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Agnete FOG



Worlds of English

SYSTIME >

Salaam Brick Lane

By Tarquin Hall, 2005



shy of *id* ikke langt fra
 tug of home *id* hjemlig
 tilrækning
 weary *adj* træet
 de-tribalised *adj* uden
 for fællesskabet
 leafy *adj* med mange
 blade, 'grøn'
 scatter *vb* sprede
 ma' terialise *vb* blive til
 virkelighed
 super'stitious *adj* over-
 troisk
 rogue *sb* slyngel
 put sb up *id*
 lade nogen overnatte
 property *sb* ejendom
 sought-after *adj* efter-
 spurgt
 semidetached (house)
sb halv dobbelthus
 subsequently *adv*
 efterfølgende

Tarquin Hall (1969 -) British writer and journalist, who with 'Salaam Brick Lane' achieved what one critic called the *flavour of updated Dickens*. Hall himself experienced the street Brick Lane like this: *I suddenly realised that [Englishness] is a huge mix of all sorts of things, it's a huge recipe of all kinds of ingredients that have been boiled together over centuries and I think we kind of formulate this idea at any particular time and our English forefathers have done this as well – we sort of decide what Englishness means but then it actually changes and I think this is happening all the time.*

For the past ten years, I had been living away from England – the last three in India, where I had been working for the American news agency, the Associated Press, covering the major events of the region from the capture of Kabul by Taliban forces to the death of Mother Teresa. I had returned to London just shy of thirty, somewhat weary of always being an outsider abroad and feeling the tug of home where I sought the familiarity of the past. Travel had taken me to many extraordinary places, but I had become detribalised and felt suddenly uneasy about where I belonged in the world. I hoped that returning to live in my own culture would provide the answers.

It had been my intention to put down roots in the leafy suburb of Barnes where I had grown up. But a lot had changed in my absence. My parents now lived three hours' journey outside London, my brother had emigrated to Los Angeles, my relatives were scattered across England and mostly didn't speak to one another, and many of my childhood friendships had not survived the test of time and distance.

I was also broke. The freelance journalism I had been guaranteed in London had yet to materialise. And during my last months in India, I had spent my savings travelling through the jungles and tea plantations of Assam in the company of a superstitious elephant hunter who had been on the trail of a man-killing rogue. I had even written a book about the journey, convinced that I had a best-seller on my hands. But no publisher had shown any interest in the manuscript and for now it sat at the bottom of my suitcase in the South Kensington flat where a friend was putting me up while I searched for a place of my own.

My financial difficulties aside, London property prices had shot up and Barnes was now one of the most sought-after areas. The semidetached on Madrid Road which my father had bought for ten thousand pounds in 1975 (and subsequently sold) was on the market for a cool half a million. One-bedroom flats were renting for silly money.

'You won't get a shoebox in Dagenham on your budget, sir,' one estate agent told me on Barnes High Street when I'd gone in search of a place to live.

It was a similar story in Chiswick, Kew, Putney, Richmond – all the areas I had known intimately as a child and thought of as home. Even Sheen, where my parents had lived when I was an infant (then still a working-class neighbourhood where the neighbours kept carrier pigeons), was leagues out of my price range.

Reluctantly, over the past fortnight, I had started looking elsewhere. Searching through the Evening Standard classifieds, I had travelled the length and breadth of the capital. And in the process, I had had a revelation. Most of London, the city of my birth, was as foreign to me as Prague.

The East End in particular was one huge blank spot. Until a week ago, I had never so much as set foot east of the City – but then again, I'd never had any desire to do so. The borough of Tower Hamlets, which today encompasses the East End proper, might as well have been marked on the map with a large skull and crossbones. My impression of the place was still coloured by childhood images of fogbound streets stalked by Jack the Ripper, Bill Sykes, and the notorious Kray Twins, who drove black Sedans and buried their victims in the foundations of motorways. At home and at school, I had been taught that the people of the East End were different. My parents and teachers had made the Cockneys sound like a distinct race – cheery, perhaps, like Eliza Doolittle's father, but tougher, wlier and never wholly to be trusted. They even had their own language, Cockney rhyming slang, which – it was said – they had developed to fool policemen.

