneyosis: an inability to write anything which is not an act of self-referral to the area or the people one knows.

<11>What can be said about this book then? It is mixture of styles and abilities, of tone and intent. It invites you in and persuades you to stay clear. It is a mixture of the engaged and the deluded. *Acquired for Development By...* is probably then the right book about its area.

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