

## LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

**Sebastian Groes (2011) *The Making of London: London in Contemporary Literature*, with photographs by Sarah Baxter. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 309pp., ISBN: 9780230348363.**

Sebastian Groes argues that the writers he considers in this book have started a counter-cultural project in the current era of British history, which he defines as that of ‘Long Thatcherism’ (Groes, 2011, p.43). This project aims, using literary techniques, to ‘resist and reverse the increasing fragmentation of the metropolis’ (p.251). Before 1975, the year in which Margaret Thatcher became leader of the UK Conservative Party, Groes sees British imperial decline reflected in the physical decay of London; since then, economic resurgence under Thatcher and Tony Blair, in a period addicted to political spin and rhetoric, has reinvented London as a simulacrum capital of fun and leisure (p. 23). The arts, including fiction, Groes claims, ‘particularly allow us to see behind the surface of material things and events because they transfigure the life of the city and its inhabitants’ (p. 4). As such, his book makes a bold case for the importance of fiction in developing understandings of contemporary urban and post-urban environments worldwide.

The book’s theoretical framework includes names familiar to students of contemporary cultural theory and radical geographies – Mikhail Bakhtin, Jean Baudrillard, Michel de Certeau, Mike Davis, Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, David Harvey, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja – alongside creative writers and thinkers who could be considered Romantic, realist, modernist and postmodernist masters: William Wordsworth, Charles Dickens, Joseph Conrad, Sigmund Freud, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Milan Kundera, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. Groes dips into this mass of possibilities rather than choosing one or more of these theorists and thinkers as his own particular master. Measured and well-informed consideration is also given to the academic critics who have established the still-young critical heritages of the writers covered in this book, only one of whom (J.G. Ballard) had died by the time this review was written (2015), and whose future canonical status in several cases remains uncertain.

Accompanying Groes’s text are photographs by Sarah Baxter. Some of these are of London sights, famous or more obscure; others are close-ups of details: ‘Ghost Sign, Regent Square’ (p. 97); ‘King Lud, St Dunstan-in-the-West’ (p. 8). As well as these ‘Illuminations’, as they are called on the List of Illustrations (pp. viii-ix), Groes includes a group of ‘Textures’ (p.142-43), seemingly blank, or even abstract, images of woodland, brickwork, railways tracks and rivers. Alongside the text, these black-and-white visual images recall experimental works on the frontier between academic literary studies and creative writing: *Lights Out for the Territory* by Iain Sinclair, one of the writers covered by

Groes and a forerunner to this book on London literary criticism, and Jeremy Tambling's 2009 *Going Astray*, on Dickens's many Londons.

Groes works author-by-author and chronologically, the oldest writers he covers (J.G Ballard, Maureen Duffy and Michael Moorcock) having been born in the 1930s, the youngest (Zadie Smith) in the mid-1970s. He connects the productions of the writers he includes to the oral languages of Londoners, to the stories and myths of the past through which people build identities, and to enduring London metaphors or images, notably that of fire and heat (p. 251-56). Chapters 1-4 survey the most explicitly countercultural writings to feature in the book, by Duffy, Moorcock, Ballard and Sinclair, all of them adults during the 1960s and in different ways writing from the edges of the English literary mainstream or even outside it. Next comes a group of chapters on writers born around 1950 who became famous in the late 1970s: Peter Ackroyd, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis. Suave, male, Oxbridge-educated, these writers could be understood as a coherent group distinct from both the first (anti-establishment, even hippy) group, and the two writers considered in Groes's last chapter: Monica Ali and Zadie Smith. Groes classes London writers according to their ethnic backgrounds, organizing the book around a move from white to non-white writers. Salman Rushdie, who in many ways belongs with Amis and McEwan, is thus here placed in a chapter with Hanif Kureishi, younger than him and closer both to screenwriting and to mainstream, non-literary fiction than most of the other writers covered in this book. For Groes, Rushdie and Kureishi belong together with Ali and Smith because all four share a 'non-West European cultural heritage' (p. 191), a statement which conceals the fact that Kureishi's mother and Smith's father were both white Britons.

Duffy, herself the child of one immigrant and one 'autochthonic' Brit, to use Groes's term (p. 192), is presented as devoted to Londoners in a politically radical way. In her novel *Capital* (1975), Groes claims, 'the destruction of ego, as symbolic of imperial power, opens their [Londoners'] vision to alternative versions of history' (p. 26), through the device of juxtaposing a magic-realist version of London's 1970s with cameos, brief scenes from throughout the prehistory and documented history of the sites now called London. Moorcock and Ballard emerge in Groes's book as writers whose backgrounds in genre fiction – traditionally written rapidly and not taken seriously by the literary establishment – enable them to do what more 'smooth and fat-free' (p. 54), and for long more prestigious writers (the example Groes gives is Julian Barnes) cannot do: in Moorcock's case be multiple, undecidable, negatively capable (p. 62), and in Ballard's to be an excoriating critic of the violence and exploitation inherent in post-war, late-capitalist London (p. 68). Duffy, Moorcock and Ballard, like Sinclair, Amis and McEwan later in the book, are recast by Groes as essentially moralizing satirists in a way that frequently makes them recall not nineteenth-century predecessors but eighteenth-century ones like Jonathan Swift (p.108-9).

