

# Urban invention

Hundreds of independent literary magazines are published in London each year.  
And many of them take the capital itself as their theme.

By Nicholas Royle

LITERATURE

It's easy to be nostalgic for the Golden Age of 'little magazines', a time (at some unspecified point in the distant past) when a Grub Street hack could make a passable living writing stories and reviews in any number of metropolitan periodicals. The economic realities of such literary piecework may have changed, but London today is home to as a varied and lively a range of small magazines as it was in Hazlitt's day, or Matthew Arnold's, or George Orwell's.

Iain Sinclair, Chris Petit, Michael Moorcock, Peter Ackroyd, Christopher Fowler, Will Self, JG Ballard. Why do London's psychogeography nuts seem to be mainly men? Where are all the women writers with a thing about place? One of them – Laura Oldfield Ford – is writing and producing a fanzine-style publication called *Savage Messiah*.

One issue of the A5-size magazine might read like a series of cut-ups: disjointed descriptions of Dalston, Hackney and the River Lea, local colour in black and white, establishing shots in pre-production. Another, focusing on Heathrow and around, will edge a little closer to coherent narrative, while still keeping its distance. There's a suggestion of almost limitless potential, as if the writer could break out in any number of directions: fiction, film, graphic novels, illustration, fine art. The material touches on direct action, drugs, lawlessness, surveillance. We negotiate canals, gated communities, perimeter fences; the mood is one of paranoia, desperation, hunger, intellectual inquiry.

The *Other Side* is that rare thing, a freebie that's worth reading. Given away on the Northern line (they handed out 5,000 copies of a recent issue), it features humorous articles, interviews with creative folk and general arts coverage. It's written in a lively popular style, and offers ample diversion on the slog from Mill Hill East to Clapham North.



Similar in look, feel and size, although with more content, the *Eel* draws its inspiration from Hackney's Broadway Market. The articles are about market traders, encounters on the Silverlink train service, and the Olympics. 'Stuff the Olympics' is a rallying cry. Its writers and editors give it a campaigning edge; local knowledge is

their currency, and they are rich. You can read folk tales, personal anecdotes and blistering polemic alongside pieces about allotments, city farms and smoked eel.

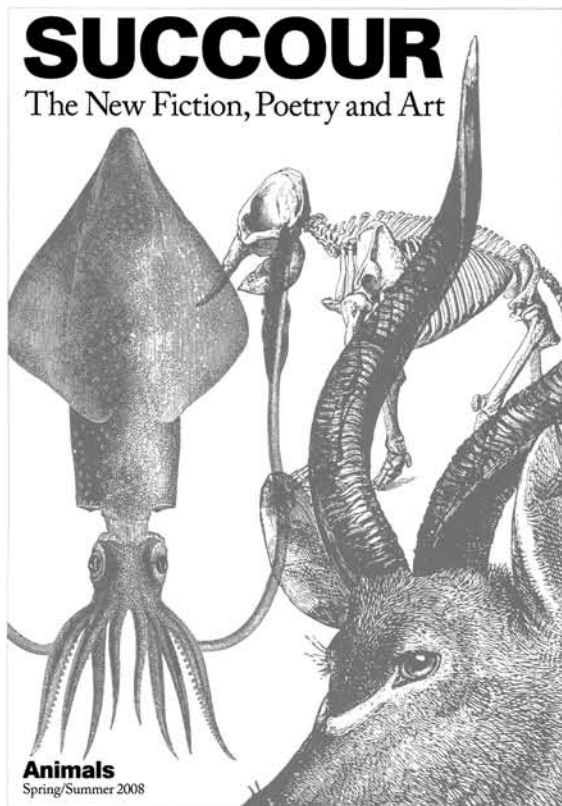
A guide to the Greenway takes you as far as Maryon Park in Charlton 'where a famous film was made'. A footnote mischievously names the film as Polanski's 1965 movie *Get Swinging*, starring Terence Stamp, Una Stubbs and Jim Davidson, which you won't find in the *Time Out Film Guide*, or any other guide for that matter. 'Ask in the Film Shop for more details,' it advises. The Film Shop, at 33 Broadway Market, would probably enjoy a chuckle at your expense, but they might well have a copy of Antonioni's 1966 movie *Blowup*, starring David Hemmings, Vanessa Redgrave and Sarah Miles, which does include key scenes shot in Maryon Park.

