

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-73083-9 - Urban Voices: A Collection of Writing on City Life

Edited by Mike Gould

Excerpt

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# 1 Five cities

The first section of the book presents a range of large cities from different parts of the world, both in fictional and non-fiction texts. You will read about people living in dreadful poverty in present-day Mumbai, as well as the glittering, high-tech world of Tokyo in Graham Marks's novel. Bill Bryson describes two contrasting sides of Philadelphia, and we visit the richness of the Roman Empire in Robert Harris's *Pompeii*. Finally, two contrasting views are presented of London in Blake's and Wordsworth's poems.

## **Activities**

- 1 Think about poems, stories or novels you have read in which cities are the main settings. Make brief notes about what impressions are given of them: are the cities presented as pleasant, enjoyable places to live, or as cruel, poor or unwelcoming – or perhaps a mix of both?
- 2 Now think about television programmes, films or plays that are set in cities. Discuss them in pairs or small groups. How important are these cities to the story and to the characters' lives?
- 3 The texts in this section deal with five cities: Mumbai (once called Bombay) in India; Tokyo; the ancient Roman city of Pompeii; Philadelphia in the United States; and London from over a hundred years ago. In small groups, take it in turns to choose one of these places (which you shouldn't have visited), and discuss why you would like to go there and what you would expect it to be like.

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## Tokyo

by Graham Marks

In this extract from the novel by Graham Marks, Adam is searching for his sister Charlie, who has disappeared in mysterious circumstances while travelling with a friend. In the section you are about to read, Adam has spent the night in a special tube-like room which he only has space to lie down in.

Adam woke up with a start, lying still in the semi-darkness, trying to work out where the hell he was. Something, a noise, must've dragged him out of a deep, deep sleep because nothing in his head seemed to be working very efficiently. He rolled over on to his back and his elbow banged on to something hard; he touched it: plastic. Plastic? His eyes finally adjusted to the light level and he remembered where he was. Tokyo. In a box. He pressed the 'light' button on his watch and saw it was 9:30, but whether that was a.m. or p.m. he hadn't the slightest idea.

*Toky-ob-my-God* . . . it was all Adam could think as he stood in the street, looking at the night-time version of Asakusa going on around him. Then he gazed up at the sky, expecting stars, but in a different pattern to the one he'd see at home.

Nothing, just black. No stars. Neon<sup>1</sup> all the way.

A whole world of neon. Every colour of the rainbow, except the subtle ones. Flashing on and off, rising and falling like electronic, coloured rain . . . pictures, symbols, graphics, all glowing in the night. And there, among the random, alien light-sprawl, the occasional English words, just to add to the confusion.

*PARODY MARKET . . . MY WAY . . . FREE . . . GENIUS AMUSEMENT . . .*

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<sup>1</sup>**neon** bright white and coloured lights used for advertisements and street lighting

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Meaningless words trying to make themselves heard amongst the indecipherable visual noise<sup>2</sup> and the cars and the people and the piped music<sup>3</sup> and the conversations. Was everyone here talking to someone else on a mobile phone? It certainly looked that way, with those not talking deeply involved in texting. Adam wondered what a Japanese text message looked like. Very different. Like now. Nothing looked the same as it had during the day and Adam suddenly felt completely disoriented.

‘Jeez . . .’ What had he done, coming here? How was he ever going to have a chance of finding Charlie in this madhouse – what had he been thinking? He couldn’t work out how come it had ever seemed like a good idea, how come Suzy hadn’t told him to get real. But she hadn’t, he was here and he knew he had to deal with it. Completely his responsibility. As the world flowed around him, it occurred to Adam that he had two

<sup>2</sup> **indecipherable visual noise** a muddle of lights that makes them unreadable

<sup>3</sup> **piped music** recorded and amplified music

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choices: go home, the first chance he had, or have a go at doing what he'd come here for.

If he didn't actually make a move, *do* something, he felt like he'd still be standing on this bit of pavement, dithering, when the sun came up. He'd already figured out that the tube map in the guidebook was much harder to make sense of than the one included in the fold-out city map he'd bought; standing in a pool of streetlight he took another look, seeing that he was actually just eleven stops from Roppongi. It could not be that difficult a journey to do, and he'd at least be able to start his search for the Bar Belle and feel he hadn't wasted the whole of his first day in Tokyo.

Underground there was a new world, a bright, clean environment which, considering the neon mayhem going on above it, was astonishingly free of excessive advertising. Working out how to buy a ticket, though, had proved to be no easy job – even after he'd found the button which changed the Japanese characters on the text screen into English. Luckily someone who turned out to understand more English than they actually spoke spotted him standing, dazed and confused, in front of a bank of ticket machines, and between them they'd managed to buy a ticket that Adam hoped would get him to Roppongi and back again.

After the frustrating ticket-buying experience, the journey turned out to be a breeze, just a question of paying attention and following instructions and numbers, of going from A18 to E23, through colour-coded tunnels and on south-bound trains. Simple.

