

LITERATURE'S BLOODY THAMES

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOEY YU

I live about 200 yards from the Thames at Chelsea and walk by the river most days and, most days, cross it twice. It's impossible for me to think of London unshaped by this great river, its ever-changing aspect and the way it entirely affects my consideration of the place where I live.

The Thames in London is prodigiously tidal - it can experience a fall or rise of water of 20 feet or more - and consequently the river view is ever-changing. On a hot summer day, at low tide, the Thames can look like the Limpopo in time of drought - all parched mudbanks and shallow, turbid water. On other days, the river is brimming at the edge of the Embankment, the moored boats riding at the same level as the passing cars.

It was this near-daily proximity to the river that inspired me to write my London novel - my Thames novel - *Ordinary Thunderstorms* (2009). On my walks by the river I often spotted the neat Targa-31 boats of London's Thames river police - the Marine Policing Unit (MPU) - based at Wapping beyond Tower Bridge. I did some research and discovered that the MPU, on average, removes

some 60 corpses a year from the river. Sixty! I thought: that's more than one a week. Who were these unfortunates? There are a very few murder victims, quite a number of suicides but most are accidents, people caught out by the rising tide or else by the force of the current. Still, sixty dead bodies a year in the river - that's positively Dickensian. And so the novel was born.

It immediately became a form of homage to Charles Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) - perhaps the greatest novel of London, and its river, ever written. It begins with a body being hauled from the Thames one night by Gaffer Hexam, who makes his dubious, dour living from the dead and the inadvertent bounty of their possessions that the river provides.

Poets have responded as much as novelists to the river from Edmund Spenser - "Sweet Thames, run softly" - to William Wordsworth on Westminster Bridge to TS Eliot watching the numberless commuters flow over London Bridge. Eliot's vision of the Thames in "The Waste Land" is one charged with historical echoes and a curious, sleazy sexuality:

"Richmond and Kew
Undid me. By Richmond I raised



'Maybe it's the river's relentless cargo of corpses that makes novelists' visions of the Thames so fraught'

my knees
Supine on the floor of a narrow
canoe."

Joseph Conrad begins his novella *Heart of Darkness* (1902) on a ship at anchor in the Thames basin. *Heart of Darkness* has another river at its centre - the Congo - but the implied parallel is clear. London's Thames in the 19th century was, in its way, as sinister a place as Conrad's Congo. Similarly, Anthony Burgess's superb novel about Christopher Marlowe, *A Dead Man in Deptford* (1993), ends with Marlowe's death in 1593 - his murder, in fact - at a riverside tavern in Deptford as he waits to take a boat to the continent.

Maybe it's the river's relentless cargo of corpses that makes novelists' visions of the Thames so fraught - are all rivers in cities so balefully freighted? The Seine? The Tiber? The Danube? According to the MPU, the bodies washed downriver in the Thames tend to pool at the great U-bend of the Isle of Dogs. My own novel ends with a (justified) killing on Chelsea Bridge. John le Carré's first novel, *Call for the Dead* (1961), terminates with a fatal fight on Battersea Bridge.

Not all Thames novels are so darkly turbulent, however. One of the most absurdly comic and charming is Penelope Fitzgerald's *Offshore* (1979) - a lightly fictionalised account of her own early married life on a converted barge at a mooring at Battersea Reach, near Wandsworth Bridge. Actually living on the Thames puts you closely in touch with its moods and vagaries and for Fitzgerald's protagonist the brutal realities of a tidal river meeting an ancient boat have their fateful consequences.

For Londoners, the Thames is our "Old Man River"; not as wide and as mighty as the Mississippi, perhaps, but with a fascinating history and a personality that makes it unique. That fierce tidal flow explains its mystique, I believe. What is washed down - and what is washed up - makes the river both endlessly intriguing and continually disconcerting. **FT**

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