

INTERVIEW

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The culture I identify with: An interview with Gary Budden

Gary Budden is the co-founder of award-winning independent publisher Influx Press, and the author of several books, including *London Incognita* (Dead Ink, 2020), *Hollow Shores* (Dead Ink, 2017), the Shirley Jackson Award-Shortlisted *Judderman* (Eden Book Society, 2018). His writing has appeared in numerous magazines and journals including *Ambit*, *Nightscript*, *Gorse*, *The Quietus*, *Structo*, *Minor Literature(s)*, *Confingo*, *Uncertainties*, *The Lonely Crowd* and many more. He lives in Enfield, north London.

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Gary Budden's *London Incognita* (2020) is an engaging and witty self-referencing collection of short fiction, creative non-fiction, hommages, tributes and asides that slowly accrues into a metafictional web of material that explores the dark underbelly of late 20th Century London. Budden's characters are often homeless, or burnt-out squatters, junkies or alcoholics; many are socially and spiritually lost, inhabiting a countercultural netherworld of punk bands and zines, surrounded by imaginary creatures who act as a personification of the unspeakable horror that are rumoured to inhabit the unknown regions of the city.

It's not all gloom and doom and disappearances though, as some characters kick their habits, some succeed in the music business with their band Scarp, others return from wherever they've been after disappearing, and Melissa – one of the many writers that Budden creates and writes as in this collection – makes a mark with her zine, *Magnesium Burns*, which twenty years on from issue 1 is getting mainstream recognition in the form of a collected book edition and retrospective exhibition.

Throughout, Budden namechecks or alludes to his literary sources and inspirations and in addition creates a new fictional pantheon of obscure and neglected writers, some of whom he then inhabits to create diaries, stories or letters, whilst others are simply mentioned in passing by his characters, often in association with imaginary collectable small presses. In a similar manner, much is left to the reader to imagine, especially the elusive monsters known as the Judderman and the Commare who are seen by many out of the corners of their eyes and can seem both scary and alluring. Either way they act as personifications of the dark, damp and unknown, luring characters to unknown destinations, be that elsewhere, undocumented suburban sprawl or death.

Budden is adamant that 'London is never finished. London never was like it was. Build and destroy and repeat.' (2020: 303) His book is set in the cracks between community and gentrification, a world where poverty is real, tower blocks burn, music and drink and drugs are not signs of rebellion but are all that hold many people's lives together. *London Incognita* is an astonishing exploration of the city, imagined and real, tinted with horror in all shapes

and forms, real and imaginary. Its characters live on the edge, geographically, socially and psychically. It is melancholic, horrific, brutal, honest and inspirational by turns, not to mention shockingly readable. I wanted to find out more about this punk psychogeography.

Rupert Loydell: *London Incognita is an amazingly intricate collection of material with all sorts of links between the stories, characters and places. I'm fascinated to know if you had a plan from the beginning or if it all evolved as you went along.*

Gary Budden: The genesis of *London Incognita* was the novella *Judderman* (Northwood, 2018) that began life as part of the Eden Book Society project – a fictional lost library of horror written by contemporary writers under pseudonyms. I was asked to write one set, and written, in the 1970s. I came up with the figure of D.A. Northwood as the ‘author’ of *Judderman*, and knew I wanted to write a horror fiction that was entirely set in, and about, London. Taking its cues from the work of writers like Ramsey Campbell, whose stories set in the crumbling Liverpool of the 1970s and 80s I admire very much, and Joel Lane, who’s work focusing on Birmingham and the Black Country was a revelation to me. I wanted to create an urban horror story about London – not whimsical ‘urban fantasy’, which I often can’t stand – but something that melded my love of British weird fiction with my interest in London and psychogeography. The term ‘London Incognita’ was lifted from Arthur Machen’s *The London Adventure* (1924) and just seemed to fit what I was doing.

After *Judderman* was written, I began writing more and more stories set in this fictional world all connected by the London Incognita concept – so it evolved as it went, until I knew I was working on an actual book of connected work, and then started writing specifically to continue the story rather than just use London Incognita as a setting.