Exiting Roppongi station Adam found himself back in Neon City and at what appeared to be a major crossroads. There was an elevated expressway<sup>4</sup> running above one of the streets which had a sign on it in English letting him know he was now in 'High Touch Town', whatever that actually meant. From what the guidebook said, it probably meant what it sounded like. And somewhere here there was a place called the

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<sup>4</sup>**elevated expressway** a motorway raised above street level

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Bar Belle, where Alice and Charlie had been working, and where Alice had last seen Charlie walking out with a customer.

As he had no idea where the girls' apartment was he'd *got* to find the bar. It was the only place to start, the only place he'd be able to hook up with Alice and find out for himself exactly what was going on. Get to talk to Alice's boyfriend, Steve, see what he had to say.

The only problem was he had absolutely no idea where in Roppongi – no small area – to find the Bar Belle. Before leaving England he'd looked it up on the Net, having discovered that a lot of the bars had their own websites, but found nothing. Was it too small? Too *scuzzy*?<sup>5</sup> Just not bothered? He'd have to find it first to know, but how? Then, above the roar of the traffic, he heard a badly amplified voice calling out, something about beer and girls and music. Now he looked he could see that there were quite a few people, types he recognised from Soho and Brixton, *touting*<sup>6</sup> various clubs and bars; one of them was using a cardboard megaphone. Most of them were black and one of them might know something. Whether they'd tell him was another matter entirely.

Adam chose the least threatening-looking of the guys and hoped you could judge this particular book by its cover. He approached, friendly, smiling. 'Speak English, man?'

'Chor, wa'choo wan? Nice girl? Cheap booze? We got de bes in town!' All teeth and big smiles, the man thrust a coloured flyer at Adam. 'Jus roun da corner, man, two minutes – you go?'

Adam looked at the piece of paper in his hand: Club Exit. 'No, I'm looking for this place called the Bar Belle, you heard of it?'

'Chor I hear . . . terrible place, man, you wan class? You go Exit, man. Lemme take you roun . . .'

'I need to find the Bar Belle, I'm meeting a friend there and I lost the address.'

'Piece a dirt place, man.'

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<sup>5</sup>**scuzzy** dirty, unpleasant

<sup>6</sup>**touting** pestering people to become customers

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Adam dug into his jeans pocket and brought out one of the ¥1,000 notes<sup>7</sup> he'd stuffed in there after buying his subway ticket. 'I really don't care . . .'

The man reached out to take it and Adam moved his hand back. 'OK, right . . . OK, man, see, you go cross da street, you take secon right, you fine it up a few floor, five or six, I don't member zackly. Look for da sign, man.'

'Thanks.' Adam handed over the note.

It wasn't there. Across the street, second on the right, was a narrow alleyway which restaurants backed on to. It was full of industrial-sized wheelie bins, it smelt of cooking and food and the remains of cleared plates that had sat out in the heat for too long. There was no Bar Belle, not at ground level or five or six floors up, no matter how far down he went . . .

Adam turned to go back up the way he'd come, and stopped. Silhouetted against the bright lights of the main drag<sup>8</sup> he saw a figure that seemed to be looking his way, waiting . . . Had he been set up here? More than likely. He looked behind him, back down into the gloom of what looked like a dead end; no point in running down there, then. He cast around in the shadow on the ground for anything he might be able to use to defend himself, and saw nothing.

Walking slowly back up the alley Adam thought about trying to fit some coins between his fingers, make iron knuckles, like he'd seen done in a movie, but he knew he was clutching at straws now. Best just to go for this head on, wait until the last minute and make a rush for the street and hope he got past the guy. He'd be safe out in the crowds. Safer, anyway.

He'd been psyching himself up so much that it was only when he was just about to start running like hell, possibly yelling at the top of his voice, that he realised the person was not only standing with his back to the alley, not looking down

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<sup>7</sup>¥1,000 note Japanese currency note, one thousand yen

<sup>8</sup>main drag the main street

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it at all, he was also much nearer to the street than he'd realised. And, as the man turned to look to his right, Adam could now see he was quite an old guy.

The feeling of panic subsided, replaced by one of embarrassment as he walked past the man and out on to the pavement; how stupid would he have felt, tearing past this total stranger like a madman? Total dimwit stupid.

Accompanied by an odd sense of anticlimax, Adam made his way back to the big junction and the subway station. He looked at his watch: a quarter to midnight. He didn't know when the trains stopped running, but he'd better not risk missing the last one by hanging round this place much longer; tomorrow he'd come back again and do it properly this time.

### ***Further reading***

Stories in which people disappear provide thrilling, if often sad, subject matter. A novel that is less thriller and more a study of human despair, is Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (Bloomsbury, 1987) which is about the disappearance of a child from a supermarket and the consequent effect on the parents.

