Imagined Futures

Museum of London Rotunda Display

21 October 2017 – 22 April 2018

Imagined Futures was part of the Museum of London's City Now: City Future programme and was displayed from 21 October 2017 – 22 April 2018. The display was curated by Dr Caroline Edwards and designed by Martin McGrath.

Introduction

Of all cities, London is one of the most widely represented in literature. During the 19th century, when it rose to prominence as the centre of the British Empire, London was considered the peak of civilisation. However, this achievement was matched by the violence of a colonial system that damaged the places and peoples from which the city drew its vast wealth, in India, Africa and the Caribbean.

London therefore made the ideal setting in which to imagine future visions – in books that destroy the metropolis through scenes of devastation, or rebuild it as a fairer society. From Mary Shelley's disaster novel, *The Last Man* (1826), to H. G. Wells's

techno-utopian vision in *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899), London established its reputation as a city in which to enact different visions of the future in literature.

In the 20th century, such imagined futures became increasingly bleak, particularly in the post-World War II period, and by the 1970s writers were experimenting with surreal future London landscapes. More recently, London has become home to the leading characters in influential books for younger readers, such as J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series and Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere* (1996). In the 21st century, as we come to terms with the environmental impact of climate change, the city has once again found a new role as a literary setting.

Whether apocalyptic, satirical, dystopian or hopeful, London continues to fascinate writers and readers as a place of different imagined futures.

19th Century Distant Futures

Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (1826)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* is the first post-apocalyptic narrative in British literature and the best example of the Romantic preoccupation with 'last man' stories of human extinction. Writers and artists in the 1820s were fascinated with the ruins of Herculaneum and Pompeii, which Mary and Percy Shelley visited in 1818. Set in the late 21st century, *The Last Man* presents Lionel Verney's account of the world's depopulation as a fatal plague spreads across the globe. Societal collapse and mass migrations lead to new wars of invasion, ransacking cities, and religious cults as people struggle to cope with the new deadly reality. Having travelled through London, Paris, Versailles, Geneva and the Alps with a small band of English survivors, Verney survives to become the 'last man' and his story ends in isolation.

With its republican values, Gothic sensibility and clear-sighted vision of a global pandemic, Shelley's novel has been a key influence on subsequent post-apocalyptic narratives by writers including Richard Jefferies, George R. Stewart, John Wyndham, Margaret Atwood and Cormac McCarthy.

QUOTATION:

Adrian and I rode for the last time through the streets of London. They were grass-grown and desert. The open doors of the empty mansions creaked upon their hinges; rank herbage, and deforming dirt, had swiftly accumulated on the steps of the houses; the voiceless steeples of the churches pierced the smokeless air; the churches were open, but no prayer was offered at the altars; mildew and damp had already defaced their ornaments; birds, and tame animals, now homeless, had built nests, and made their lairs in consecrated spots. […] No human step was heard, nor human form discerned. Troops of dogs, deserted of their masters, passed us; and now and then a horse, unbridled and unsaddled, trotted towards us… (p. 265)

Richard Jefferies, *After London, or, Wild England* (1885)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Richard Jefferies's *After London, or Wild England* is set hundreds of years after a natural cataclysm caused London's sewers and canals to silt up and flood much of England. The mystery of this ecological change is entrenched by society's collapse into barbarism and neo-feudal tribes. In the early years of the flooding, the affluent classes secure passage to Europe and the New World, leaving behind a country of uneducated labourers and leading to mass illiteracy and the loss of historical records. In Jefferies's distant future, London is replaced by inland seas, beautiful forests and abundant wildlife whilst people live in fortified compounds reminiscent of early Anglo-Saxon encampments.

Jefferies was a well-known nature writer whose essays on natural history and rural communities were popular with late Victorian readers. His vision of post-industrial England in *After London* inspired subsequent visions of future London, including William Morris's utopian *News from Nowhere* (1890) and M. P. Shiel's apocalyptic *The Purple Cloud* (1901).

QUOTATION:

It became green everywhere in the first spring, after London ended, so that all the country looked alike.

The meadows were green, and so was the rising wheat which had been sown, but which neither had nor would receive any further care. Such arable fields as had not been sown, but where the last stubble had been ploughed up, were overrun with couch-grass, and where the short stubble had not been ploughed, the weeds hid it. So that there was no place which was not more or less green; the footpaths were the greenest of all, for such is the nature of grass where it has once been trodden on, and by-and-by, as the summer came on, the former roads were thinly covered with the grass that had spread out from the margin. (p. 5)

H. G. Wells, *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

H. G. Wells's 'scientific romances' of the 1890s and early 1900s have had an enormous impact on science fiction and speculative literature. In *The Sleeper Awakes*, a troubled young man called Graham falls into a coma in 1897 from which he awakes 203 years later. Wells's vision of London in the year 2100 is extraordinary, even now. Graham staggers out of his chambers to find a city of immense, high-rise architecture and futuristic technology. London has a vast, domed roof structure made of glass and the city's giant windmills generate enough electricity to power perpetual daylight.

