



## **A Conversation with Philip Tew: from Critic to Novelist, from Reading London to Writing London**

Interviewer: Dr Alan Ali Saeed  
(Sulaimani University)

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A novelist and literary scholar, Philip Tew has published three books of fiction with Brigand Press: *Afterlives: A Novel* (2019); *Fragmentary Lives: Three Novellas* (2019); and *Clark Gable and His Plastic Duck: A Novel* (2020). In 1997 Philip was awarded a doctorate for a thesis on a 1960s experimental novelist, published as *B. S. Johnson: A Critical Reading* (Manchester UP, 2001) after revisions undertaken while living in Hungary and Brussels. Since 2001, he has published twenty-four scholarly books as an author, co-author or editor, including *Coming of Age* (Demos, 2011), an influential policy report on ageing. In 2006 he was appointed to his current post, Professor of English (Post-1900 Literature) at Brunel University London. Philip is the current and founding director of the annual Hillingdon Literary Festival (HiLF), although this year's event has been postponed due to Covid-19.

*Saeed: I wanted to begin by asking you the question of whether, as someone who grew up as a Londoner and who was presumably an avid reader, you had much sense of Literary London?*

*Tew: Yes, I was an avid reader as a child and adolescent, growing up in the northern reaches of the London suburbs, with access to a well-appointed local Carnegie-endowed library amazingly built at the heart of the working-class area where my family lived and worked. By age eleven I had twelve tickets (having purloined eight that were nominally allocated to my parents). My father must*

have appeared well-read to certain librarians; only I knew that in his whole life he'd only ever read one book of fiction, Nicholas Monsarrat's *The Cruel Sea* while waiting nervously for an operation that finally never occurred. In contrast, my reading was omnivorous, even indiscriminating at times, but I do remember very much liking books about life in central London, both accounts of those who arrived (such as David Lodge's *Flight into Camden*) and those who were always resident like myself (Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*). I think that divergence creates a very different consciousness of the city, one that can be observed in for instance Dickens (Portsmouth, Kent) and Woolf, for instance, or Margaret Drabble (Sheffield) and B. S. Johnson. Although very different both perspectives were of endless fascination for me. Dickens was my first literary passion and I find his depictions of London characters and settings still to be in many ways exemplary, catching the nuances of the city, but not as exaggerated or grotesque as some critics might suggest. In my view, if you look hard enough, there are plenty of Wemmicks and Harold Skimpoles (Leigh Hunts) out there among the city's millions of inhabitants.

Saeed: *Is Literary London a new phenomenon that has been created by our critical discourse, do you think, or was it always around in Londoners' heads? I'm thinking here of something your good friend, Steve Barfield, said to me once: 'Londoners have traditionally tended to treat London as a series of villages, so they tended to not really see London and hence Literary London as a whole. You read George and Weedon Grossmith's Diary of A Nobody and it is about Archway and Highgate and you read Colin MacInnes's Absolute Beginners and it is about Notting Hill Gate.' What do you think?*

Tew: I consider there is a London consciousness that exists among writers in particular, and some critics or literary scholars, but I do feel that Literary London as a movement (the conferences and webpage and journal) has added an emphasis to this categorization, reminded people of its existence. And yes, Steve is correct, London is a series of locations, once villages or even hamlets, a sense of which I have tried to incorporate in my latest novel, *Clark Gable and His Plastic Duck*, which is mostly set within north London in an arc from the Angel, Islington across to Hampstead. Such villages and hamlets are obvious if you cycle around and across the city, as I did for so many years, absorbing the landscape, aware of hills and valleys only someone in physical motion might notice. As a younger scholar, in my running days, I used to train by sprinting up Highgate Hill from Archway tube and back down again from the Flask (a pub I frequented in my teens) down the West Hill to Parliament Hill Fields, and after a short breather, I'd go back over again. Incidentally, I adore both George and Weedon

Grossmith's *Diary of A Nobody* and Colin MaclInnes's *Absolute Beginners*, but however localized they seem, I think both narratives have a sense of both the streets themselves as part of a larger matrix and they do capture the comic vitality of Londoners, the potential eruptions of humour or cynicism.

