

# A journey through London

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## Annie Morrad

Marc Atkins and Iain Sinclair, *Liquid City*, Reaktion Books Ltd, London 1999, £14.95

So, how to begin. Well it was one of those mornings: bright, sunny but with a peculiar notion towards rain. Thud, through the letterbox fell the book parcelled up in distinct publishers' brown. I unwrapped with vigour, happy with the warm comfort that my football team, Chelsea, had not only won the previous day but in superb style, with a flow and delight of classy football that you knew in your soul would not only still be present at the end of the season, but would gush over into triumph.

OK, I was happy. I gave the book a nodding glance, it gave me the same. I like to plan for journeys so with a cup of tea and a sit down I started. This book, this *Liquid City* seemed at first to be another journey, a journey through my home, my city. But was it? I worked on unsure, pages descending from my sight step by step onward and inward. I started to decide that it was more of a discovery, a discovery of Atkins. Not in his photos, no; he wasn't hidden there, but somewhere in the misty prose, lurking, half hidden in the shadows at twilight like a cat

pretending not to notice the young mouse playing in the corner. I wasn't sure though. Iain Sinclair is clever at leading you a merry dance through the maze, he himself not knowing half the route, half the way. He sort of stalks your mind, sometimes in front of you, sometimes behind. So with the music of Tom Waits in the background, lines like 'Shadows infecting a shoreline that resisted metaphor' stroked my eyes. Then 'Stepping out from the Isle of Grain' I was led to Hackney Road and onwards towards the Limehouse Basin. Yeah, it's a book about a walk or walks through London, people visited along the way, like a Victorian Sunday. Atkins on the photos and Sinclair on the pen, the people visited being an excuse to walk, the journey more fun (or at least as much) as the reason.

The East End plays a prominent role in this saga of small perfectly formed worlds, each like a flower unfolding its spectacular, beautifully coloured petals to lead us - like bees nectar gathering - from flower to flower, traces from each plant (each chapter) giving us the bigger, yet not whole picture, of this our *Liquid City*. We visit the London Orphan Asylum in Lower Clapton, calling in at the family home of Harold Pinter, then nipping down to Vicky Park (sorry, *Victoria Park*) towards Bow Bridge. On the way we are entertained by our guide, Mister Sinclair - by now I'm sure we can call him Iain - with

information on the Viking/Saxon border of the Lea. I'm not going to say any more because it's for you to find out. (And at some point in our travels we are going to meet authors Michael Moorcock, Peter Ackroyd and Kathy Acker but that's later).

'A curious elevation, a mound from which radial roads move out as if in answer to a riddle'. Yes, this is Arnold Circus in Bethnal Green. He goes on to talk about the bandstand, like an old friend who not only watches the world but whose character is transformed by the people who use this gathering space, this central point of the wheel, the spokes being the roads which radiate from it. We clatter along towards

Cheshire Street and second-hand book dealer Martin Stone. I still think Atkins is our real discovery. There are bits in his photos that scare me. He sees things that I have never considered, pieces of undisturbed debris and scatterings of lost thoughts that echo from windows high above. I shiver a bit. My mind takes hold of hold of memories from people I have never seen, strangers, in the future as well as the past.

A beautiful day, morning clear, bright, we (Chelsea) are in the Champions League and all's well with the world. *Liquid City* is taking me West. There are bits I don't understand, language lost on me. Because I come from the East End,



*Arnold Circus* Photo: Marc Atkins

the West side only gives me clues to its existence. I could explore them but the West's true identity flees ghost-like, hides and laughs in the crevices of its own making. I tried to find a way through and understand the guts of it, but truly I only get there when football gives me the key. The West will remain strange and illusive for the time being. Back to Durward Street in Whitechapel. Buildings; they're old friends that remind us of our present. We see them changing, they in turn witness our progressing shadow which creeps up on us gently. This building in Durward Street, our guide Iain tells us, is a warehouse. I remember it different, maybe a different building, maybe I'm living a parallel life or just saw it different. The photo intrigues me. I question it, the position it's taken from. I ask what happened to the street, where is that arch now, how come the skyline appears that way? My thoughts echo around the room, bounce off the view out of the window and reflect back on my insight into this area, this part of the map.