However, this technological progress has not been matched by social progress and the 22nd-century future is on the brink of class war. As a result of compound interest on his inheritance, Graham has become the wealthiest person on the planet and now owns the megacorporations that run the world, causing him to be petitioned by the ruling class as well as its dispossessed workers.

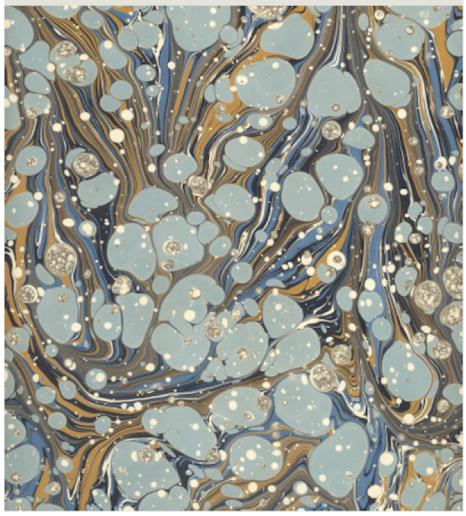
The Sleeper Awakes offers a vision of future London that anticipates both technological and political revolutions and remains compelling reading to this day.

QUOTATION:

His first impression was of overwhelming architecture. The place into which he looked was an aisle of Titanic buildings, curving spaciously in either direction. Overhead mighty cantilevers sprang together across the huge width of the place, and a tracery of translucent material shut out the sky. Gigantic globes of cool white light shamed the pale sunbeams that filtered down through the girders and wires. Here and there a gossamer suspension bridge dotted with foot passengers flung across the chasm and the air was webbed with slender cables. (p. 42)

THE LAST MAN

MARY SHELLEY
1826



THE SLEEPER AWAKES

H. G. WELLS
1899

AFTER LONDON:
OR, WILD ENGLAND

RICHARD JEFFERIES
1885

Mid-Century Near Future Dystopias

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

George Orwell's totalitarian vision of near-future London in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one of the most famous dystopias in literature. The novel coined ideas that have passed into popular currency, such as Big Brother, Room 101, newspeak, and the thought police. Written just two years before his death in 1950, Orwell's book imagines a world in which World War II led to atomic war in the 1950s, followed by a Revolution in which English Socialism ('Ingsoc') transforms the country.

Citizens live under the microscopic watch of complete state surveillance – ubiquitous telescreens monitor people's activity in their homes and a legion of informants spy on family, workers and neighbours. The narrator, Winston Smith, works at the Ministry of Information's Records Department doctoring official archives so that the Party can control history. As people are murdered or disappear into the shadowy police state, an army of bureaucrats like Winston must rewrite events to obliterate records of ever having existed.

With its vision of totalitarian control over people's daily lives, the failures of free market capitalism, and its echoes of wartime hardship and rationing, Orwell's dystopian vision resonated strongly with its original 1940s readership and remains influential to this day.

QUOTATION:

This, [Winston] thought with a sort of vague distaste – this was London, chief city of Airstrip One, itself the third most populous of the provinces of Oceania. He tried to squeeze out some childhood memory that should tell him whether London had always been quite like this. Were there always these vistas of rotting nineteenth-century houses, their sides shored up with baulks of timber, their windows patched with cardboard and their roofs with corrugated iron, their crazy garden walls sagging in all directions? And the bombed sites where the plaster dust swirled in the air and the willowherb straggled over the heaps of rubble; and the places where the bombs had cleared a larger patch and there had sprung up sordid colonies of wooden dwellings like chicken-houses? (p. 5)

John Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (1951)

Whilst it may have terrified readers in the early 1950s, John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* has been described by critics as a 'cosy catastrophe' in which, as science fiction author Brian Aldiss writes, 'the hero should have a pretty good time…while everyone else is dying off'. Indeed for Wyndham's central characters, Bill and Josella, the catastrophe offers the chance of a fresh start in the countryside and an escape from dreary jobs and sterile urban living. The catastrophe starts when a comet lands on

Earth, causing blindness in the majority of the population with the exception of characters like Bill and Josella who had their eyes bandaged or covered at the time of the attack.

However, even more calamitous are the Triffids – genetically modified plants that Bill believes to have been bioengineered in the Soviet Union, which are farmed for their oil. The Triffids become carnivorous predators rampaging through the countryside and hunting down people and livestock.

Wyndham's novel offers an unforgettable vision of the near future, in which the Cold War arms race has led to biological warfare resulting in the complete breakdown of societies around the world.