My father and his father before him had never set foot in the East End either. Their world had been Chelsea and Knightsbridge (where my grandmother did all her shopping at Harrods) and later, the villagey suburbs of south-west London. During my childhood, my parents had rarely travelled beyond these borders, except to go to the theatre in the West End or to visit Hampstead where, compared to Barnes, their friends were distinctly bohemian. The closest we had ever come to the East End was during a day trip to Greenwich. Standing on the Meridian, we had looked out over the Thames to the badlands beyond, a grim cityscape of gasworks and disused cranes, abandoned warehouses and crumbling wharves, and we had counted ourselves lucky that we didn't live there.

By the time I reached Whitechapel it was nearly four o'clock and already dusk was falling. The neon signs above the shopfronts seared the gathering darkness like branding irons, while the main road, still slick with rain, began to glister beneath the headlights of passing vehicles. I crossed over Whitechapel Road and entered the warren of nar-

league *sb* gl. mål, ca.
 5 km
 range *sb* rækkevidde
 re'luctant *adj* modvillig
 classified *sb*
 rubrikannonce
 reve'lation *sb* åbenbaring
 borough *sb* af London
 dons 32 (by-)distrikter
 en'compass *vb* omfatte
 fogbound *adj* tågeindhyllet
 stalk *vb* snige sig efter
 no'torious *adj* berøgtet
 Cockney *sb* en der taler London-arbejderdialekt
 alekt
 dis'tinct *adj* særlig
 wily *adj* listig, snu
 bo'hemian *adj*
 bohemægigt, smart
 Me'ridian *sb* længdegrad 0 i Greenwich, London
 badlands *sb* pl. her: øde områder
 grim *adj* barsk, ubarmhjertig
 crumbling *adj* smulderende
 wharf *sb* kaj, bolværk
 sear *vb* svide, svitsee
 branding iron *sb* brændemærke-jern
 slick *adj* glat
 vehicle *sb* køretøj
 warren *sb* labyrint

1 row streets behind the East End mosque where Bangladeshi children in white skullcaps played football between rows of parked cars. Not for the first time during the past few days, I found that I was the only white face on the street. Everyone else was from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Somalia. As I passed by, I caught snippets of conversation in some of the estimated 102 languages spoken in the East End. Only occasionally did I hear a word or two of English - and only then amid a babble of Somali or Urdu.

10 The area was mostly residential, the streets filled with the sounds of Talvin Singh blaring from open windows, and the enticing aromas of South Asian cooking. Among the tightly packed terraces, there were businesses too, all of them immigrant-owned. A halal butcher here, an old warehouse packed with rows of people working behind sewing machines there. And on one corner, an Islamic paraphernalia shop selling everything from leather-bound Korans to prayer mats with sewn-in compasses, designed to ensure that the twenty-first-century Muslim never fails to locate Mecca.

