

The Literary London Journal



Review

**Andrew Whitehead and Jerry White (eds.), *London Fictions*.
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Reviewed by

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<1>*London Fictions* is a fascinating compendium, a kind of many-authored multicultural modern sequel to Ned Ward's *London Spy* (1698-1700; 1703), which does not expose only the vanities and vices of the town (though these naturally play their part), or claim to be wholly factual, but maps the interplay of imaginary and real metropolitan topographies (never, of course, fully distinguishable). It contains 26 essays by divers hands, each on a London novel or story collection, some of them eminent – for example, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) – and others obscure – for instance, Henry Nevinson's *Neighbours of Ours* (1895), Jack Lindsay's *Rising Tide* (1953).

<2>Although a few of the pieces had appeared on the 'London Fictions' website of Andrew Whitehead, one of the volume's co-editors, most were especially commissioned for the book. As its other co-editor, Jerry White, relates in his introduction, contributors were asked 'to write about a novel', published after Dickens's death in 1870, that 'they love or admire or maybe hate, to tell us something of plot and character and just what makes it special in the London canon, and to dwell briefly on how the city described there differs from the London of 2013' (8). The account of how the places, buildings and communities evoked in each novel differs from the London of today is sometimes discussed within an essay but more usually in a short section that follows it, sometimes by the essay authors themselves, sometimes by Andrew Whitehead, who also contributes the first essay in the volume, on George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1899).

<3>The contributors to *London Fictions* are, by virtue of their enthusiasm for the capital and for fiction set there, all Londonists – a term which, as Jerry White's introduction points out, is currently enjoying a revival but seems to have been coined in the Victorian era by Marcus Fall, who uses it as a chapter heading in his book *London Town* (1880).

But the Londonists in this volume are of different if sometimes overlapping provenance: novelists, poets, historians, journalists, critics. This helps to make *London Fictions* a generically hybrid book, mixing the critical, theoretical, experiential, autobiographical, biographical and anecdotal and incorporating photographs; such a melange gives an exciting sense of writing beyond the limits, of, as Ward put it in the *London Spy*, breaking loose from the scholar's gaol (2). Some of the essays would seem, in an academic context, 'under-theorized', that pompous pedantic putdown; but they are not necessarily thereby undernourished. Others are unobtrusively fed by a range of relevant theoretical perspectives.

<4>The New Critics of the mid-twentieth-century fastidiously eschewed what they called 'the intentional fallacy', the interpretation of texts in light of their authors' intentions, and poststructuralism reinscribed this as 'the death of the author', the idea that the author is the effect rather than cause of the texts attributed to them. The contributors to this volume not only sometimes perpetrate 'the intentional fallacy', treating authors as if they were or had once been alive and possessed of intentions, but also engage throughout – it is, in a sense, the very *raison d'être* of the volume – in what New Criticism might have called 'the locational fallacy', the idea that a text can be interpreted in relation to the actual locations it purports to represent. But then neither of these is a fallacy but rather the way the human mind works in reading a fiction, as it criss-crosses between the imagined and the real. The locational approach only slides towards fallaciousness when it assumes that a fiction is to be judged by its degree of correspondence with a reality constructed by other means (from empirical experience – living in, walking through a city – to sociology, history, geography). Fiction tells different truths, even if these are a continuation of realities accessed by other means.

<5>Jerry White, who is an historian, affirms the distinctive truth-telling power of fiction in his introduction, claiming a special cognitive role for it in more nearly approaching the truth of the capital than any other discursive mode: 'London is truly unknowable, but we get closest to it through the novels and short-stories [sic] whose characters work out their destinies in this most complex and multilayered of cities' (7). Of course this begs the epistemological question of how we know that fiction comes closer than any other discourse to the unknowable. The wave of theoretically-influenced criticism in the later twentieth century tended to demote fiction in favour of other discourses – historical, sociological, philosophical, political and psychoanalytical. But the superiority of these discourses also proved difficult to establish and they were perhaps at their most attractive, at least to literary critics, when they assumed that capacity which fiction possesses to engage readers in multiple ways. White's introductory claim of the cognitive superiority of fiction is a sign that fiction has ridden the theoretical storm, that it appears to offer a unique and irreplaceable access to truth, even if this perception is philosophically difficult to justify.

<6>*London Fictions* starts with a title whose initial letters, after its definite article, denote a London postal district – George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889) – and ends with a title that consists only of those letters, Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012). Gissing is followed by essays on four novels published in the 1890s: Conan Doyle's *The Sign of Four* (1890), Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), Nevinson's *Neighbours of Ours* and Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1896).

<7>Only one novel features from the first 24 years of the twentieth century – Thomas Burke's *Limehouse Nights* (1916) – and only one from the 1920s – *Mrs Dalloway*. The three essays that follow are on 1930s novels: Pamela Hansford Johnson's *This Bed Thy Centre* (1935), Simon Blumenfeld's *Jew Boy* (1935) and John Sommerfield's *May Day* (1936). There is then another trio from the 1940s: Patrick Hamilton's *Hangover Square*, Betty Miller's *Farewell Leicester Square* (both 1941) and Elizabeth Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949). After this come three 1950s novels – Jack Lindsay's *Rising Tide*, Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) and Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959). Two 1960s novels follow: Lynne Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* (1960) and Alexander Baron's *The Lowlife* (1963).