Pages 140 and 141. Poem and photo: the two combine and collide, poetic in its juxtaposition, page facing page. I want to meet the person in the poem and the person in the photo; both of them, word and picture. Who cares if it's the same person. We get two bites of the cherry, outer and inner, Atkins and Sinclair, plus the talent. The shadow

lengthens from the West across an urban landscape of streets flattened by looking from above, the West a shadow. I felt troubled, my heart striking out, unable to feel the substance from which the shadow came. These photos, these images stare up at me from the *Liquid City*.

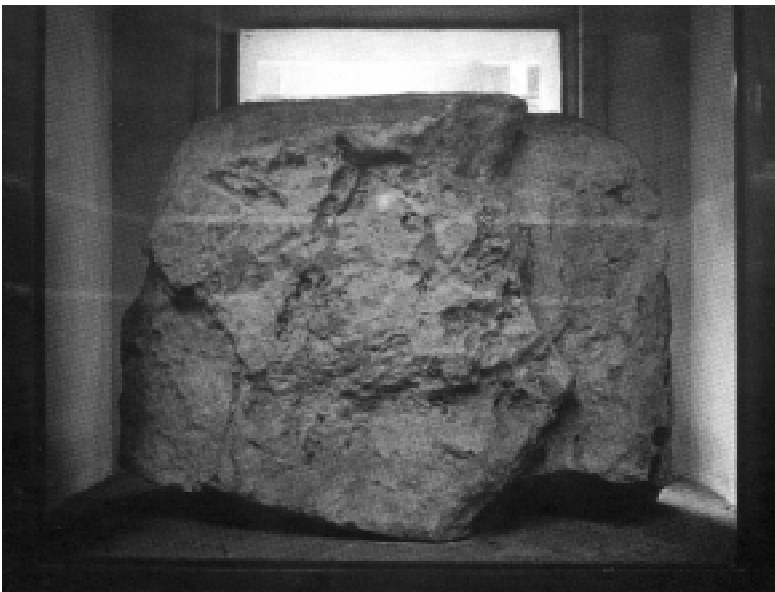
I can't help but wonder at their passion, the way they see my home, my city. It nags me, that these two men, one with a lens and one with a pen, have disquieted my reference in life, my reference to myself, seen and explored through witnessing my city. I've read *Street Signs Chicago* and *Division St. USA*. I lived there for a while. Books on cities, books from the inside looking out, no mirror reflection. Just grit and poetry. This *Liquid City* is all of that and much, much more. There's a curious way that the book frees the skin from the skeleton to work its way into your inner soul, be you Londoner or no. Each page entraps you, pulling you forward, deeper, inward until you are caught by their suggestion and notions of the world. Keep questioning and looking, be watchful of the guide, cast your thoughts inward and observe them change, challenge and be challenged by what is there in your mind and on the page, but above all beware be vigilant and enjoy the journey. I look at the photos. They whisper to me, laugh and we play together, friends, our histories different but backgrounds the same. We share something

precious, a delight and joy of the world, experiencing and exploring each other's consciousness. Our perceptions merge, aware of each other's boundaries. I start to fear less their dark passion and trust more. Enjoyment floods my veins. Their marriage of chic physics and alchemy dances with me like an old lover who has become a complete friend like a warm winter glove to the hand, textures different, we share the same space without conflict.

So we (Chelsea) have Milan in the Champions League. Should be fun. Suddenly, I'm beneath a pavement looking at 'London Stone' in the offices of the Overseas Chinese Banking Corporation in Cannon Street. It's behind glass, encased, captured like an artist's thought, proud and watchful. I want to know what it is thinking, I want to know if it

is happy. There are few clues from its expression. You see, if it wants, I will endeavour to help it escape. That's the feeling you get from it. A sort of need to be a companion to it. There is a feeling that it is part of you, it belongs to your inner core, it comes from something deep rooted inside, from your past, or a past that should have belonged to you, one that you deserve. You want to hold out a hand and say, 'Hi, I'm me', and 'It's going to be all right, going to be great'.

I want to leave you with the 'London Stone'. But I don't want to finish our journey/discovery. I want to believe that it's a movie that will keep on going like *Star Trek*. So go on. I dare you. Get your *Liquid City* and dance, on your own cobbled streets at night in the rain, in the liquid city of your own making, and your own dreams.



*London  
Stone*  
Photo:  
Marc  
Atkins