RL: *You include references to many authors, including horror writer Arthur Machen and psychogeographers such as Iain Sinclair, along with Alan Moore's graphic novel From Hell (1999). Is this a way of acknowledging your influences or an attempt to write yourself into the literary company you'd like your work to be seen with?*

GB: Ha ha good question. I’m not that arrogant, no. I wanted to write fiction where the characters, like people in real life, were affected by fiction and knew and read notable authors.

You know how zombie films don’t exist in zombie films? No one knows what’s happening, when in reality even little kids know what a zombie is. Well it always struck me as odd that a character in fiction, encountering the uncanny, or ideas found in hauntology and psychogeography, had no awareness of writers and thinkers exploring these topics.

So I wanted to write fiction where a character knows the work of Machen, and weird shit then happens.

RL: *Part of the world you create includes fictional small presses and authors, some of whom you then write as. I find this immensely playful and inventive, especially when you juxtapose the real and imaginary, such as cult press NEL (New English Library) and your invented The Malachite Press. What is it about the idea of independent publishing that interests you? I*

know that in the real world you run Influx Press, and that you have previously published some of the material in London Incognita as your characters using presses you have created. (I might add that my interest is also informed by running Stride Books for over 30 years.)

GB: Same way I find independent record labels interesting – there’s usually a lot of personality behind the indies, and they often produce more interesting, and certainly more idiosyncratic, work.

And it ties into the horror genre too – the concepts of lost books, shady publishers, cursed manuscripts and mythical titles are very powerful. So it’s a way of merging that horror trope with a world I know intimately i.e. independent publishing.

And the fictional presses and authors give the separate stories of *London Incognita* connecting points – telling the reader this is all happening in its own specific reality.

RL: Punk and zine culture are also important components of alternative culture in your book, indeed they could be construed as central to the wellbeing and survival of several of your characters. Are music and zines central to your own life?

GB: Music, absolutely – the music that I love and the scene that it comes from as been a huge influence in my life, and is linked to wellbeing. I have many close friends made from that world and it’s a great thing to meet people via a shared passion rather than just having shared time together in a classroom or an office or a postcode.

Zines less so – they became a useful way to tell some of the stories in *London Incognita* more than anything.

RL: The punk in London Incognita is mostly a late 20th century version, perhaps a hybrid of 70s punk with music from squat, traveller and dance culture? (Thankfully you don't try to describe the music in the book!) Is that fair? Can punk be relevant 40 years on? Is it relevant? I confess that I'm more inclined towards the experiment and genre-defying confusion of post-punk.

GB: I have little interest in 70s punk culture compared to what came after. I grew up in the 1990s, and so unsurprisingly 90s punk and hardcore had a much bigger influence on me. Then I discovered British punk from the 80s, and American hardcore and post-hardcore, at the same time as listening to stuff from a very healthy time musically for new music in those traditions (2003-06 sort of time).

The London scene, especially the one I know from the mid 00s to mid-teens, does have a mix of squat, traveller and dance culture. But the DIY UK punk scene never went away. It changes and mutates all of the time – maybe the word ‘punk’ is the problem, because I’m resolutely not talking about the Sex Pistols or The Damned.

Is it relevant? I don’t know. It’s the culture I identify with, that exists globally, and I wanted to reflect that in the writing.

RL: *You touch upon ideas of nostalgia and commodification in your book, and I'm interested they are issues we have discussed in seminars at Falmouth in relation to Laura Oldfield Ford's *Savage Messiah* (2011). I think I am right in saying that you don't name her in your book, but Melissa seemed to me to be related to or inspired by Ford as an artist and zine maker, whose zine then gets gathered up and republished as a coffee table book and repurposed as an art exhibition. My students often question why anyone would appropriate 1970s zines, collage and handwriting, now that computers are available. Some suggest it's either nostalgic for a personal past or a kind of fake rebellion. I confess I veer between liking the book, especially the West London sections, which is where I grew up, and being cynical about how it's become repackaged by an academic press. (I'm obviously complicit in my use of it as a set text!) Any thoughts on that?*

GB: I love *Savage Messiah* and Laura's work, and it's a direct influence on *London Incognita*. The style is certainly taken from the stark black and white of 80s punk zines, rather than 70s, but the idea of being fake rebellion seems silly.