Folk tales are at the heart of the more classically designed pamphlet *One Eye Grey*, styling itself as a 21st-century penny dreadful and featuring modern short stories based on traditional London tales of

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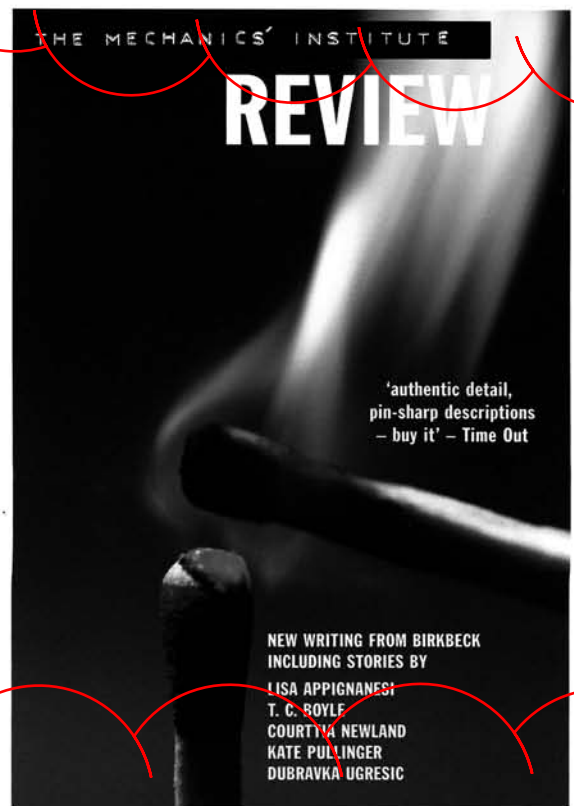
with publications that can showcase their students' work. Birkbeck writing school publishes an annual anthology in book form, *The Mechanics' Institute Review*, whereas the University of Greenwich has opted for a magazine format: *Brand*, enthusiastically edited by Nina Rapi, publishes stories, poems, plays, poems and non-fiction.

Another growth area is art and artists' magazines. The trouble with artists' magazines, if written by artists, is that, by and large, artists can't write. One of the best, however, is *Garageland*. Editor Cathy Lomax has attracted writers of the calibre of Stewart Home and Marina Warner to appear alongside her regular contributors.



the supernatural and uncanny. Early issues were written entirely by Carl Gee and Chris Roberts, but contributions were later sought from other writers, of which there is no shortage these days, with the massive expansion in university creative writing programmes. Indeed, many of these institutions have experimented in different ways

Read all about it, in three of the numerous literary magazines based in London.