QUOTATION:

And so I came to Westminster.

The deadness, the finish of it all, was italicized there. The usual scatter of abandoned vehicles lay about the streets. Very few people were in sight. I saw only three who were moving. Two were tapping their way down the gutters of Whitehall, the third was in parliament square. He was sitting close to Lincoln's statue, and clutching to him his dearest possession – a side of bacon from which he was hacking a ragged slice with a blunt knife.

Above it all rose the Houses of Parliament, with the hands of the clock stopped at three minutes past six. It was difficult to believe that all that meant nothing any more, that now it was just a pretentious confection in uncertain stone which could decay in peace. […] Alongside, the Thames flowed imperturbably on. So it would flow until the day the Embankment crumbled and the water spread out and Westminster became once more an island in a marsh. (pp. 127-8)

Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Set in the 1970s or 1980s, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* depicts a dystopian near future in which youth culture has evolved into brutal warring tribes. Fifteen-year-old Alex and his miscreant pack of 'droogs' roam the streets seeking drug-fuelled 'ultra-violence' and sparring with neighbouring gangs. Their vicious acts lead to Alex being imprisoned for murder and subsequently selected for an experimental treatment in which he is conditioned against violence and released back into society.

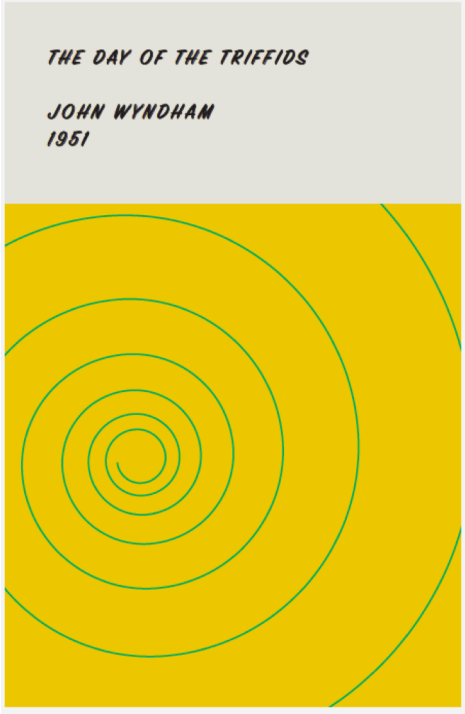
Although the location of Burgess's novel is left vague, Stanley Kubrick's 1971 film adaptation draws heavily on London landmarks for its dystopian setting. Location filming at the Thamesmead South Housing Estate in southeast London brought to the fore Burgess's fable of the effects of 1960s and 1970s leftist social engineering through urban regeneration schemes.

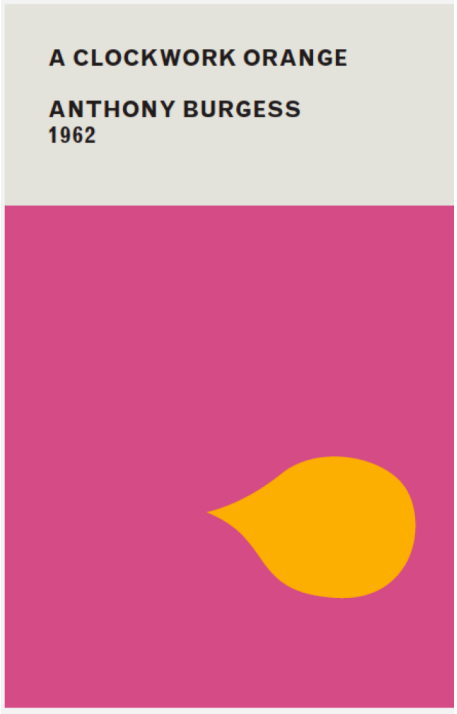
Burgess' mythologised version of inner city London blends English youth cultures (such as the Cosh and Teddy boys) with Russian subcultures (notably the *stilyagi*, or style-boys) in a frightening vision of gang violence and inter-generational conflict – all narrated in Alex's distinctive patois of 'nadsat talk'.

QUOTATION:

So off we went our several ways … I had my cut-throat britva handy in case any of Billyboy's droogs should be around near the flatblock waiting, or for that matter any of the other bandas or gruppas or

shaikas that from time to time were at war with one. Where I lived was with my dadda and mum in the flats of Minicipal Flatblock 18A, between Kingsley Avenue and Wilsonway. I got to the big main door with no trouble, though I did pass one young malchick sprawling and creeching and moaning in the gutter, all cut about lovely, and saw in the lamplight also streaks of blood here and there like signatures, my brothers, of the night's fillying. (p. 25)





New Wave Experimental Futures

J. G. Ballard, *The Drowned World* (1962)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Having made a name for himself as a writer of science fiction stories in the magazine *New Worlds*, J. G. Ballard began writing a series of disaster novels in the early 1960s. *The Drowned World* is the most famous of these early books and imagines life in the 22nd century after climate change has led to rising sea levels and the melting of the polar ice caps. Demographic changes caused by growing infertility have resulted in a declining human population that is increasingly threatened by the return of large reptilian creatures, perfectly adapted to the lagoons and swamps.