For the character of Melissa, it's worth remembering a few things. The zine itself is started in the 1990s, certainly before knocking one up on a computer was easy or viable. And in the culture from which it is from and about, the hand-made DIY approach is part of the point, rather than a separate issue. Form is part of the content.

RL: *There's also a connected theme of gentrification in the book, with characters excluded from development zones and building sites, or unable to place themselves within an altered landscape. The developers' utopia is not for the likes of your characters, and not only that but the utopia often doesn't work. You write, for instance, about Grenfell Tower, a very real failure in all sorts of ways, from personal and economic levels to health & safety issues via corporate development and the political. You don't foreground the politics, but it is there, yes, simply because of who and what you are writing about?*

GB: I have no idea who the developers' utopia is for – other than buy-to-let landlords and wealthy investors. The anxiety of a rotten housing market and constant development is something many people in the city feel, and I wanted this unease to be a recurring theme in the book. It struck me as being a good source of horror.

I don't know how you could write about London and not engage on some level with the politics, especially when it comes to the issue of housing. To ignore that would be deceitful.

RL: *Can you tell me anything more about the creatures that inhabit London's shadows in your novel? Are they the personification of evil, or imaginary others that your characters have somehow willed into existence? Melissa's version of the Commare, with its flickering overlays of important women from throughout her life, seems to suggest the latter, informed by memory and emotion, but it's also suggested that both the Commare and Judderman are responsible for the disappearance (a suitably vague word!) of several individuals in the book, not least because of your almost ritualistic lists of associated found bodies and unexplained*

murders. They clearly work so well because your horror is not explained or brought into clear focus.

GB: I wanted the Judderman and the Commare to be slippery, mutable figures that's it hard to pin any specific meaning onto. Their ambiguity is, I hope, what makes them more frightening and unsettling.

To me, they are masculine and feminine versions of the same thing, the anxieties and hidden traumas of London manifesting for my characters. I wouldn't actually call them evil – I like the idea that the darkness and horrors of the city can be appealing and alluring. This is the idea that powers 'Judderman', 'My Queen' and 'You're Already Dead'. All written as a form of warning to myself – how it's alluring and addictive, but not always too healthy to focus on the darkness.

RL: I confess I haven't read it (yet) but I note that your previous book, Hollow Shores (2017) was set on the coast, both invented and real. Could you talk about how your work moved from there to the metropolis?

GB: *Hollow Shores* actually has a number of London-set stories. The Hollow Shore and London Incognita both exist in the same reality.

But I moved away from the coastal landscapes because I strongly wanted to move away from anything that could be called folk-horror, or be too associated with the twee and polite form of English landscape writing that had risen to prominence.

I was also sick of people complaining about London, so wanted to write entirely set in, and only about, the London as I know it.

RL: Your blog New Lexicons uses the phrase 'Landscape Punk' and states that you 'wanted to know if I could write about place, nature, alternative thought, in a way that didn't present these things as just props to our everyday lives in the late-capitalist world.' You go on to note how 'landscape writing, weird fiction, psychogeography and the occult thrilled me' but that you also 'needed to write in how my obsession with these subjects jeopardised, at times, my real relationships in the human world.' (Budden 2016) Is London Incognita actually about obsession, the result of obsession, or both?

GB: Yeah, it's about obsession and the results of it. How getting too enmeshed in your interests, especially in the darker and more obscure aspects of history and culture, can ruin people. Life isn't all bad, after all.

'My Queen', my personal favourite story I've ever written, is all about sexual obsession, men and women, and how too-deep an interest in all the themes of *London Incognita* can fuck up your romantic relationships.

RL: What can we expect next from Gary Budden? Will we see a return to landscape writing or non-fiction, more stories, or will you continue to experiment and layer your material?

GB: I think I'll be sticking to fiction for the foreseeable future – certainly no memoirs of how walking in nature healed me, or anything like that. But the themes of landscape (urban or natural) are always going to be there, as it's an inexhaustible subject that will always interest me.

I've been working on a screenplay with a director for a short film, one that exists very much in the *London Incognita* mode. I've enjoyed the process so much that I may see what else can be written that way.

RL: Thanks for your time.

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NOTE

The introduction to this interview includes material which appeared as a review of *London Incognita* in *International Times* (Loydell, 2021).

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