
Peter Ackroyd’s latest work of fiction, *Three Brothers*, is his fifteenth novel and his fifty-fourth book since he began publishing almost forty years ago. Since the late 1970s, Ackroyd has steadily produced a substantial collection of award-winning work as a poet, novelist, historian, biographer, journalist and critic. Awarded a CBE for services to literature in 2003, Ackroyd is one of London’s most well-known intellectuals. As an internationally bestselling author, popular historian and recognisable radio and television personality, he has gained both the literary recognition and the public status of a cultural iconoclast in Britain. His reputation as one of England’s pre-eminent ‘cultural gatekeepers’ (perhaps self-appointed, but nevertheless apt) is all the more pertinent, for what is most distinctive in Ackroyd’s writing (besides his flair for hyperbole) is his focus on the obscure and the infamous in England’s social and cultural history, particularly in the dark past of its capital city London - his Muse and life-long home. His newest novel is no exception. *Three Brothers* tells the tale of brothers Harry, Daniel and Sam Hanway, who start their lives on the same day one year apart on a post-war council estate in Camden Town in the middle of the last century. Abandoned by their mother, who simply disappears one day, and neglected by their father, a nightwatchman and failed writer exhausted by living, each brother is left to find his own way through life in swarming, shadowy 1960s London.

Ackroyd begins *Three Brothers* in a manner reminiscent of the Brothers Grimm:

> In the London borough of Camden, in the middle of the last century, there lived three brothers; they were three young boys, with a year’s difference of age between each of them. They were united, however, in one extraordinary way. They had been born at the same time on the same day of the same month – to be precise, midday on 8 May (p. 1).

The story of the titular three brothers has certainly been written with a dash of the Gothic fairy-tale style. But the story of the three Hanway brothers also appears to be touched by Ackroyd’s own personal experiences of living and working in post-war London of the 1960s and 70s. The eldest brother, Harry, driven by uncompromising ambition soon realises ‘words were cheap, and that they could be manufactured by the yard’ (p. 61) and so pursues a career on Fleet Street, promptly learning how to negotiate the cut-throat (and corrupt) world of London journalism, and quickly rises to editorial positions, as Ackroyd himself so successfully did in the early years of his literary career. The middle brother Daniel’s life also appears to be drawn from elements of Ackroyd’s own; both are gay men from a working-class ‘council estate’ background, who become Cambridge scholars of English literature, literary book
reviewers and writers; on occasion this character seems to function as the author’s mouthpiece, a fictional doppelgänger and little else.

However, it is the city of London which is the true protagonist of the Hanway brothers’ story. That this is so should be of no surprise to those familiar with Ackroyd’s writing. To borrow one of Ackroyd’s favourite phrases, London has always been the landscape of his imagination. The labyrinthine world of a mystical and often Gothic London of the past, present, and on one occasion the future, is the main setting of almost all of Ackroyd’s novels. One could even go so far as to suggest Ackroyd and his works are haunted by the city. In his fictional and non-fictional writing about London, Ackroyd repeats the themes of haunting, in which the city’s Gothic genius loci, its ‘spirit of place’, continually returns, with uncanny effects. In Three Brothers, as in all of Ackroyd’s London fiction, the city is represented as a physical and psychical embodiment of the uncanny, for inscribed within its buildings and streets is a transhistorical pattern of coincidence and continuity into which the characters’ lives (and deaths) are drawn, and from which none can escape.

When Daniel Hanway, the aspiring academic and reluctant book reviewer, is commissioned to write a book about London writers, he finds through the course of his research:

a preoccupation with the image of London as a web so taut and tightly drawn that the slightest movement of any part sent reverberations through the whole. A chance encounter might lead to terrible consequences, and a misheard word bring unintended good fortune. An impromptu answer to a sudden question might cause death (p. 185).

Ackroyd, too, has explored these writers as their work delves into the patters of coincidence and consequence so prevalent in his own work. He considers the writers to be ‘London Luminaries and Cockney Visionaries’, a collection of exceptional individuals, writers and artists, scholars and philosophers ‘to whom or through whom the territory – the place – the past – speaks’. Sam, the youngest Hanway brother, appears to be fashioned in the form of one of Ackroyd’s ‘Cockney visionaries’. A strange and melancholic misfit, drawn to the marginalised and downtrodden in society, Sam has visions and seems to be able to commune with the ghosts of London’s past. Wandering through his lonely life in London, he is the only one to whom the city’s truly transcendental ‘spirit of place’ is revealed.

Moreover, in the novel the uncanny connections that are slowly revealed to exist between almost all of the characters are suggestive of a kind of haunted condition, or perhaps, a haunting consequence, of living in the city; one that is felt in the Hanway brothers’ lives by their seeming incapability to escape the mystical threads of fate that tied them together at birth and eventually again in death. Ackroyd’s lucid narration even hints that London, possessing some form of consciousness, orchestrates such uncanny returns, in that the city itself seems to take responsibility for the patterns of continuity, coincidence and consequence which permeate the brothers’ curiously detached lives.

Towards the end of the novel, whilst Daniel is teaching at Cambridge, one of his students asks him about the repeated use of coincidence in Dickens’s novels, to which he replies:

That is the condition of living in the city, is it not? The most heterogeneous elements collide. Because, you see, everything is connected to everything else (p. 240).

*Three Brothers* is a carefully crafted tale of collisions, in which the connections drawn between the characters are based on encounters with the city because, for Ackroyd, it is in history’s coincidences that one can find transhistorical continuity.

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