The novel's central character, Dr Robert Kerans, is part of a team of scientists monitoring the evolution of flora and fauna at a testing station above the drowned city of London. As the tropical heat and jungle conditions start to affect Kerans, he lapses into an increasingly subconscious and regressive state, yearning for the womb-like lagoons and their seductive pull into a new Triassic era that recalls the geological prehistory of man.

Ballard's interest in surrealism and Jungian psychiatry informs the stunning psychic landscapes described in *The Drowned World*, where London's former streets lie at the bottom of the sea.

QUOTATION:

All the way down the creek, perched in the windows of the office blocks and department stores, the iguanas watched them go past, their hard frozen heads jerking stiffly. […] Without the reptiles, the lagoons and the creeks of office blocks half-submerged in the immense heat would have had a strange dream-like beauty, but the iguanas and basilisks brought the fantasy down to earth. As their seats in the one-time boardrooms indicated, the reptiles had taken over the city. (p. 18)

Emma Tennant, *The Time of the Crack* (1973)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Emma Tennant's links with Britain's 'New Wave' of science fiction writers in the 1960s and 1970s (including J. G. Ballard, Hilary Bailey and Michael Moorcock) can be identified in her almost-forgotten novella, *The Time of the Crack*. The book imagines a near future in which a large crack in the Thames plunges London into darkness and chaos as electricity fails, fires break out, buildings slide and topple, and social structures fall apart.

Having grown up in an aristocratic family in London's swinging '60s (working for *Queen* and *Vogue* magazines), Tennant focuses society's collapse around an ensemble of predominantly upper-middle class characters: psychoanalysts and their affluent, hysterical patients, Playboy Club patrons, and

property tycoons. The novel also features a cult of women whose liberation from patriarchal domination and the shackles of endless housework is made possible by the crisis.

As a satire of capitalist society, Tennant's story blends the English disaster tradition with elements of magical realism, the novel of manners, and farce to produce a highly enjoyable comedic vision of apocalypse.

QUOTATION:

Hyde Park Corner was, of course, unrecognizable. The twisted metal of crashed cars lay scattered at the base of the great earth mound that had gone up like a gigantic molehill. Picking their way carefully through the debris, the doctors led their charges to the roofless hospital that once had been St George's. […] Thirsk and Harcourt strode along at a good speed. 'We're in luck,' Thirsk remarked, 'if you look at the situation objectively. This is just the kind of traumatic shock this society needs to jolt it out of its complacency.' (pp. 25-6)

Doris Lessing, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

In the early 1970s, Doris Lessing began writing a series of what she called 'inner space' fictions, examining human consciousness through the lens of R. D. Laing's psychiatry and Sufi mysticism. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is a product of this journey into 'inner space'. Set in a post-apocalyptic future city, the novel presents readers with an ambiguous state of unfolding disaster. The unnamed narrator looks out from her block of flats as society collapses, and violent gangs of youth roam the streets whilst middle-aged and middle class residents cower indoors. She takes comfort from imaginary forays beyond the wall of her living room, into a network of other rooms and family scenes that are part memory, part dreamlike hallucination.

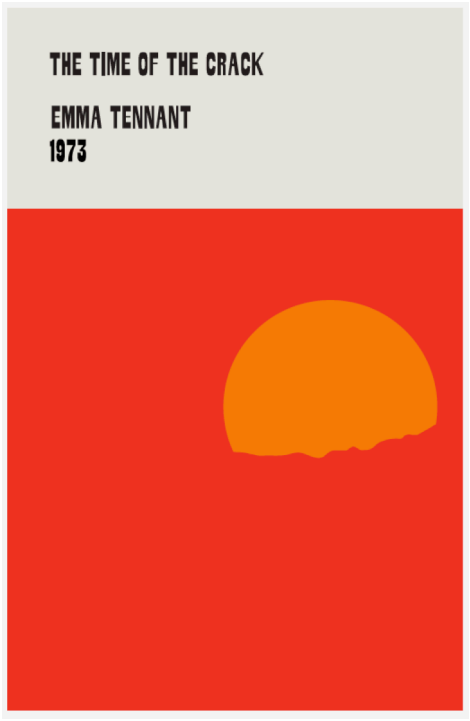
Although the city is never named, the 1981 film adaptation of Lessing's novel starring Julie Christie was explicitly set in London, which chimed with Londoners' experiences of strikes, blackouts and uncollected mountains of rubbish in the previous decade.