<8>A conspicuous calendrical gap of two decades then ensues – nobody, it seems, chose to write about two defining novels of 1980s London, Martin Amis's *Money* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989), although these are likely to be the titles to which readers will turn in the 2080s and beyond to catch the peculiar qualities (for better and worse) of the capital at this time. After this hiatus, there are essays on two novels published in 1990 – Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Neil Bartlett's *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* – but set in the 1970s and 1980s respectively.

<9>The final tranche of *London Fictions* contains six essays on novels from the millennium and after: Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), Chris Petit's *The Hard Shoulder* (2001), Iain Banks's *Dead Air* (2002) (misprinted, in the essay heading, as *Dear Air* (239), a title whose adjectival ambiguity promises an intriguing and as-yet-unwritten London novel), Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) and two novels published in 2012, John Lanchester's *Capital* and, as already mentioned, Zadie Smith's *NW*. Whitehead's afterword says that the editors did not intend that any author should appear twice but excepted Smith 'simply because *NW*, published just as this book was being put to bed, has such a powerful sense of place' (280).

<10>Every essay in this volume offers insights and points of interest but some contributions resonate in the mind more than others. These include Cathi Unsworth's absorbing account of Lynne Reid Banks's *L-Shaped Room* and Bryan Forbes's 1962 film of the novel, which acknowledges the differences between them but sees the latter 'as a tribute to the strength of Reid Banks' often beautiful but never sentimental writing' (187). Unsworth's afterword makes the amusing but telling observation that the L-shaped room used in the film adjoins what is now one of the best-kept properties on St Luke's Road: 'If Doris [the landlady of the L-shaped room] could have held on until the film *Notting Hill* came out in 1999, she would have been a very rich old landlady' (189).

<11>Susie Thomas focuses on the 'treatment of class and the links between class and place' in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*. The novel deploys a familiar and 'basic framework of suburban dullness and bigotry versus metropolitan, multicultural playground', but within this, 'there is considerably more complexity'. It does not show the South London suburbs as 'a homogeneous mass of semis' but 'calibrates the social status and gradations of culture in each neighbourhood meticulously' (203). Thomas concludes that the *Buddha's* 're-envisioning of the suburbs as a locus for the birth of multiculturalism is Kureishi's most prescient intervention in the debate about Englishness' (207). This opens up a whole new approach to the novel and also makes a key contribution to the rehabilitation of the London suburbs as a topic for fictional and critical attention.

<12>Bill Schwarz's essay on Sam Selvon's *Lonely Londoners* is one of the most insightful in the book, informed by theoretical perspectives but wearing its learning lightly, staying close to the detail of text and topography, interweaving the experiential and the conceptual. Schwarz suggests that Selvon's novel exemplifies 'a new way of writing about London' – a "diasporic" realism' that incorporates the sense of unreality that arises from the disjunction between the 'idealized expectations' of Caribbean immigrants in the late 40s and the 1950s and the 'actualities' (Selvon's term) of London life (160). Schwarz points out, however, that throughout the novel, 'the pleasures of the migration, and the pleasures of the city, are almost exclusively organised through the optic of male sexual desire' (162). When summer comes it releases a more general eroticism in the native English as well as the black immigrants. At night 'the entire city is propelled into an unresolved force-field of polymorphous sexual and racial energy, where the main currents of human intercourse reproduce the mechanics of everyday exploitation' (163). But overall Selvon's fiction, particularly *The Lonely Londoners*, 'is testament to the power of the imagination – the power of the migrant imagination – to turn existing realities inside out' (164).

<13>Some of the essays in *London Fictions* are more interesting for their peripheral rather than principal topics. For example, Gregory Woods's account of Neil Bartlett's *Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall* manages to make Bartlett's novel sound less intriguing than some of the other metropolitan gay fiction he mentions. The most entertaining passage in Woods's essay is his excursus on a key erotic locale that is notably absent from Bartlett's novel: the cottage:

These are spaces of the deepest ambiguity, dedicated to the lowliest of physical functions yet conducive to thoughtfulness; places of enrapturement and entrapment; coldly functional yet romantic; designed for solitary shame yet apt to enable the most unexpected connections; boring and exciting, disgusting and delightful ... (I could go on doing this indefinitely.) (215)

<14>It seems significant that this precedes one of the most compelling passages in Woods's essay, on the sadistic delight of Bernard Sands, a liberal homosexual, in the arrest of a man for importuning at the Leicester Square Gents in Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* (1953).

