

# *The Literary London Journal*



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## **Review**

**Sebastian Groes, *The Making of London: London in Contemporary Literature*  
309 pages, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-230-34836-3. £16.99.**

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In *The Making of London*, Sebastian Groes explores the ways in which London is experienced, imagined, but most importantly is persistently made and re-made through the London fiction of Maureen Duffy, Michael Moorcock, J.G. Ballard, Iain Sinclair, Peter Ackroyd, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. Groes is quick off the mark to emphasise the importance of the present participle in his title, quickly establishing *The Making of London* as a work which aims to read the contemporary London novel as both a response to and a constituent part of a London that is always in process and always in a state of becoming (1).

Groes sets out to examine the ways in which London writers 'construct profoundly real, imaginary Londons' (16) and thus, using a vocabulary reminiscent of cultural geographer Steve Pile, sets the tone for a work which refuses to be constrained by imposed dichotomies which view the imaginary city as any less 'real' than that which we can reach out and touch. In return, however, Groes also commendably emphasises the indelible materiality of the city, thus refusing to de-politicise his featured authors' literary negotiations of London. He notes from the outset that, despite the persistent postmodern trope of the metropolis as an intangible, hyperreal network of images and information flows, London nevertheless persists in contemporary fiction as 'a memory map containing traces of power inscribed into its material formation' (2). Groes emphasises early on the importance of the city's materiality in the face of a London which simultaneously seems to be 'disappearing in an enchanting mirage of cold-gleaming steel and glass' (2). Through such expression, the poignant and impressive self-reflexivity of his work also comes to the fore. Not only does *The Making of London* offer up refreshing and insightful readings of what is fast becoming an established canon on London writing; another achievement of this monograph comes in Groes's linguistic eloquence and his awareness that to write a text which reads and re-reads contemporary

literary Londons is also necessarily to create a narrative which will simultaneously become part of London's imaginative and expressive repertoire.

Indeed, this awareness of the fact that literary Londons can never, by nature, be mutually exclusive is woven through *The Making of London* to great effect. For instance, Groes's reading of J.G. Ballard's work is deeply informed by the idea that Ballard re-works and re-writes the relationships between centre and periphery and between the city and notions of destruction found in the nineteenth-century Londons of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Conrad's *The Secret Agent* respectively. Meanwhile, Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Joyce's *Ulysses* are persistent undercurrents which work to contextualise Groes's chosen contemporary responses to London, most pertinently rising to the surface in his examination of Ian McEwan's renegotiation of literary Modernism in *Saturday*. When turning to Amis's London writing, Groes then evokes Wordsworth and Dickens respectively to provide a contextual backdrop to Amis's mode of 'Urban Pastoral' (173) and his 'scatological' London in which the capitalist city and notions of excrement are representationally bound to each other (188).

Each of Groes's chapters offers insightful readings of texts which already, in some cases, carry with them a considerable palimpsest of critical commentary. Furthermore, each begins with a succinct and illuminating summary of existing critical and theoretical responses which surround the authors in question, again demonstrating the ways in which *The Making of London* is written from a perspective through which London, London-literature, language and theory co-exist to constantly create and re-create each other. One of the most effective examples comes in chapter four which examines Iain Sinclair's negotiation of what Groes calls 'the problem of London' (94). Groes moves swiftly yet comprehensively through a range of responses to Sinclair previously offered by critics including Brian Baker, Peter Brooker, Roger Luckhurst and Julian Wolfreys, dismissing intimations that Sinclair is 'a pure deconstructionist' and instead drawing attention to the fact that Sinclair's London cannot be appreciated 'without analysing his interest in the representational problems that writing the self poses in the process of textualising the city' (99). Focusing on Sinclair's earlier works including *Downriver* and *Radon Daughters*, Groes goes on to give an exposé of a somewhat underappreciated conundrum in Sinclair's work: namely, of how the very act of representation and the very notion of a writing and speaking self often appear agonisingly at odds with Sinclair's reluctance to appropriate and master London in order to glorify the individual self. Although limited in *The Making of London* to a small section of the book's material on Sinclair, Groes's analysis in this case suggests how this reading might prove even more fruitful in exploring the fascinating dynamic of Sinclair's collaborative works, such as *Liquid City* and *Rodinsky's Room*, in which the Sinclair-persona consistently negotiates this fraught relationship between selfhood, representation and the possibility of allowing the city to speak its own stories.

The *The Making of London* therefore succeeds in bringing fresh interpretative frameworks to some of the most heavyweight texts of the contemporary literary London canon. In places however, Groes's work remains somewhat frustratingly devoted to the binaries of authentic and inauthentic, of 'official' and 'unofficial' and of 'mainstream' and 'alternative' Londons which have so typified many critical readings of London writers' methodologies, particularly those of psychogeographical practitioners such as Iain Sinclair. For instance, Groes's reading of Moorcock's *Mother London* and *King of the City* remain heavily focused upon the ways in which Moorcock's narratives attempt to counter the 'official' version of London as told by state authority, by excavating London's 'forgotten and alternative' history through his casts of eccentric and marginalised characters (44). Indeed, such binaries reappear at the monograph's conclusion, where Groes claims that the analyses throughout *The Making of London* go towards proving that 'the obsession with London's mythology has now been replaced by an emphasis on the realism of factual history' (260). Whilst Groes's book makes an undeniably valuable

contribution in establishing contemporary London writing as a 'collaborative palimpsest, which [...] has also contributed to the city's reinvention' (256), the reader is therefore left with some doubts as to how Groes's critical premises might meaningfully extend to London writings by authors such as Tobias Hill or Conrad Williams, that is, novels which play much more equivocally with mythology and external reality, but which at the same time certainly stake a claim to be considered as salient examples of contemporary London writing.

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