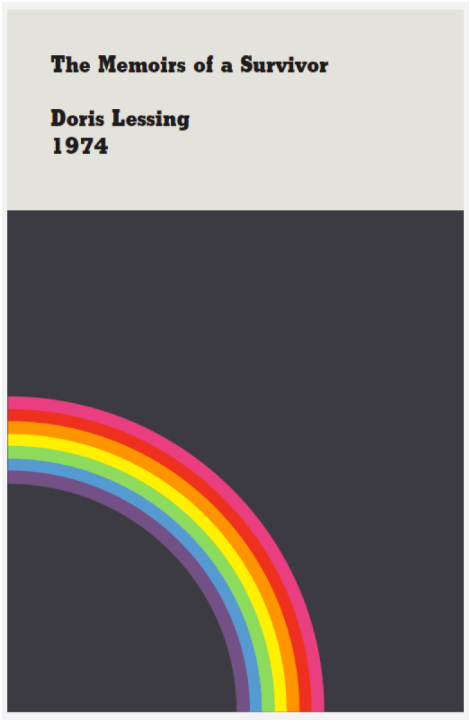
With its phantasmagoric atmosphere and stylistic innovation, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is an important example of 1970s experimental literature that animates visions of the future with a compelling ambivalence.

QUOTATION:

While everything, all forms of social organization, broke up, we lived on, adjusting our lives, as if nothing fundamental was happening. It was amazing how determined, how stubborn, how self-renewing, were the attempts to lead an ordinary life. […] When something really bad happened, as when an area got devastated, people might move out for days, or weeks, to stay with relatives or friends, and then move back, perhaps to a looted house, to take up their job, their housekeeping – their order. We can get used to anything at all; this is a commonplace, of course, but perhaps you have to live through such a time to see how horribly true it is. There is nothing that people won't try to accommodate into 'ordinary life'. It was precisely this which gave that time its peculiar flavour; the

combination of the bizarre, the hectic, the frightening, the threatening, an atmosphere of siege or war – with what was customary, ordinary, even decent. (p. 20)





Fantasy Remediations of London

FANTASY REMEDIATIONS OF LONDON

Neil Gaiman, *Neverwhere* (1996)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Neverwhere was first created as a TV show by Neil Gaiman and Lenny Henry, which aired on BBC Two in 1996, and then adapted by Gaiman into a novel. The original idea was to examine the tribes of London's homeless. Gaiman developed this into a fantasy world in which the people who 'fall through the cracks' in society arrive at London Below – a weird subterranean version of the city where rats and pigeons communicate with humans and warring clans continue their centuries-old struggle for power. Richard Mayhew, an ordinary Londoner, happens upon London's unreal underside when he helps a wounded girl called Door whose quest for avenging her family's murder leads Richard ever deeper into the sewers, tunnels and abandoned tube stations of London Below.

Neverwhere became a bestseller and remains an important example of the urban fantasy novels that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s and have been influential upon 21st century speculative literature.

QUOTATION:

An enormous Irish wolfhound padded down the aisle, and stopped beside a lute player, who sat on the floor picking at a gladsome melody in a desultory fashion. The wolfhound glared at Richard, snorted with disdain, then lay down and went to sleep. At the far end of the carriage an elderly falconer, with a hooded falcon on his wrist, was exchanging pleasantries with a small knot of damsels of a certain age. Some passengers obviously stared at the four travellers; other, just as obviously, ignored them. It was, Richard realised, as if someone had taken a small medieval court and put it, as best they could, in one carriage of an Underground train. […] *Earl's Court*, thought Richard. *Of course*. And then he began to wonder whether there was a Baron in Barons Court Tube station, or a Raven in Ravenscourt… (pp. 150-1)

J. K. Rowling, *The Philosopher's Stone* (1997)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

As the first novel in the Harry Potter series, J. K. Rowling's *The Philosopher's Stone* introduced characters and settings that have become beloved by millions around the world, launching an international publishing phenomenon and reviving the genre of children's fantasy literature. Rowling blended the British boarding-school story with traditional fantasy literature as popularised by J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954-5), with its wizards, elves, magical tokens, and central quest narrative.

Rowling's central character, Harry, is initiated into an alternative world of magical elites who move among ordinary people (Muggles) and shape real political events. At Hogwarts boarding school, Harry and his friends Hermione and Ron learn not only how to perform magic but gradually become initiated into a dangerous world of wizardry and dark magic.

Having been adapted into eight films the Harry Potter franchise has also boosted tourism to London, inspiring fans to visit real-world settings in the books such as King's Cross Station and Charing Cross Road. *The Philosopher's Stone* introduces Rowling's readers to London's magical community, which co-exists with ordinary Londoners in recognisable locations offering a tantalising glimpse into another world.

