

Book Review: This is London: Life and Death in the World City by Ben Judah

In This is London: Life and Death in the World City, journalist **Ben Judah** returns to the city in which he was born, immersing himself in intermittently surreal and harrowing encounters in order to discover the various faces of contemporary London. While Judah's decision to focus on the extremes at times neglects the richness enfolded in the stories of the Londoners whom he meets, **Jenny McArthur** nonetheless appraises the book as a worthwhile read that attempts to uncover the often unseen experiences of those living in the capital.

If you are interested in this review, you may also like to listen to [a podcast](#) of Ben Judah's lecture at LSE, held on 26 January 2016.

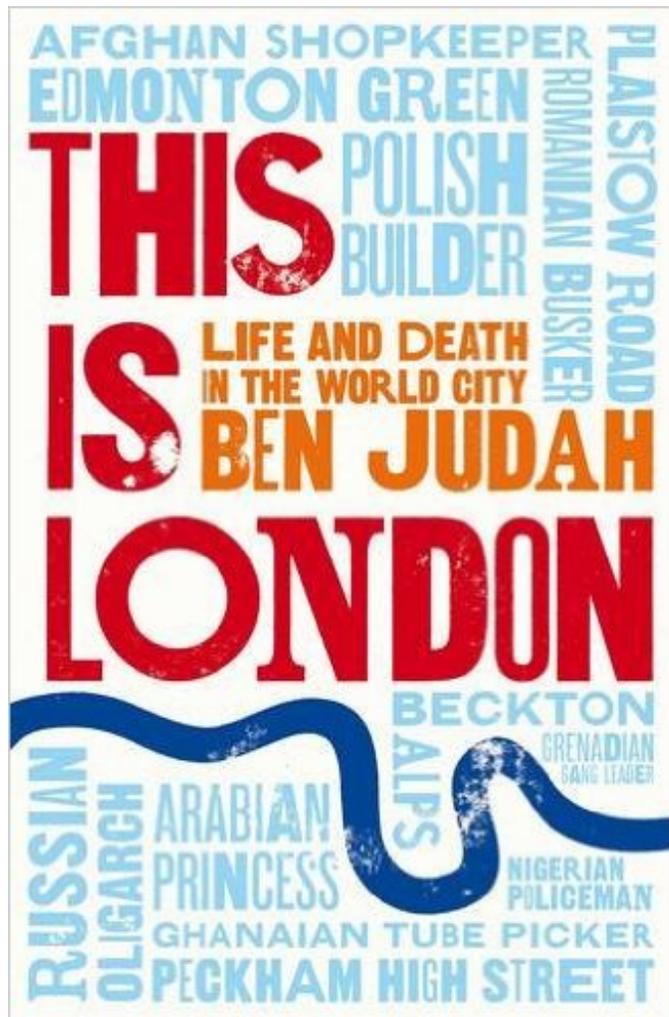
***This is London: Life and Death in the World City*. Ben Judah. Picador. 2016.**

| *I've come to London to fiddle and beg (9).*

This is London: Life and Death in the World City starts without a shred of pretence, and follows with an equally unembellished tour of modern London. The author, Ben Judah, sought first-hand experience of the city, and his encounters alternate between the surreal and the harrowing.

A political correspondent, Judah has lived and worked across continental Europe and the Middle East. Now he shifts his focus to the city in which he was born. The goal is clear: to understand a London that he no longer recognises, where '55% of people are not ethnically British, nearly 40% were born abroad, and 5% are living illegally in the shadows' (4). He confesses: 'I have no idea who these Londoners are. Or even what their London really is' (4).

Judah puts himself in the position of those he meets: sleeping rough in an underpass beneath Hyde Park Corner, living in a doss house in Barking and loading rubbish on construction sites. Most of the book takes place outside Zone 1 and the prose is painstaking in describing London's various sites of disrepair and decay. The iconic sites of Oxford Street, St Paul's Cathedral and Leicester Square do not feature. The depiction of London presented here is not the triumphal city with its grand monuments, tall towers and cosmopolitan society:



This is a city that can't own up that so much cocaine gets snorted at weekends that water authorities notice its presence spiking on a Tuesday afternoon. This is a city that pretends this £10 billion industry does not exist: by leaving its on the go distribution to the people it gives the least of a shit about: teenage boys – black teenage boys (337).