Saeed: *You did not go to university in London but in Leicester, which you have said was a formative experience for you as a writer. Can you say more about this, please? I gather you have written about Leicester as well.*

Tew: I left London at eighteen because of the way student finances worked in those days (the early 1970s), meaning you had to live at home to be a London-based student if you'd grown up in a London Borough, and that potentially meant losing out on much of student social life (or so I feared), plus my relationship with my father was so bad I couldn't have managed to live with my parents any longer. Going to Leicester resulted in being awarded a proper full grant (with a parental contribution, a portion of which my father neglected to pay), plus it was much cheaper to live there in those days. I went up for university in October 1972 and didn't return to the capital to live until early 1981, almost a decade later. The first Christmas in 1972 I did return to visit for several weeks, and my father asked me not to come back again since in his opinion I didn't live at my parents' place any longer, much as described in my first novel, *Afterlives*. He'd even sold my bicycle! I was on my own from that point, emotionally and financially. That was a formative experience, as was studying for a degree, the latter experience unheard of in my family.

Leicester proved a curiously formative experience since its provinciality so contrasted London and made me intensely nostalgic for my home, to which I returned eagerly after my separation from my wife of the time, with our divorce impending. And yet, for a while after my return, I couldn't readjust or settle, even though I very much felt in exile during my residence in the East Midlands. Those contradictions permeate my fiction, the ambivalence toward Leicester and central London (Hackney and Islington) which were the areas I moved to in the early 1980s. I yo-yoed back and forth away from London, returning periodically, since once I became an academic in 1990 I worked (and lived) for ten years in and around the West Midlands in Birmingham and elsewhere in that general area (from 1990-1995; and, 2001-2005), in Hungary (2000-2001) and Northampton (2005-2006). At certain points, my fiction tries to capture this peripatetic, rootless quality that undermines any sense of belonging. My books chart aspects of these years with much of *Afterlives* set in Leicester; the West

Midlands and return to London feature in *Fragmentary Lives*, and London itself predominates in *Clark Gable and His Plastic Duck*.

Saeed: *You've also spent time in other places like Hungary. Do you think a sense of place is important to the novelist – as it is with poets – or is it less important?*

Tew: A sense of place (along with a sense of character since usually the two are interrelated) is crucial to a novelist as well as a poet. That can be to do with interiors, which are critical in people's lives, and some writers really don't make enough of them. They are spaces that matter. Living in Hungary opened my eyes to how location could be so radically different, both in terms of exteriority and interiority as regards even familiar or ordinary places, the ins and outs of our lives, such as cycling across the neat forest in Debrecen full of dark black squirrels to a spa resort set among the fir trees for an outdoor dip during winter or sharing goulash with academic colleagues during a formal dinner with the sound of chinking glasses in a featureless restaurant fashioned under communism, but replete with wall-hangings, tapestries and the repeated and suggestive formal clacking of our short, stout glasses filled with pálinka after short speeches. For the differences in such indoor and outdoor spatial orientations, think Henri Lefebvre and Gaston Bachelard in a critical sense. One of my favourite scenes in my fiction is a drive taken by the protagonist in *Afterlives* with poet Dr Chris Challis to the north-east to interview Basil Bunting in the latter's huge car, which he called the Great White Shark, ploughing through snowdrifts: this is all located within several environments, offered as a microcosm of this period in early 1980, a very different world, which hopefully the scene reveals.

Saeed: *Would you ever consider writing a novel about your time living in Hungary?*

Tew: It's a definite possibility, but I have a censor-cum-editor for my writing which is my Hungarian wife, who would probably object to all sorts of detail being either inauthentic or just unbelievable. Take one of my novellas, 'Swimming the Goldfish Bowl': I have a character who sends some children home to their father in a minicab; my wife wasn't convinced this could happen, and that was set in the south-east of England, so you might sense my problem with a Hungarian setting, all the potential objections from her, on the grounds of inauthenticity.

