Save Our Slums

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Jerusalem
By Alan Moore
(Liveright, 2016)

> Our street is us and we are it.
> Our street is where we like to be,
> and it looks like all our dreams.
> —Daniel Pinkwater,
> *The Big Orange Splot*

Alan Moore lives in the past, and who can blame him? The rent is cheaper there. *Jerusalem* is not the first novel from Moore, though the Hugo-winning author is better known for writing bleak and gory comic books: the antisuperhero masterpiece *Watchmen*, the dystopian *V for Vendetta*, the Jack the Ripper tale *From Hell*. Moore frequently delves into the weird. His *Swamp Thing* series explores that age-old tale of "sentient plant meets girl."

But in *Jerusalem* he has found all the weirdness and wildness anyone could want in his own backyard—quite literally, as the new novel uses real people and folklore from his hometown of Northampton. Moore reveals this economically abject northern English town, and especially its poorest neighborhood, to be the spiritual heart of the country and the world. "Every clearance area is the eternal golden city" is his creed. *Jerusalem* is the most powerful and poignant novel I've ever read about love of one's hometown. Anybody who's ever loved a scorned and broken place will find vindication and comradeship in Moore's vision.

If you hear an echo of "The last shall be first," that's intentional. *Jerusalem* is a theological novel, for better and eventually for worse. The novel has three main sections: a series of loosely linked portraits of people of the Boroughs, the poorest section of the city, from a monk in the ninth century to a drug-addicted prostitute in 2006; a fantastic journey through the soul of the city, in which a gang of dead children taunt monsters and outwit demons; and a genre-switching sequence of moral investigations purporting to be a plot. Archangels play snooker with human souls, Oliver Cromwell has a very bad dream, there's a chamber-pot chalice and an immensely satisfying woolly mammoth.

All these fantastical elements come together in a hymn to Northampton and the Boroughs. The Boroughs is still dear as it's slowly being gutted; in dream and memory it "had still been a thing of beauty through-

out its undignified and gradual surrender." At first Moore's careful delineation of every right turn on Sheep Street seems self-indulgent, but by the end you'll be moved by the simple recitation of street names. Sheep Street now means the former American slave Henry, herding nineteenth-century flocks down from Wales with his newlywed bride; Freeschool Street means the dream of education that respects poor children; Narrow Toe Lane, still mysterious by the novel's end, suggests some long-forgotten escapade or beloved local character. You'll feel the affront at the twin "stack-a-prole" housing projects that rear up like a giant two-fingered salute to the Boroughs, "two upended and piss-perfumed sarcophagi that would replace the tenant's back-wall badinage and summer doorstep idylls with more vertical arrangements, thin-air isolation and the tension rising with each number lit up in the climbing after-curfew lift, a suicide's-eye view of what had been done to the territory around them that was inescapable."

The characters inhabiting this beloved place—almost all of them real, or real-ish—are not quite as memorable as the place itself. The brother and sister at the book's heart, Mick and Alma Warren, are mostly delightful company. Mick is a manual laborer trying to understand the hallucinatory visions of a childhood adventure in the afterlife that poured down onto him when an industrial accident doused him in corrosive chemicals. He's an observer, not an instigator, and so he's a stand-in for the audience. Alma, whose name picks her out as the Soul of the Burrows/Boroughs, is our authorial stand-in. She's an abrasive pothead of daunting physical monstrosity, and she's hilarious and lovable as long as we're not inside her head.

The supporting cast is chosen to display the diversity of souls who have passed through the Boroughs over the centuries. Moore shows us the "deathmongers," who really existed back before the NHS: women who attend funerals and births, ushering other women's children into and out of this world. He shows us those who feared the Boroughs—like an Edwardian actor who mimes, for money, the drunken misery he'd spent his life escaping—and those who found in it a refuge or a religious calling.

The second-best element of Moore's work is his prose style. The novel sings when Moore speaks in his own curlicued, lurid, often sardonic voice. At his best Moore is dazzled or chop licking, a visionary and gourmand, a lover of the undefended and the indefensible. This is a dead child looking at wood: "The engraved hearts of hurricanes, reverberating outward in concentric lines of vegetable force; the accidental faces of mad, decomposed baboons trapped snarling in the wood; trilobite stains with legs that trailed away to isotherms."

There's always a thematic reason for the book's literary displays—the rhyming stanzas, the television script. One of Moore's devices is an imagined board game based on Lady Di's life and death, which emphasizes the novel's contention that the shape of our lives is set from the beginning, all the tokens inevitably progressing to the final square. And there's a deeper thematic reason for the profusion of genre experimentation. The margins of human experience—madness, drug trips, intense physical suffering, death, and déjà vu—are at least as true as the everyday world. Our lives are lived in multiple genres, and in one hour we can experience religious ecstasy (a mode of experience Moore explores much less than one might expect from such an insistently Blakean novel), Gothic doom-swoon, and slapstick comedy.

But Moore's style starts to overload his prose. The genre-switches and mash-ups start to feel frantic, as if the author is anxious of losing our attention. There's a fifty-page chapter where Moore imitates *Finnegans Wake* and writes indecipherable pornography. There's a television play where a humble,

saintly prostitute scolds a man for repenting his sexual congress with a ten-year-old. These sections' problems flow from Moore's worldview—the television play, for example, reinforces the book's strenuous argument that there's no free will, all our deeds are predetermined, and therefore repentance is just a form of self-loathing. A lesser-known Moore gem, the haunting and phantasmagoric graphic novel *A Small Killing*, offers a different and truer portrayal of remorse.

Jerusalem borrows from Christianity—archangels and preachers, crosses that represent mercy and the "hymn-made-solid" of St. Paul's Cathedral—but also makes key omissions. There's no Jesus, and the characters often scorn the idea that they might need salvation, transformation, not just better self-esteem. Perhaps the most poignant omission is of Catholic England. In a novel about the survival of the past, we get exactly two pre-Reformation Northamptonites: that ninth-century monk and a rigid, fearful Thomas Becket. A thousand years of English sin and beauty are all but erased.

The novel's refrain is "Justice is above the street." This at first seems like a promise that, no matter how grueling the oppression of the Boroughs' poor, there is a power and a consciousness who will bring justice, if not in this life then in the next. Moore, unlike most Western Christians, remembers how much of the Bible is concerned with overturning worldly hierarchies. That isn't just about lifting the poor up: the Bible is clear, in both Testaments, that the rich and mighty will be cast down. Justice means succor for those who had nothing and suffering for those who had all.

We get hints that *Jerusalem*'s justice may come unhooked from compassion. In one chapter the image of a balance above a road—justice above the street—is branded into a slave's shoulder. The novel argues that evil is simply a part of good. Devils, if you understand them correctly, are a part of angels. If that girl hadn't been raped by her father, she might not have saved my life decades later. We remain ourselves eternally, no part of us lost or even transformed. Heaven is simply this world preserved forever, and so is Hell.

Yet Moore sometimes seems to forget that nobody in this book chose to be awful. Sometimes he can make poignant the moral cowardice of the better-off, as in the chapter written from the perspective of a local councilman who oscillates between complacency and unacknowledged remorse. But the novel also indulges in blame and glee when it can. This is a Paradise where you can beat up fascists forever.

The novel's end suggests that art preserves all that is lost to time; the artist's attention replaces an absent God's. Alan Moore's attention is broader and deeper than most. But his Heaven can never be larger than his own furrowed face, deeper than his own haunted mind.

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