QUOTATION:

Harry had never been to London before. Although Hagrid seemed to know where he was going, he was obviously not used to getting there in an ordinary way. He got stuck in the ticket barrier on the Underground, and complained loudly that the seats were too small and the trains too slow. 'I don't know how the Muggles manage without magic,' he said as they climbed a broken-down escalator that led up to a bustling road lined with shops. […]

He tapped the wall three times with the point of his umbrella.

The brick he had touched quivered — it wriggled — in the middle, a small hole appeared — it grew wider and wider — a second later they were facing an archway large enough even for Hagrid, an archway onto a cobbled street that twisted and turned out of sight.

'Welcome,' said Hagrid, 'to Diagon Alley.'

He grinned at Harry's amazement. They stepped through the archway. Harry looked quickly over his shoulder and saw the archway shrink instantly back into solid wall. (pp. 72-7)

China Miéville, *Un Lun Dun* (2007)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

In this illustrated novel for younger readers, China Miéville recasts London into an appealing yet grotesque site of urban fantasy. Inspired by the classic children's literature of Enid Blyton and Lewis Carroll, *Un Lun Dun* reveals a hidden parallel London that has evolved out of the city's refuse and detritus. Teenagers Zanna and Deeba discover this 'abcity' by accident, stumbling into a teeming metropolis of sentient discarded objects and bric-a-brac with attitude. Buildings in UnLondon are fashioned out of giant hats, old typewriters and dead TVs and London's abandoned rubbish has come to life.

Like his genre-bending adult fiction, the boundaries between real places and their fantastical counterparts remain permeable in *Un Lun Dun*. Resisting the traditional structure of children's portal fantasy (where characters access magical kingdoms via a portal, but must return to reality at the end of the narrative), Miéville's central characters are not forced to return to the 'real world'. For Zanna and Deeba, the connection between London and its other, UnLondon, remains intact inviting younger readers to see the city anew.

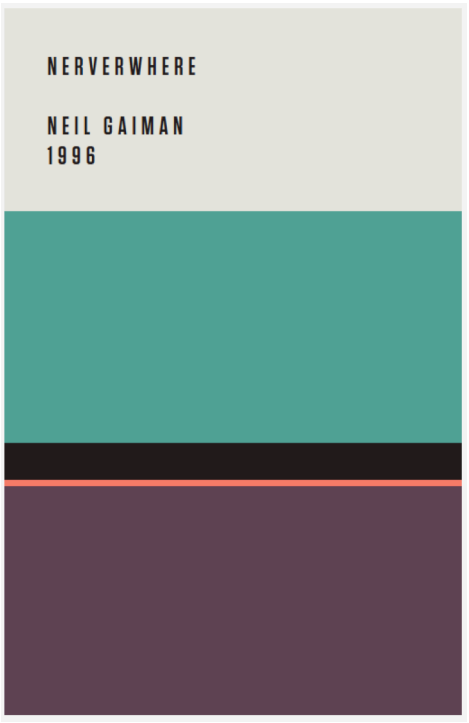
QUOTATION:

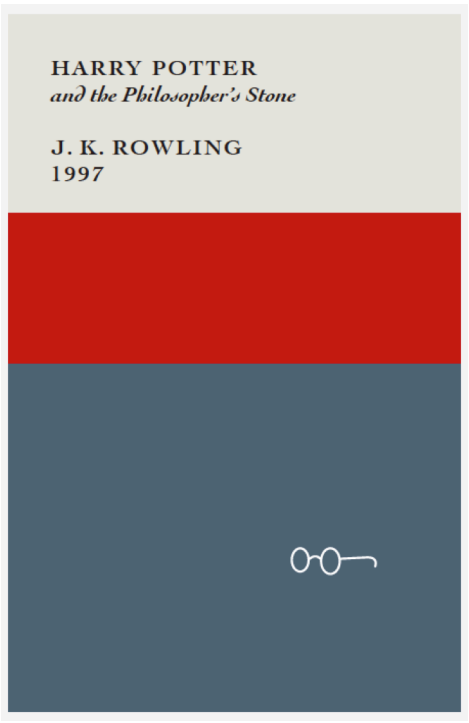
Most people looked human (if in an unusual range of colours), but a sizeable proportion did not. Deeba and Zanna saw bubble-eyes, and gills, and several different kinds of tails. The two girls stared when a bramble-bush walked past, squeezed into a suit, a tangle of blackberries, thorns and leaves bursting out of its collar. […]