Saeed: *You were involved in the Literary London conference (founded by Lawrence Phillips and Brycchan Carey) and with the journal before it was even a society. What was it like back then and did you ever imagine Literary London would become such a major subject area? How do you think the field has developed since the early days? Any funny (but printable) stories about the old days?*

Tew: It was fun to be at the beginning of this movement, with lots of scholars visiting from around the world, but as to anecdotes, I think they must remain under wraps to avoid embarrassments. Both Lawrence Phillips and Brycchan Carey exhibited great energy and drive and I think their role was monumental. It's a shame if their legacy is affected by Covid-19 and the lockdown.

One funny story situated elsewhere: my good friend, Steve Barfield, was a stalwart of Literary London and ran the conference once at the University of Westminster, with as I recall particularly good wine and canapes. Steve has a Beckettian sense of humour, and although weird things happen to him, he remains implacable. Later, he worked as an academic in Kurdistan, Iraq during the war against ISIS/Daesh. Steve claims he'd been more worried about both facing the REF and running Literary London than about these hostilities. He was protected in Kurdistan: his Peshmerga (Kurdish militia) driver kept hand grenades in his glove compartment and an AK47 on the back seat. Steve's bedside cabinet hid a loaded 9mm Glock, a gift from several helpful female Kurdish students. However, Steve refused an assault rifle offered by several male students active in the Peshmerga. Ironically, Steve didn't know how to reload his pistol, so he'd a solitary chance to defend himself, presuming that he could release the safety catch. Luckily he didn't shoot anyone, not even accidentally, and returned to us safely. In fiction, an academic with a loaded gun could be darkly funny!

Saeed: *You have met and written about many contemporary novelists who have set novels in London like Will Self and Zadie Smith. Do you think they operate with an idea of Literary London at all – or is it an issue that is just convenient for we critics to talk about?*

Tew: Will is a special case in some senses as we've known each other since the early 1980s, almost forty years; like me and Zadie Smith, he was a Londoner from birth. Like us, he knows the city as intimately as his own life. I met Smith once, very briefly, driving her back from Brunel's campus in Uxbridge across the Westway to a central London event. As I've explored at Literary London, there is a rootedness and interrogation in writing by London-born writers that has its

own timbre, one I think is best seen, for instance, at the beginning of *White Teeth* where Archie Jones attempts suicide in his battered car in a nondescript parking bay outside a halal butcher's shop, thinking of failure and seeking silence confronted with the cacophony of the city that defies his intentions, all the contradictions of the city, the mundane, ethnic difference as comedy, and all that is intrusive about urban living. Will's *How the Dead Live* transposes that London-based sensibility to a living death, a nether region that haunts our own by being essentially unchanged in the Dulston and the Dulburbs, but largely unseen, perceived in the novel from the perspective of old women, both in life and death as if 'waiting for something to happen.' This appalling pregnancy of the moment and the contrasting mundanity of life I recognize in both writers and my own fiction, with characters' lives accumulating experiences, but generally they are ignored by history. Fiction perhaps redresses that balance, revealing the inconsequential as crucial, the hopeless as charged with infinite possibility.

Saeed: *London's literature is by its nature very repetitive – London is either growing out of control or contracting and dying – and when it comes to literature these situations seem surprisingly similar. I looked up this passage from The Diary of A Nobody where the narrator, Mr Pooter, talks about being driven by his son:*

*He may wear what he likes in the future, for I shall never drive with him again. His conduct was shocking. When we passed Highgate Archway, he tried to pass everything and everybody. He shouted to respectable people who were walking quietly in the road to get out of the way; he flicked at the horse of an old man who was riding, causing it to rear; and, as I had to ride backwards, I was compelled to face a gang of roughs in a donkey-cart, whom Lupin had chaffed, and who turned and followed us for nearly a mile, bellowing, indulging in coarse jokes and laughter, to say nothing of occasionally pelting us with orange-peel.*