<15>No contributor seems to have taken up the invitation to write about a novel they hate – Martin Amis might have gained admission by that route, if no other – but Andrew Lane does mount an attack on Conan Doyle's alleged (non-)representation of the capital in his Sherlock Holmes stories: 'while Conan Doyle was trying to accomplish many things with his Sherlock Holmes stories, writing about London was not one of them' (28). Lane argues that the notion of Doyle as a London writer is a myth created by film and TV adaptations of the Holmes corpus rather than by Doyle's texts themselves. One admires the iconoclastic aim here, but it misses its target because Lane operates with a very narrow notion of how London might be written about and evoked. For example, Lane quotes Holmes's description in *The Sign of Four* (1890) of a journey from Rochester Row across the river to 'Cold Harbour Lane' (Doyle 99) and complains '[t]his is nothing more than a list of street names' (26). This not only ignores the fact that the list, from the *Iliad* to *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and beyond, is a venerable and valuable literary technique but also overlooks the evocative power of street names, the poetry of the London gazetteer and A-Z. Street names (as deployed in Eliot's *Waste Land* (1922), to

take a noticeable poetic example) can be more than enough to suggest locales and trajectories.

<16>Conan Doyle's descriptions of London are concise – to offer more might slow the narrative flow, especially in the short stories – but they do the necessary work. Take the account in 'The Red-Headed League', from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (1892), of Holmes and Watson's walk out of Saxe-Coburg Square into 'one of the main arteries which conveyed the traffic of the City to the north and west':

The roadway was blocked with the immense stream of commerce flowing in a double tide inward and outward, while the paths were black with the hurrying swarm of pedestrians. It was difficult to realize as we looked at the line of fine shops and stately business premises that they really abutted on the other side upon the faded and stagnant square which we had just quitted.

'Let me see,' said Holmes, standing at the corner and glancing along the line, 'I should like to remember the order of the houses here. It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London. There is Mortimer's, the tobacconist, the little newspaper shop, the Coburg branch of the City and Suburban Bank, the Vegetarian Restaurant, and McFarlane's carriage-building depot.' (Doyle 185).

< 17>Conan Doyle here conveys the contrast between the Square ('faded and stagnant' is compressed Dickens) and the City main road, captures the bustle of commercial life, and provides precise detail – a list, if you like, but one that juxtaposes the large and the small, the retail, financial and manufacturing, the predictable and what might be, for some readers, the unexpected ('the Vegetarian Restaurant'). The passage economically evokes a vital part of London at a particular historical moment in a way that is germane to the plot of the story. It would not be difficult, turning through the complete Sherlock Holmes novels and stories, to find other equally economical and evocative passages – and perhaps one of the merits of Lane's essay is that it is likely to provoke readers, not only among Sherlockians, to reread those novels and stories with an eye to Doyle's representation of London and to consider more widely the different tactics and strategies that 'representing London' might involve.

<18>*London Fictions* does not claim A-to-Z comprehensiveness and Whitehead's afterword acknowledges many absences: Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), Bennett's *Riceman Steps* (1923) and Priestley's *Angel Pavement* (1930); work by Margaret Harkness and John Galsworthy, 'chroniclers of Victorian-into-Edwardian outcast and propertied London respectively'; George and Weedon Grossmith's *Diary of a Nobody* (1892), whose absence from this volume, the editors suggest, would mortify Mr Pooter; Gerald Kersh's *Night and the City* (1938), 'the epitome of London Noir'; and 'that quartet of modern sages and visionaries of the city, J. G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, Peter Ackroyd and Iain Sinclair' (280).

<19>Taking up the implicit invitation of this list of omissions, one might also note the absence, *Mrs Dalloway* apart, of innovative, modernist-influenced fiction, such as Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* (1938) and B. S. Johnson's *Albert Angelo* (1964) – though Andy Wimbush's entertaining and insightful article on the latter is now available on the London Fictions website. In the spheres of realism, fantasy and science-fiction, the early short stories and novels of H. G. Wells are often richly evocative of London and its suburbs,

not least those that were later to become Kureishi's territory (it would be intriguing to trace the relationship between the fear of aliens invading the suburbs in stories like *The War of the Worlds* (1898) and the suburban postwar 'alien' experience evoked in *The Buddha of Suburbia*). Angus Wilson, whom we have already mentioned, produced much London-centred fiction, from the realism of *Hemlock* to the futuristic fantasy of *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961) – though Wilson's London Zoo is sometimes said to be based on the British Library where he worked until 1955. Among genre novels, Len Deighton's *The Ipcress File* (1962) – and Sidney J. Furie's 1965 film version with its redolent London locations – are worthy of attention.

<20>To mention titles and authors absent from *London Fictions* is not to criticise the volume but to pay tribute to its power to provoke thought about novels and tales that portray the capital. *London Fictions* is both a volume that can be read through with pleasure and illumination and a vade-mecum that stimulates literary and literal perambulations; sedentary explorations of fictional terrains and ambulatory expeditions into their past-haunted, vibrantly present counterparts, armed with bag, book and Kindle (at least three of the texts this volume discusses, *The Nether World*, *The Sign of Four* and *Children of the Ghetto*, are currently downloadable for free). Jerry White concludes his introduction by saying that London is not only unknowable but inexhaustible; *London Fictions* may not be inexhaustible but it is likely to become a boon companion to Londonists and to enjoy a long and active life, on and off the bookshelves.

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