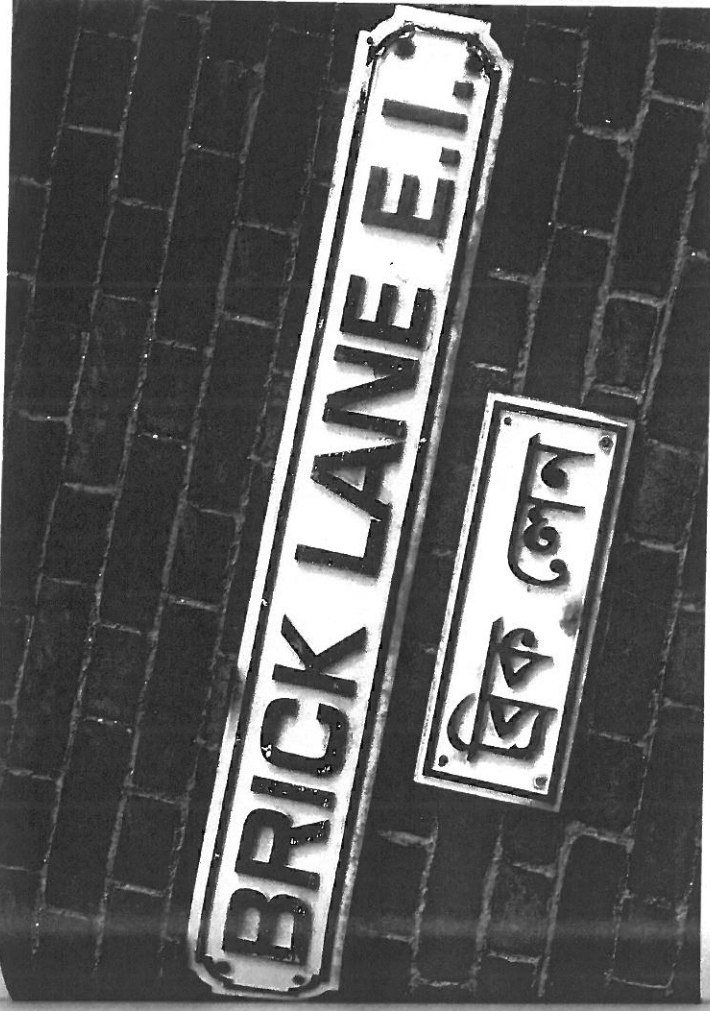
20 Looking up at the street signs, I noticed they were written in Bengali, as were the posters plastered on the lamp-posts and walls. The illusion of being back in South Asia was almost complete. But as I reached the next main road, the sight of a red double-decker bus hurtling past reminded me that this was London - just not the London I knew.

25 The cafe where I was due to meet Abdul-Haq, the Shia letting agent who had set up the appointment with Mr Ali, was owned by a Pakistani family from Lahore. Photographs of the city's famous landmarks, including the fort and Kim's gun, hung on the wall. In the window sat a pair of dusty brass samovars.

30 The cafe's chai was milky and sweet and flavoured with cardamoms, and as I waited for Abdul-Haq, I drank several cups and read the last few pages of Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*. I had come across the book the day before while browsing through a bookshop on Whitechapel High Street. It was an account of the American writer and adventurer's harrowing experiences living as a down-and-out in the East End in 1902. The Abyss of the title - the Victorian East End - was, to Jack London's socialist eyes, a bottomless pit that sucked the poor down into its depths and enslaved them in debilitating poverty. Much like Third World slums of today, it was a city of the damned in which young girls were sold into prostitution, destitute workers were left to rot in vermin-infested bed-sits, and broken men on the verge of starvation slept in Dickensian doss-houses.

40 *The streets were filled with a new and different race of people, short of stature, and of wretched or beer-sodden appearance*, wrote Jack London of his first impressions.

skullecap *sb* kalot, hue
estimate *vb* anslaet
amid *prep* midt
iblandt
babble *vb* pludre
residential *adj* bebo-
elses-
Talvin Singh london-
indisk musiker
blare *vb* drøne, larme
paraphernalia *sb pl*
tilbehør, udstyr
hurtle *vb* suse, fare
letting agent *sb* udlej-
ningsagent
Kim's gun *sb* 1700-tals
kanon brugt i krig i
området (Zamzama)
brass *sb* messing
samovar *sb* temaskine,
samovar
a'byss *sb* agrund (om
Londons fattige - East
End, 1903)
browse *vb* gå på opda-
gelse
harrowing *adj* opri-
vende
de'bilittating *adj* svæk-
kende
destitute *adj* fattig,
nødlidende
vermin-infested *adj*
skadedyrsbefængt
bed-sit *sb* etværelses
lejlighed
on the verge of *it* på
kanten af
Dickensian *adj* som
relaterer til forfatteren
Charles Dickens
dosshouse *sb* simpelt
og billigt logi
stature *sb* bygning
wretched *adj*
ulykkelig, ussel
sodden *adj* gennem-
blødt



1 We rolled along through miles of bricks and squalor, and from each cross street and alley flashed long vistas of bricks and misery. Here and there lurched a drunken man or woman ... At a market, toffery old men and women were searching in the garbage ... for potatoes, beans and vegetables, while little chil-
5 dren clustered like flies around a festering mass of fruit ...