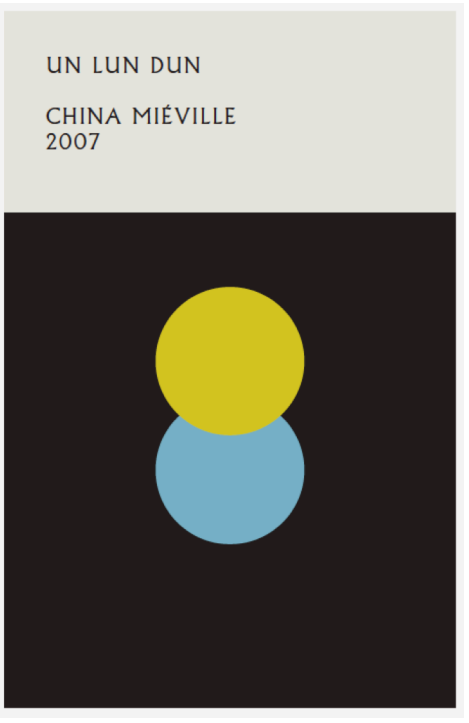
The streets were mostly red brick like London terraces, but considerably more ramshackle, spindly and convoluted. Houses leaned in to each other and storeys piled up at complicated angles. Slate roofs lurched in all directions.

Here and there where a house should be was something else instead.

There was a fat, low tree, with open-fronted bedrooms, bathrooms and kitchens perched in its branches. People were clearly visible in each chamber, brushing their teeth or kicking back their covers. Obaday took them past a house-sized fist, carved out of stone, with windows in its knuckles, and then the shell of a huge turtle, with a door in the neck hole and a chimney poking out of its mottled top. (pp. 54-5)







Contemporary Visions of the City

Maggie Gee, *The Flood* (2004)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Maggie Gee's *The Flood* resumes a theme that has been explored in much of her previously published fiction: apocalyptic events and their effects on ordinary individuals. Gee's novel is also a work of political satire, set during the Bush-Blair administrations shortly after the September 11 attacks in 2001. The 'fear of the future' aroused by al-Qaeda's terrorism inspired Gee to consider another kind of frightening future in the form of ecocatastrophe.

In the novel, London has experienced extreme rainfall causing widespread flooding of the city. Many of the novel's characters are involved with an apocalyptic religious cult that welcomes the imminent end of the world. Others are struck by the beauty of London, which has been transformed into a city of shining canals like Venice. Ultimately, the floods are superseded by a meteor that crashes onto Earth, causing a tsunami across the city and killing many of the book's characters.

Gee's novel suggests that what survives humanity's destruction – in London at least – is a promise of ecological regeneration that endures after mankind's 'brief, ant-like' existence.

QUOTATION:

Later, as they rowed through the drowned kingdom, they saw the beauty and the havoc. The river stretched out like a golden flood-plain. Only a scattering of birds traced lines on its surface. Where a great throng of specimen oaks once stood, every one of them different, from all over the world – Turko, Malai, Anaturia – the water now shone, inscrutable. Not a twig, not an acorn, waved above. […] the half-drowned trees seemed to bend and shift, every sturdy black branch was swelling and shrinking, and then [Lottie] realized they were covered with crows, a crawling black congregation of crows, hopping over each other, jostling, cawing, a deafening chorus of harsh raw sound. Some of them flew up like a storm of black ash and hovered, squawking, above the boat. They looked large, and old. They had heads like hammers. (pp. 113-116)

Bernardine Evaristo, *Blonde Roots* (2008)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

British-Nigerian author Bernardine Evaristo recasts the transatlantic slave trade in *Blonde Roots* into a photographic negative of historical events where white people are stolen by black slave traders and sold into slavery to work on plantations in Japan. The novel's central character, an attractive blonde-haired woman called Doris Scagglethorpe, was abducted as a child from her family's cabbage farm in northern England. She is quickly transformed into a despised underdog in a world where black beauty

is paramount and light-skinned characters desperately try to darken their complexions and 'pass' as black.

This alternate history brings to life the horrors of slavery and racism as Doris recounts her appalling experiences – surviving the Middle Passage, labouring in sugar cane fields, and working as a domestic slave for a rich planter's family.

Blonde Roots mixes Europe's colonial, slave-trading past with contemporary references to plastic surgery, urban fashion, and London's abandoned underground. In a surreal reimagining of London, the city of Londolo is the centre of the Aphrikan Empire, vibrantly depicted with its colourful markets, highlife music, breadfruit trees, and Savannah wildlife.

QUOTATION:

Alone on the empty deck I sat out of sight on a coil of rope and peeped over the railing. I was surprised to see we were still only passing through the outer reaches of Londolo – zones 8, 9 and 10. I recognised the prosperous town of Green Wi Che, known for its shipbuilding yards, several of which we passed. We soon skirted the wide riverside factories of the arsenal town of Wool Wi Che, famous for manufacturing the finest spears, shields, crossbows, poison darts, muskets and cannons in the world.

