

Ici Londres

'Capital' is John Lanchester's first novel in a decade. Its epic scale recalls that of many a Dickens or Trollope plot as he sets out to draw a 'state of the nation' portrait, with London serving as a microcosm of modern Britain. The author himself commented in an article that appeared in 'The Guardian' last month: 'I wanted to have characters who were lucky and unlucky, immigrants and natives, mindful and oblivious, poor and rich...'

Britain's current obsession with property is very much at the heart of the book, which is set in Pepys Road, a realistic yet fictional south London street. The unremarkable late-Victorian villas were originally built for aspiring lower-middle-class families, but have since metamorphosed into hotly fought-over objects of desire thanks to repetitive housing booms and soaring property prices. All the characters either live there or have a close connection with the area.

'Having a house in Pepys Road was like being in a casino in which you were guaranteed to be a winner. If you already lived there, you were rich. If you wanted to move there, you had to be rich.' Gentrification looms large: attics are routinely turned into lofts, while the latest craze is for basements to be excavated. At number 42 Petunia Howe, the only resident who has lived in the street all her life, is a frail eighty-two-year-old who is not even aware of the pot of gold her house has become. Hers is the only property that remains stuck in the 1950s with tatty lino on the kitchen floor, a lace curtain in the front room and fading flowery wallpaper in the hall.

At the other end of the spectrum is number 51, the mansion owned by Roger, a City investment banker, and Arabella, his high-maintenance wife. She seems to be changing the colour of the walls every other week either in the townhouse or in the Cotswolds parsonage which serves as the family's weekend retreat. Arabella's life revolves around holiday brochures, designer clothes and spas that allow her to decompress; cleaning ladies, nannies and Polish builders are taking the more serious tasks away from her. Yet when Roger does not get the seven-figure bonus he is certain he deserves, life slowly starts to unravel in more ways than one. Meanwhile, a teenage Premier League footballer from Senegal and his culture-shocked father have become the latest new arrival at number 27.

Lanchester presents his readers with a multi-layered portrait of a vibrant, fragmented city, where words like 'community' or 'empathy' only exist intermittently. Parallel destinies make for the anonymity of urban life: families or individuals are cut off from everyone else because their legal status is shaky or because they are too different to even be noticed. Their paths might cross, but hardly ever tangle for long as people instinctively stick with their own.

You are bound to soon feel caught up in the inner lives and the thoughts of strangers, in their doubts and dreams, forgetting that these characters are but words on a page. That is how life-like reading 'Capital' feels. Suddenly you need not watch a long-form BBC TV series to begin to understand the complexities of living in London today – these pages will do a far more than adequate job. All you will have to do as a reader is take the plunge and follow on from there.

Lanchester's sentences are not self-consciously elegant or intricate, the directness of the prose mirroring the gritty everyday experiences of most of his characters. Yet some plot twists will come as a complete surprise and be unexpectedly moving.

Look out for the triple-shot cappuccino, for orange recycling bags, for the crammed corner shop, for gouda and prosciutto and rocket in ciabatta or a 'happy hour' offering two drinks for the price of one! There is warmth as well as depth, exuberance next to meanness. There is lots of humour, too, and the odd detail which debunks the more pompous characters. In many ways 'Capital' is an updated version of what Henry James referred to as the 'loose, baggy monsters' of the Victorian age. It is a fantastically smooth read that offers a sprawling tableau of the way Londoners live now, warts and all.

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