Given that the slums had been only a stone's throw from the heart of the British Empire, The People of the Abyss still, nearly a century after its publication, made for shocking reading. Indeed, what intrigued me most about the book was Jack London's impression of the capital as a segregated city, with the rich, affluent and powerful living in the west, and the poor confined to the east.

10 This was a trend established as far back as Roman times when the area east of Londinium's walls was used as a rubbish tip and burial ground. During the period prior to the Reformation when the land was owned by the Church, it remained a transient place with leases restricted to just a few years. Later, when ownership was wrested from the Church, it was allowed to grow unchecked into the slums so vilified during Jack the Ripper's reign of terror. Its geographical position down-
15 wind from the Court, together with its proximity to the docks, ensured

squalor *sb* snavs, elen-
dighed
vistas *sb* udsigt
lurch *vb* tumle, slingre
toffery *adj* vaklende
cluster *vb* flokkes
fester *adj* betændt
in'trigue *vb* vække
interesse
segregated *adj* opdelt
affluent *adj* rigelig, rig
confined *adj* begrænset
rubbish tip *sb* losse-
plads
transient *adj*
forbigående, midlerti-
dig
wrest *vb* vriste fra
vilify *vb* rakke ned
court *sb* hof
proximity *sb* nærhed
dock *sb* dok, anløbsbro

that the East End became London's principal industrial quarter, attracting migrant workers, immigrants, dissidents and artisans, as well as entrepreneurs excluded from the City by the monopolistic guilds.

In sharp contrast, the West End's development was homogeneous, its grand squares, avenues and parks designed and built by the rich, to the exclusion of the poor. By the time Jack London arrived on the scene, the segregation of the City had become what the historian Jerry White has called *a mystic divide between good and evil, civilisation and savagery*. Indeed, while staying in Highgate before making what he called his *descent* into the East End, the American was hard pressed to find a single person who had ever set foot beyond the eastern border of the Square Mile of the City.

It is over there somewhere, people told him vaguely, waving their hands in an easterly direction and warning him against travelling there. Why, it is said there are places where a man's life isn't worth tu' pence.

In his frustration, Jack London turned to the travel agents Thomas Cook & Son - *pathfinders and trail-clearers, living sign-posts to all the world* - for help. The company had plenty of experience in organising expeditions into darkest Africa and innermost Tibet, but of the East End they admitted they knew *nothing whatsoever*.

Eventually, Jack London disguised himself as a sailor and, with a gold sovereign sewn into the lining of his jacket for emergencies, set off for the East End on his own. He spent the next seven weeks sleeping rough and living off a diet of tea, bread, margarine and 'skilly', or watery oatmeal. Later in life he would write, *No other book of mine took so much of my young heart and tears.*

When Abdul-Haq arrived, he sat down next to me, ordered a cup of tea and started to complain about his life. He was late, he said, because a tenant of a property he managed had been found dead from an overdose in his bathroom.

'Suicide,' he said dryly. 'I had to go to the morgue to identify him. He'd been dead for days. He did not look his best.'

Abdul-Haq's tea was brought to the table and he took several short sharp sips, eyeing my copy of *The People of the Abyss*, which was lying on the table.

'What is this?' he asked gruffly with a nod.

I told him about the book's premise and he picked it up, turning to a passage I had marked.

From the slimy, spittle-drenched sidewalk, they were picking up bits of orange peel, apple skin and grape stems, and they were eating them,' he read aloud. 'The pits of greengage plums they cracked between their teeth for the kernels inside. They picked up stray crumbs of bread the size of peas, apple cores so

dissident sb systemkritiker

artisan sb kunstner

entrepre'neur sb iværksætter

guild sb (håndværker-)lav

homogenous adj ensartet

descent sb nedstigning

sign-post sb vejskilt

lining sb for

sleeping rough id sove på gaden/udenfor

skilly sb tynd grød, vælling

oatmeal sb havregrød

tenant sb lejer

morgue sb lighus

gruff adj ru, rå, grov

premise sb præmis, overordnet idé

spittle sb spyt

drenched adj gennemblødt

pit sb sten fra frugt

greengage sb reine-claude (blomme)

core sb kernehus, skrog

black and dirty one would not take them to be apple cores, and these things these two men took into their mouths, chewed them, and swallowed them.