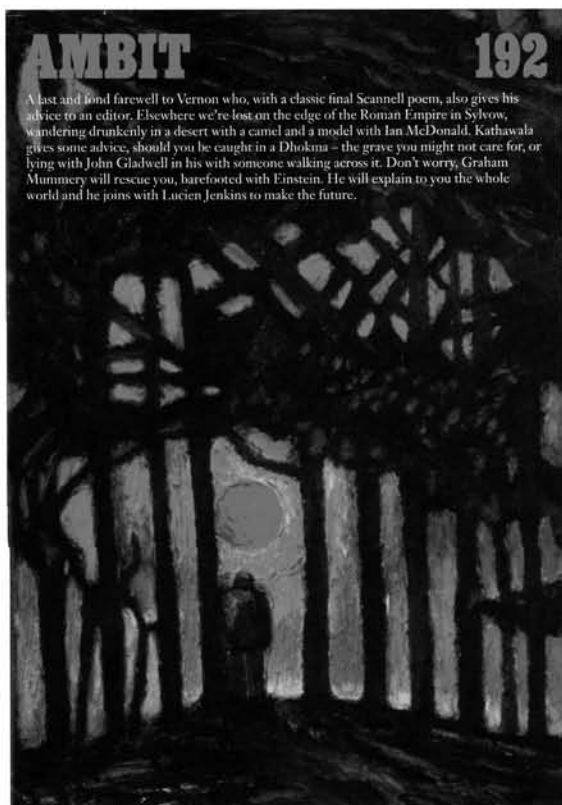


Steve Lomax has an effectively creepy short story about paranoia and alienation on the Underground in a recent issue on the supernatural. Other themes have included machismo, the baroque, nature, and beauty. The magazine looks fantastic, with lots of colour, excellent reproduction and a simple, attractive design, making it easy to read.

Altogether more venerable than any of the periodicals mentioned so far, the *London Magazine* (founded in 1737) and *Ambit* (1959) are two of the best literary magazines in the country. Both are based in London, but neither is exclusively metropolitan in outlook. Both were hit hard by recent Arts Council cuts, but continue to publish regularly and to an excellent standard, filling their pages with poetry, short stories, essays, reviews and art. A list of names of the fine writers – and artists – who have contributed to both magazines over the years could have filled the space allowed for this piece.

Newer and with only a slightly narrower focus (it doesn't publish reviews), *Succour* is a twice-yearly magazine published in London. Regional editors based in Manchester, Exeter, Brighton and Dublin attract contributors from outside the M25. The magazine features a mixture of new writers and more established authors contributing short stories, poetry and art. Themed issues, clean design and overall quality suggest a *Granta* for

Literary giant *Ambit*, established in 1959.



the Facebook generation. The 'Animals' issue, for instance, provides a home for everything from humble mutts to 'the Kraken', via hares, moths, pigs, a black tiger and flocks of birds.

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## Notes from the underground



Among the hundred flowers to bloom in the hothouse of London's late '60s counterculture were a number of newspapers and magazines. Smudged, mimeographed freesheets came and went all the time, but three products of this cultural ferment proved more durable than most: *Black Dwarf*, *International Times (IT)* and, perhaps most notorious of all, *Oz*.

Whereas *Black Dwarf* (initially edited by Tariq Ali) and, to a lesser extent, *IT* were identified with the neo-Leninist politics of the New Left, *Oz* was the mouthpiece of what its co-founder Richard Neville called the 'psychedelic left'. Its concerns were broadly cultural as well as political. Regular contributors included Germaine Greer, the cartoonist Robert Crumb, and David Widgery, who tried to keep open channels of communication between the hippy idealists of *Oz* and more austere, *marxisant* tendencies in the underground.

*Oz* had been monitored by the Obscene Publications Squad at Scotland Yard ever since its launch issue in January 1967, which included an essay by Greer on the 'English man' and an 'LBJ playmate' foldout. But the magazine would collide with the law most spectacularly in 1971. The previous year, the editors had invited 20 teenagers to edit a special School Kids issue. One item in particular caught the eye of the 'Dirty Squad': Vivian Berger's 'Rupert/Crumb' montage, in which the head of Rupert Bear was superimposed on a sexually explicit cartoon by Robert Crumb.

In 1971, the *Oz* offices were raided, the School Kids issue seized, and Neville and his fellow editors Felix Dennis and Jim Anderson were put on trial for conspiring to 'corrupt the morals of children and other young persons'. Lawyer and playwright John Mortimer (creator of *Rumpole of the Bailey*), worked for the defence team, and George Melly and John Peel were called as defence witnesses. *Oz* lost the case, though the verdict was overturned on appeal. The magazine folded in 1973.

Jonathan Derbyshire