Tew: I'm not so sure it's repetitive at all, but certainly not in a bad way, especially when captured aesthetically with proper and modest imagination. Consider the bells in *Mrs Dalloway*, the caged parrot in a classroom in *Albert Angelo*. It implies sound and fury, the engagement of cravings, and hunger of being, which sometimes overflows into cupidity. This is an existential essence, not simply reiterations, more replete with renewal. The quote from *The Diary of a Nobody* sounds to me very much like the horror of driving in London now, although it's not something I do very much in nowadays, having semi-retired and moved back

to the suburbs, to Enfield Wash, the area next to the one where I lived as a child! But yes, I can imagine cyclists pelting people cars with orange-peel, or worse!

*Saeed: Can you tell me a little about how and why you made the transition to becoming a novelist after being an academic. It is always intriguing I think, as the majority of English Literature academics are really frustrated writers or so people tend to think! You've described to me previously that your career as a novelist was something of a 'slow burn', why was that?*

Tew: I was writing for many years, a whole variety of different stories including draft novels, but couldn't get published. I wrote my first full novel in the summer of 1979, but afterward, my efforts shifted to my first doctorate in 1995, on B.S. Johnson, which I completed in 1997. After that mainly I wrote scholarly work, pursuing my career as an academic and was lucky enough to be successful. As described in *Afterlives*, the death on 10 April 2016 of a former friend with whom I'd lost contact, the writer Sue Townsend, not only moved me greatly, but also persuaded me to start writing creatively once again. I wrote a novel (originally entitled *The Gift of Death*) which I used as part of a second doctorate, this one in Creative Writing which I studied at Brunel where I worked, which I submitted, the award made in 2016. I greatly enjoyed this project and joined the Somers Town Writing Group in 2017–2018, which led me to meet the people who set up Brigand Press. I turned the doctorate into *Afterlives*, after much revision, still guided by my tutor and friend, David Fulton, and my son, George. Finally, I was published by Brigand and my creative urge had resurfaced, fully reinvigorated.

*Saeed: That is an interesting point about your son and writing groups, which I guess we'd now call examples of 'social networks'. Do you think writers gain from being part of a social network of some sort? Even if it is not a formal writing group is it about communication like chatting to friends, colleagues, family, etc. And is that the kind of things we tend to miss in literary studies when we look at writers?*

The simple answer is yes, they do benefit, as I did. To be serious as a writer, I think you need the company of and interaction with others with a similar commitment, longings, and ambitions. The same is true for literary scholars, a different group with other social networks such as Literary London. Having been in both camps, I'm privileged in a sense, as I find my friends and colleagues who are committed to literary studies can offer ideas that are helpful in my creative work, my fiction, as do fellow writers. Modern technology means that these networks can be virtual, using Skype or Zoom and so forth to interconnect with

people across the globe. I have a good friend working in Macau, an academic working on his fiction, and we often swap ideas as if we were in the same neighbourhood.

*Saeed: As someone who has written about London and literature and who now writes novels which are sometimes set in London, I wondered whether you find your critical knowledge helpful or does it make it harder to write about London if you are thinking about Literary London?*

Tew: Do remember London is also my home and point of origin, so London settings and dynamics do come naturally to a degree, but I do think my copious teenage reading and my subsequent scholarly work have played their part at least implicitly in allowing me to imagine these fictional responses in a far deeper and perhaps more acute or persuasive manner. This is particularly true of my more recent work, *Fragmentary Lives* and *Clark Gable and His Plastic Duck*, where relations are defined by love-hate and yet sometimes the weight of positive expectations so typical of the capital also informs the lives and perspective of my characters.

*Saeed: I wondered if you could speak about your work set in London in a bit more detail, about the role does it plays?*

Tew: Generalizing, London represents, variously, a point of origin, objects of great desire and even some associated with revulsion, and an ambivalent place that nevertheless shapes the consciousness of my protagonists in particular. London is always in excess of their lives, but its fine grain is very familiar to them and functions as a grounding, a complex and variegated element that underpins both their longings and doubts. It's not something they need to think about consciously for it to feature in their lives, although on occasion they do. In essence, London is their lifeblood, but also at times delivers the deepest of dissatisfactions. There is a dialectic between the city, the self, and all that lies beyond the city, the open vistas of the latter being highly suggestive and yet inducing a frantic quality at times, a symptom perhaps of the Londoner's typical agoraphobic caution about the countryside.