Abdul-Haq, a diehard pessimist who never smiled, nodded his solemn nod, closed the book and placed it back on the table.

'Yes, that is most definitely Whitechapel,' he said.

'But that book was written in 1902.'

'Perhaps. But it has not changed much round here.'

Abdul-Haq had come to England in 1973 from Kenya, looking for a bright new future, but things had not gone his way, and he had grown bitter about Britain. He continually likened conditions in the East End to those of the Third World. When he did, I found myself trying to placate him.

'I admit it's grim around here,' I said. 'But surely you can't be saying that it's as bad as it was in Jack London's day. People don't starve to death in the streets any more. The Welfare State has -'

'Welfare State, huh!' he interrupted. 'There are people living in such poverty here that it would make you sick just to see it for five minutes! I have seen old women so poor that they must eat cat food to survive. Many children suffer from cholera and rickets. It is common for families of ten to live in one room with no toilet, no bath, no running water. Only recently a part of the Whitechapel Hospital was closed because it was overrun by rats. And they call this Great Britain!'

Abdul-Haq's voice was raised now and other customers in the cafe were staring. The Kenyan didn't care; an audience is what he wanted.

'This is still one of the poorest parts of Britain. You will not find rich people living here. They are all in Piccadilly! And because the people are so poor and ignorant, the vultures' - he meant politicians - 'are able to line their pockets with our taxes and get away with it. You will not find justice here. You will only find lies!'

Abdul-Haq was the only estate agent I had ever met who talked down the area he dealt with. The first time I'd stepped into his agency near Brick Lane, he had tried his hardest to persuade me not to move to the East End.

'Why do you want to live here?' he'd said. 'You are obviously educated. This is not a place for a person like you. Everyone here is a criminal!'

To illustrate his point, Abdul-Haq had shown me the latest edition of the local newspaper, the East London Advertiser, which was packed with news of contract killings, gruesome murders, rapes, muggings and armed robberies. One story described how a man had been found floating bound and gagged in the Regent's Canal; another spoke of a pitched battle that had taken place in a local park between rival Bangladeshi teenage gangs, the Brick Lane Massif and Stepney Posse. In one edition, a two-page spread was dedicated to a recent spate of drive-by shootings by Yardies, whose weapon of choice was the Uzi machine-gun.

solemn adj højtidelig

liken vb sammenligne

placate vb formilde

rickets sb rækkits,

engelsk syge

vulture sb grib

line vb fore

mugging sb overfald

gag vb kneble

pitched battle sb vold-

somt sammenstød

posse sb flok; bande

spread sb opslag (i avis)

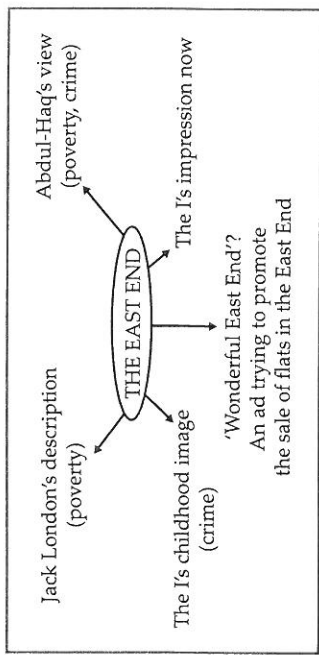
spate sb række (af)

state housing *sb* socialt boligbyggeri
 ex'ploit *vb* udnytte
 pawn *sb* bonde (i skakspil) - brik
 re'lent *vb* give efter
 a'bandon *vb* opgive

1 During that first meeting, Abdul-Haq also showed me the latest statistics on poverty, education and unemployment for the area. They were some of the worst for any inner city borough in Britain. Eighty per cent of the population lived in state housing; the average 'official' income per household was less than five thousand pounds a year.
 5 'People here are being exploited as they always have been. The virtues care nothing for the poor people. We are pawns in a greater game!' It had taken a good deal of effort on my part to persuade Abdul-Haq to show me the properties on his books. Although eventually he had relented, he still seemed to be holding out hope that I would abandon the idea of living in the East End.
 10 'So you still want to move here, to this place?' he said, finishing his tea and fixing me with his cold, dark eyes.
 'Believe me, it's not by choice,' I said, almost apologetically.