Grotesque hippos lay entwined on top of each other in the mudflats, their rubbery, slimy skins like those of giant slugs, their eyes and ears a putrid pink. Two open-mouthed alpha males were squaring up to each other, jaws stretched wide, teeth interlocked inside. […]

A Temz crocodile pretended to sleep on the riverbank, mouth casually open, waiting to snap down hard on its next gullible prey. […]

Far away I could just make out the mountain ranges of the Essex Massif. (pp. 159-60)

Julie Myerson, *Then* (2011)

CONTEXT BLOCK:

Known for her semi-autobiographical works about familial breakdown and troubled mothers, Julie Myerson's novel *Then* examines questions of morality and maternal love in the ghastly setting of post-apocalyptic London. The narrator, who remains unnamed for most of the story, lives in an abandoned office block in Bishopsgate with a small group of ragged survivors. Her severe amnesia and traumatic experiences render her an unreliable chronicler of events in the deserted city after a mysterious climatic event led to widespread fires and extreme temperature rises followed by a new ice age. Bodies lie amid banks of snow, freezing on the capital's former streets, and collections of broken bones hint at cannibalism as London's decimated population struggles in a bitter war of survival.

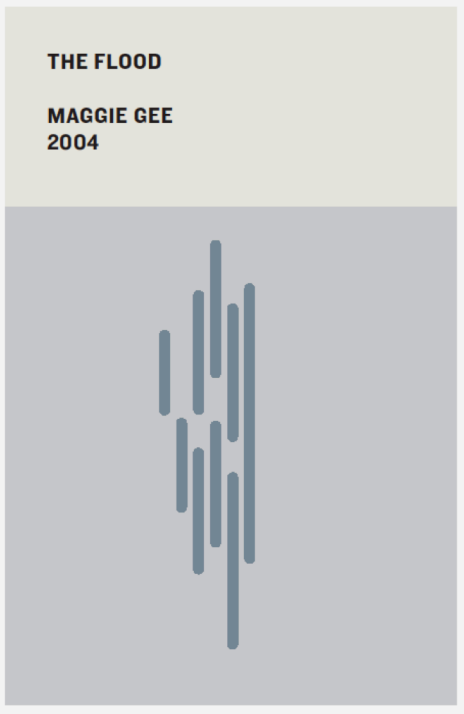
Myerson's novel is distinctive for its use of non-linear narrative structure, which connects this book with a feminist tradition of storytelling about alternative futures (including works by Doris Lessing, Marge Piercy, Joanna Russ, Octavia Butler, Jeannette Winterson and Liz Jensen). Part of a wave of post-apocalyptic novels in the 21st century, Myerson's chilling vision of future London reminds us of the power of the apocalyptic imagination and our ongoing fascination with narratives of societal collapse.

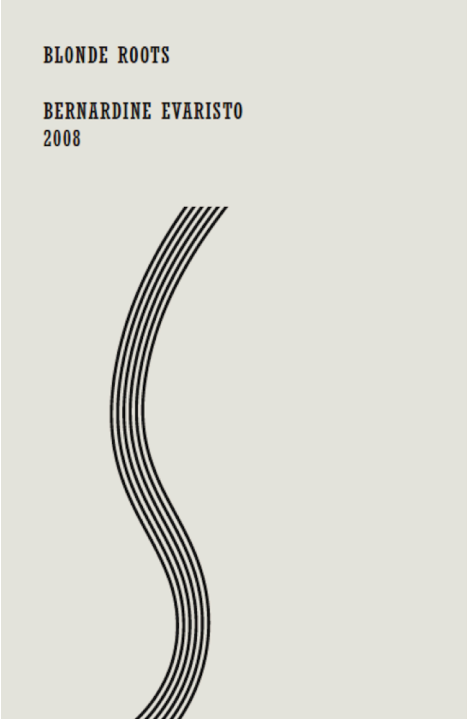
QUOTATION:

We hurry on down Threadneedle, past what was once the grand old Bank of England. Here the streets are strewn with debris. All the once-smart shops have been looted and burned. The signs that used to advertise perfume and make-up and alcohol are all broken or defaced.

A sign still says Mint Haircutting, and another, in faded red, Dry Riser, and another Bank Tejarat. Some window-boxes hang off a building with no windows. In them you can still see the frozen ghost shapes of leaves and stalks. Everywhere, burned-out cars and lorries and buses, all of them window-deep in snow.

Now and then you see the clean, splayed bones of a hand, gripping a rolled-down window or hanging out of a car door. We make our way around an office photocopier that must have fallen out of a window. It is on its side and a pair of feet poke out from under it. One foot still has half a sock on. The toes on both are entirely black. (p. 87)





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