*Saeed: What is your favourite book, of those written by you?*

Tew: I can't offer one answer given my scholarly and fictional work. In academic terms it must be *B.S. Johnson: A Critical Reading*, which took so long to finish and gave me great pride that it was received so well. In terms of reputation and



sales, however, it must be *The Contemporary British Novel*, a volume that came out in two editions, the second much revised, and it was also translated into Serbo-Croat. Of my fiction, so far it has to be *Fragmentary Lives*, of which James Riley of Girton College, Cambridge University says this:

is a skilfully wrought triptych of novellas which detail the intersecting trajectories of a liminal and variously alienated circle of (almost) friends. Standing somewhere on the edge of the remarkable, these characters slog from one quotidian crisis to another. In the world at large their struggles are silent, but in the networks that Tew carefully documents, they carry loud reverberations. With shades of B.S. Johnson and Jonathan Coe, Tew maps out lives that are static, stalling or in many ways have yet to begin. Taking place as the twentieth century comes to a close, *Fragmentary Lives* offers a roadmap of ominous things to come. There is no shred of the Gothic in Tew's clear, realist prose but that doesn't prevent the volume from pointing to the horrors of precarity lurking just over the horizon.

Saeed: *Last, I wonder if you could say anything about your future projects and whether any of these are connected to London?*

Tew: I have one last academic study on narrative exchange mechanisms that I hope to finish, and London will feature at the very least in the writing of Virginia Woolf (fiction, diaries, letters and so forth), which will be considered in the analysis in this volume; currently I'm completing a chapter on the Blitz novel, and clearly London has its place, although offset by the many other places that were bombed by the Luftwaffe. The metropolis also features in two more books of fiction of mine, the first drafts of which have been completed, but they may now be tweaked almost endlessly. The first is a book consisting of two novellas, the volume entitled *Heroes and Villains* (drawn from the Beach Boys song which I love, and from which Angela Carter also filched her title), partly set in London in the mid-1990s and around 2000; the second is my third novel, *Call Me Horse*, although one of the main characters escapes to Harlow (where I lived briefly for one summer), which she regrets. As I discovered during my sojourn there, it's a place full of people and families who were originally Londoners, a time warp of a sort, an Essex outpost, part of the matrix that is the contemporary capital.

**Philip Tew's fiction is available direct from Brigand Press with the reduction in price as outlined below until 31 October 2020 if you use the following discount codes on the Brigand website:**

*Afterlives* (ISBN 978-1-912978-02-1): £6.99 + P&P: ENTER CODE AFTER1

<https://www.brigand.london/books/afterlives>

*Fragmentary Lives - Three Novellas* (ISBN 978-1-9129781-2-0): £6.99 + P&P:

ENTER CODE FRAG1: <https://www.brigand.london/books/fragmentary-lives-three-novellas-philip-tew>

Advance orders for *Clark Gable and His Plastic Duck*: £7.59 + P&P:

<https://www.brigand.london/books/clark-gable-and-his-plastic-duck-philip-tew>

### **Interviewer**

Dr. Alan Ali Saeed is a lecturer in Modern English Literature in the Department of English, College of Languages, Sulaimani University, Iraqi Kurdistan. He has a BA in English (Sulaimani University), MA (University of London) and a PhD from Brunel University London. He currently teaches twentieth-century English literature and modernism. His research interests explore and scrutinize the influence of William James and Henri Bergson on the role of selected British modern female writers of the early decades of twentieth century, mainly from 1918 to 1929. The research provides a new interpretation of the way texts are framed and formed, of writers' and characters' inner perception of the outside world, and how the identity of women's writing practice altered aesthetically.

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