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## India: A Million Mutinies Now

by V. S. Naipaul

The book from which this extract comes describes the visit of the author to the country in the title. In this extract, he has asked a friend, Papu, to show him the huge slum area of Mumbai called 'Dharavi' which is very close to the wealthier area in which Papu lives.

I thought that Papu had given up the idea of the visit to the great slum of Dharavi. But his spirits had revived in the sitting room of his flat, and after our tea he took me to a back room, to show me the view. The slum was closer than I thought. It lay just beyond the railway tracks that ran at the back of the street on which Papu's block stood. Papu's middle-class area, so established-looking when one came to the street, was contained in a narrow strip between the area of the quarters<sup>1</sup> and the area of the great slum.

He said, of the slum, 'You wouldn't be able to stand the stink.'

A little later, with the determination and suddenness with which people go out into bad weather, he said we should be going.

We set out on foot. The slum was only a short walk away. We began to cross the busy, dusty bridge over the railway lines. The afternoon traffic was hectic. We had barely got down the hump of the railway bridge, when Papu, losing a little of his resolution, said we should take a taxi.

To stress the extent of the slum, he said, 'Look. No tall buildings from here to there.' It was a good way of taking it in. Otherwise, moving at road level, one might have missed the extent of the flat ragged plain, bounded by far-off towers.

And then, in no time, we were moving on the margin of the slum, so sudden, so obvious, so overwhelming, it was as though

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<sup>1</sup>**quarters** a section of the city where more formal buildings are found

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it was something staged, something on a film set, with people acting out their roles as slum dwellers: back-to-back and side-to-side shacks and shelters, a general impression of blackness and greyness and mud, narrow ragged lanes curving out of view; then a side of the main road dug up; then black mud, with men and women and children defecating on the edge of a black lake, swamp and sewage, with a hellish oily iridescence.<sup>2</sup>

The stench was barely supportable; but it had to be endured. The taxi came to a halt in a traffic jam. The jam was caused by a line of loaded trucks on the other side of the road. The slum of Dharavi was also an industrial area of sorts, with many unauthorized businesses, leather works and chemical works among them, which wouldn't have been permitted in a better regulated city area.

Petrol and kerosene fumes added to the stench. In this stench, many bare-armed people were at work, doing what I had never seen people doing before: gathering or unpacking cloth waste and cardboard waste, working in a grey-white dust that banked up on the ground like snow and stifled the sounds of hands and feet, working beside the road itself or in small shanties: large-scale rag-picking.<sup>3</sup>

Papu said he hardly passed this way. In the taxi he sat turned away from the slum itself. He faced the other side of the road, where the loaded trucks were idling, and where, in the distance, were the apartment blocks of the middle-class area of Bandra, on the sea.

The traffic moved again. At a certain point Papu said, 'This is the Muslim section. People will tell you that the Muslims here are fundamentalists.<sup>4</sup> But don't you think you could make these people fight for anything you tell them to fight for?'

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<sup>2</sup>**iridescence** displaying rainbow-like colours, often seen where water is polluted by oil or chemicals

<sup>3</sup>**rag-picking** people in slums often make a living by sorting and selling the city's rubbish

<sup>4</sup>**fundamentalists** people with extreme religious views

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The stench of animal skins and excrement and swamp and chemicals and petrol fumes, the dust of cloth waste, the amber mist of truck exhausts, with the afternoon sun slanting through – what a relief it was to leave that behind, and to get out into the other Bombay, the Bombay one knew and had spent so much time getting used to, the Bombay of paved roads and buses and people in lightweight clothes.

It had been hard enough to drive past the area. It was harder to imagine what it was like living there. Yet people lived with the stench and the terrible air, and had careers there. Even lawyers lived there, I was told. Was the smell of excrement only on the periphery, from the iridescent black lake? No; that stench went right through Dharavi. Even more astonishing was to read in a Bombay magazine an article about Papu's suburb of Sion, in which the slum of Dharavi was written about almost as a bohemian<sup>5</sup> feature of the place, something that added spice to humdrum middle-class life. Bombay clearly inoculated<sup>6</sup> its residents in some way.

I had another glimpse of Dharavi some time later, when I was going in a taxi to the domestic airport at Santa Cruz. The taxi-driver – a Muslim from Hyderabad, full of self-respect, nervous about living in Bombay, fearful of sinking, planning to go back home soon, and in the meantime nervously particular about his car and his clothes – the taxi-driver showed the apartment blocks on one side of the airport road where hutment dwellers had been rehoused. In the other direction he showed the marsh on which Dharavi had grown and, away in the distance, the low black line of the famous slum.

Seen from here, Dharavi looked artificial, unnecessary even in Bombay: allowed to exist because, as people said, it was a vote-bank, a hate-bank, something to be drawn upon by many

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<sup>5</sup>**bohemian** a little strange and unconventional, but interesting

<sup>6</sup>**inoculated** literally means 'treated against disease'; here, the author uses the word to suggest that the inhabitants of the city seem to overlook, or not see, Dharavi's problems