Comprehension and analysis

1. Who is the I: What is his story?
2. This excerpt from Tarquin Hall's 'Salaam Brick Lane' presents the reader to the East End of London seen from several angles. In groups, make posters (or power-point presentations) that illustrate each of these East Ends. Use text, words, drawings, pictures, etc. to make the experience vivid.



Post-reading

Study London and its many different neighbourhoods and suburbs. Make posters or power-point presentations that show the unique character of selected places. The main neighbourhoods are: *Bayswater, Westminster, South Kensington, Soho, Chelsea, Clapham Common, Notting Hill, Camden Town...* Some of the suburbs: *Barnes, Chiswick, Kew, Putney, Richmond, Greenwich, Hampstead...*

excerpt *sb* uddrag
 vivid *adj* levende
 poverty *sb* fattigdom
 suburb *sb* forstad

Tory Prankster

By David Gaffney, 2006

David Gaffney (1961 -) British. Debt adviser turned writer, now a much respected indie northern writer whose first collection, 'Sawn-Off Tales', received much acclaim. About his former profession Gaffney has the following comment: *For a long time, I thought I was doing good as a debt counsellor. But I have to face facts: I was coaching people on how to wallow in the warm swamp of indebtedness.*

Pre-reading

Print out pictures of Tory (Conservative) leader David Cameron from the Internet. Put them up *all* over your classroom.

Reading

Read the text aloud in class.

Danny and Gill asked us to stay at their house whilst they went to Budapest. They needed some time alone, to sort a few things out, get some perspective. We were about to settle down to a DVD on Danny's giant plasma TV when the new Tory leader, David Cameron, appeared on the news. And we noticed that he was the spitting image of Danny: the same moonish face, the same springy, puppy-dog gait. Pundits wagered Cameron would run to fat, and we'd said the same about Danny.

So when Danny rang from Budapest to remind us to switch off his lawn sprinkler, Adelle asked him straight away if he knew that he looked exactly, precisely, **UNCANNILY**, like David Cameron. Danny protested violently, and Adelle couldn't understand why. After all, Cameron was fairly handsome, in his Converse all-stars and faded jeans - even bit fancyable, if you allowed Tories a sexual dimension.
 But I understood.

Danny was unutterably pompous about his Trotskyite past. The fact that a famous Tory looked like him reminded him of how far he had betrayed his socialist roots. It was hilarious. So the night before he was due back I printed out dozens of smarmy publicity shots of Cameron.

We sought out unusual and surprising sites for our poster campaign: under the toilet seat, inside cupboard doors, the bottom of the bread bin, beneath the dried food in the cat's bowl, the bottom of Gill's underwear drawer.

The pictures were everywhere and the next day we left the house exhilarated by our grand joke, looking forward to the amused phone call from Danny. But the call we got the following evening was from



debt adviser *sb* gælds-rådgiver
 ac'claim *sb* ros
 swamp *sb* sump
 indebtedness *sb* gæld
 prankster *sb* spasmager
 Tory *adj* konservativ i det britiske parlament (reaktionær)
 springy *adj* fjedrende, spændstig
 gait *sb* gang, måde at gå på
 pundit *sb* klogt hoved, lærd
 wager *vb* vædde
 uncanny *adj*
 uhyggelig
 un'utterable *adj* ustelgelig
 pompous *adj*
 opblæst, højtidelig
 Trotskyite *adj* med relation til Trotsky = russisk revolutionær, 1917
 smarmy *adj* slesk, slikket
 exhilarated *adj* eksalteret