Political correctness is set aside, and twenty-five chapters chronicle Judah's attempts to rediscover the new London. The stories tell of the hopes, frustrations and realities of life for Londoners – how they came to be here, their day-to-day experiences and how they make sense of the city. Many chapters offer a similar account: people arriving in London with high expectations, spending a short time in wonder at the glittering shop fronts, the technological sophistication of the tube network and supermarket shelves stacked with every variety of produce imaginable. When plans do not work out, they end up in minimum-wage work in hotel laundries, cleaning tube trains or in the tenuous market for casual construction workers. The exorbitant costs of living in London force the poor to live in far-flung neighbourhoods, which is reshaping the city: '[John] Betjeman's dream is dead. And this is changing the suburbs. Migrants now land at the edges. Poverty now accumulates out of sight. Gabled semis are turning into clammy tenements' (57).

This is London tells the stories of Londoners born outside the United Kingdom. The majority lives in the likes of Brent, Newham, Camberwell and Barking, contrasted jarringly with three chapters set in Kensington and Westminster. The book's journalistic quality is impressive and the author's background serves him well as he meticulously observes his subjects and draws out their stories.



Image Credit: [d26b73](#)

Judah hunts out the shocking and sometimes bizarre areas of the city. We discover Beckton Alps in Newham: a toxic landfill converted into an outdoor ski slope, which subsequently collapsed and is now left derelict, an unofficial hangout for local teenagers. As one of the highest points in east London, the hill provides striking views back toward central London – a pointed reminder of London's extremes: 'Behind us and over the curving carriageway, those ridiculously named objects line up dark against a dim sunset: shards, gherkins, and cheese-graters. Like the City of Oz' (187).

The more sobering chapters introduce us to the 4am commute on the night bus for the City of London's cleaning staff and the illegal boarding house with one bathroom shared between fourteen people. Crowds of illegal immigrants tout for work on the pavement in Seven Sisters, vying for jobs that pay below minimum wage. Amongst the drudgery, there are fleeting signs of hope. A marriage registrar recounts the weddings she enjoys the most, where couples can momentarily forget their grim circumstances. A teacher, when pushed, can think of one student who she thinks will succeed.

The back cover compares Judah's political acumen to that of George Orwell. Orwell's *Politics and the English Language* (1946) sternly criticised the use of language that abstracts from, and essentially dehumanises, political issues. In giving over substantial portions of the text to the voices of his subjects, Judah skillfully avoids the vague language that can pervade the way in which we talk about cities and migration. Rather than sidestepping the uncomfortable reality of London's impoverishment and unfairness, the book brings the reader face-to-face with the realpolitik of the situation.

Unfortunately, the illuminating and candid representations of the city in each chapter are placed within a broader narrative that is contrived. *This is London* could draw more from the richness within the individual stories to really make sense of the city. Focusing on the boroughs with the lowest share of ethnically British people, at both extremes of the income scale, may have been an attempt to illustrate how profoundly London has changed. Instead, it verges on making a caricature of the city. With a few exceptions, the subjects of this 'new London' have been pushed to their limits, and treat their circumstances either with despair, violence or a disturbing sense of apathy. Boroughs and districts are introduced by their poverty statistics and ethnic compositions. Surely there is something we can say to explain modern London in addition to this focus upon race and income? Without discounting the major divisions that stem from differences in culture, language and economic inequality, London surely merits a less simplistic portrayal.

Judah's journalistic talent has been used well to give an in-depth account of the city, and on this premise alone the book is a worthwhile read. While the under-developed politics of *This is London* limit the broader social commentary on why the city is changing, it is nonetheless valuable as a candid and necessarily alarming depiction of London's extremes.

Jenny McArthur is a PhD candidate at University College London. Her research focuses on the relationship between infrastructure investment, urban growth and liveability. Jenny has a background in civil engineering and economics. Twitter @jen_m_mcarthur. Read more reviews by Jenny McArthur.

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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