Sinclair and Ackroyd, frequently lumped together under the heading of 'psychogeography' (see for example, Coverley 2006; Murray 2007), are discussed separately here, which is refreshing. Valuably 'de-occulted' (p. 124) by Groes, they are distinguished from one another: the egotistical and pessimistic Sinclair, his subject the observing (male, white) subject; the more hopeful Ackroyd, his concern the city as text, not the human protagonist. There are valuable flashes of insight too, into the often scatological Amis, who 'loves to hate' London (p. 170), and the possibly puritanical McEwan, whose London, a 'site of moral contestation' (p.144) moves from darkness to light between the 1970s and the 1990s. But sometimes the sheer funniness of Amis's best writing (and that of Smith)

goes missing. Groes invokes Bakhtin (138-40, 227) and Rabelais (p. 187) but doesn't quite take the comic or 'ludic' spirit of London and its writers seriously enough, preferring to see their work as a cover for something more sinister, a culture of surveillance and gated communities (p. 253). Among the writers considered here, Ackroyd's work in particular (for example in much of *London: the Biography* and in the novel *Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem*), also shows an intense awareness of a violently comic, anti-authority spirit running throughout the history of the city and its people(s) which is not adequately conveyed by Groes.

The later chapters of Groes's book chart a retreat from the heights or depths of extreme postmodernism, represented here by Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* and in particular the compound district of Brickhall (Brick Lane plus Southall) within it, to a newly knowing, post-postmodern London realism. Kureishi, with his eroticized city viewed through the eyes of an immigrant's son from the suburbs (p. 215-18), Smith with her Proustian 'personal memory theatre' in Willesden Green (p. 232), and Smith with her intense, internal portrait of the 'drawn-out process' a woman's life becomes after she is imported from a village in Bangladesh to be a Muslim wife in the concrete jungle of inner East London (p.248). All are read as taking steps back from the 'almost aggressive engagement with the English language' and English culture of Rushdie in the late 1980s (p.194). In the most recent novels he covers, from the first years of the new millennium, Groes seems to consider a 'more factual interest in London's historical lives' (p. 248), to be most worthwhile. But when he accuses Kureishi of producing writing that is 'severely conflicted in its representation of London' because it is, 'unable to violate the realist rules of representation', its author, unlike Rushdie, is guilty of 'replicating the nineteenth-century city' (p. 211), Groes shows himself unwelcoming to literary realism in a way that downplays the adaptability of the genre (see Beaumont 2007). Viewed another way, Kureishi is writing about a different kind of city from his nineteenth-century forebears, one in which a teenager of mixed ethnicity can travel in from the suburbs for his leisure and fantasy life, mediated through film and popular music that are consumed with spending money not available to, say, the son of a Jewish immigrant in the East End of 1890.

Groes is a strong close reader. He gives illuminating and sensitive accounts of passages from Ballard (p. 72), Kureishi (p. 218) and Smith (p. 226). Moreover, his dipping-in approach to theory emerges as a positive. Groes's approach, surely, is a better way for university students to encounter this crowd of often hard-to-engage-with theorists and activists, than the old-fashioned 'schools of literary theory' approach in which they meet structuralists, then Marxists, then feminists. Groes often draws on Bakhtin, de Certeau, Lefebvre or whoever at precisely the moment when his argument and his explanation of the London fiction-writers can benefit from notions of dialogue or 'languages of the city' (p. 225).

The book, proposing as it does to introduce London and its fictions to people from elsewhere, is marred by small inaccuracies. Many of these have to do with London place names: the BBC is headquartered in Portland Place not 'Portland Street' (p. 81); Trellick Tower, Tate Modern and Walthamstow Marshes do not have definite articles (p. viii, 86); it is St Katharine Docks that lies just east of the Tower of London, not 'Katherine Dock' (p. 51); the Royal Gunpowder Mills is at Waltham Abbey, not 'Waltham' (p.118); Ballard surely writes that the London Eye rotates next to County Hall, not 'County Council' (p.88); Willesden is part of the London Borough of Brent, not a separate borough (p. 222, 232). Nor is the role Baxter's photographs play in the book made

sufficiently clear. No dialogue is established between them and the texts discussed. While tantalizing and seeming to invite interpretation, they also seem extraneous, and to belong in a book with less text and less of a straightforward, pedagogically-oriented structure. Groes's London literary history, too, can seem patchy. There are brief mentions of Iris Murdoch and Muriel Spark, but writers of London active between the 1930s and the 1970s are largely absent as context for the writers considered here. Readers of Groes's book thus get no sight of the complexities of different realist traditions in an often profoundly topographic history of London writing embodied, for example in Anglo-Jewish writing of London produced in mid-century by the likes of Simon Blumenfeld, Willy Goldman, Emanuel Litvinoff and Alexander Baron, but also in the 1930s London fictions of William Plomer, George Orwell and Samuel Beckett. Yet this is the most immediate background to the writing covered by Groes.

Still, overall, Groes has produced a book which will contribute greatly to future teaching and research on contemporary London and its fictions. Groes makes his case: fictions such as those covered in his book – many of them built on the foundations of an intimately known and broadly surveyed London topography – ought to be considered by those who handle the 'real' city and its inhabitants. Reading the book sequentially makes the reader wonder what's next for London fictions. Groes, as stated, charts a retreat from the high postmodern extremes of Rushdie and a move towards the factual, a form of realism informed by postmodernism, that is also a move away from the faith in 'London's popular mythologies' of Duffy and Moorcock, to a fiction like that of Smith, which is deeply skeptical about story-telling of any sort (p. 229). Almost in passing he makes a key point near the end, that in the bearish market of early twenty-first century commercial publishing, those commissioning novels are far less likely to gamble on 'anything as boldly inventive and radical' as Sinclair's *Downriver* (256). Perhaps the future will be outside conventional publishing, somehow online, or in work such as quasi-academic writing and blogs which lie beyond the traditional boundaries of fiction and even of literature. Groes himself has tried to use 'imaginative energy' to contribute to 'the city's reinvention' (p.256) and, in large part, he has succeeded.

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### Works Cited

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