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Summary Article: **Ackroyd, Peter**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

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Peter Ackroyd is a prolific writer whose novels, biographies, and works of non-fiction have attracted a wide audience and sustained acclaim. He started out as a poet and a critic, but soon found his niche as a novelist who delights in ransacking the past and rewriting its literary and cultural histories in a manner associated with postmodernist fiction. The majority of his novels center on London, as does most of his other work. The English capital is the site for delving into a number of recurring themes: the influence of place upon the psyche, the spiral nature of time, impersonation and imitation, the Catholic heritage of England, Englishness, occult beliefs, and strained father-son relationships. His characters are often transformations of real-world figures such as the poet Thomas Chatterton, the music hall performer Dan Leno, and the essayist Charles Lamb.

Ackroyd was born on October 5, 1949 and brought up on a modest East Acton council estate in west London. His parents separated not long after he was born and his maternal grandmother played an important role in his upbringing. A precocious child, he excelled at school and entered Clare College, Cambridge in 1968 to study English literature. There he was exposed to the “Cambridge poets” group (J. H. Prynne and others) whose experimental approach toward language was later to inform his own poetry and fiction. His year of postdoctoral study in 1972 as a Mellon Fellow at Yale University furthered these interests. Here he came into contact with the poet John Ashbery and drafted an aesthetic manifesto (Ackroyd 1976).

It is London, though, that has had the biggest impact upon his writings. He often refers to it as the landscape of his imagination and it functions like a character in its own right in his work. Many of the subjects of his biographies have London in common, too. He has dealt with “Cockney visionaries” such as Dickens (1990) and Blake (1995); writers to whom the capital is significant, such as T. S. Eliot (1984) and Shakespeare (2004b); and the city itself (2000). Ackroyd is one of a number of contemporary British writers – among them Iain Sinclair, J. G. Ballard, and (to a lesser extent) Martin Amis – who focus upon London as a source of inspiration. These novelists follow in the footsteps, sometimes literally, of their literary ancestor Charles Dickens. They bring to their explorations of London a sense of the capital as a labyrinth of possibility as it stretches infinitely through space and time. Ackroyd's first novel, *The Great Fire of London* (1982), picks up on the city's historical echoes and artfully deploys Dickens's *Little Dorrit* as an intertext. His later substantial biography of Dickens merges factual and imaginative material to examine its subject.

Ackroyd's novels show a fascination with the wide range of English discourses that have existed in history. A good example of his mastery of mimicry is *Hawksmoor* (1985). This compares and contrasts the opening decades of the eighteenth century, when the rational procedures of science began to supersede the more ancient forces of animistic magic, with the urban squalor of 1980s London. The chapters narrated in the *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* General editor: Brian W. Shaffer © 2011 Blackwell Publishing Ltd first person by Nicholas Dyer, loosely modeled on the historical figure of the architect Nicholas Hawksmoor, present a convincing pastiche of the prose of the earlier

period. Ackroyd spent six months in the British Library reading texts relevant to his setting. He recorded phrases and sentences into his notebooks until their language became second nature. In doing so, he followed the method established in his previous novel, *The Last Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983), of building upon a specific literary style as a template for his own inventions. It is a technique associated with T. S. Eliot. Eliot's influence is particularly noticeable in *Hawksmoor* as events from the late sixteenth/early seventeenth century are juxtaposed with a series of murders in the present day.

Subsequent fictions expand Ackroyd's thematic and stylistic concerns. Several probe the subject of fakes, forgeries, and plagiarism (1987, 2004a). Some focus on the occult and the paranormal (1989, 1993, 1994). Other novels excavate the past to present alternate histories (1996, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008). Perhaps his keynote novel, though not the most successful artistically or commercially, is *English Music* (1992). This novel features chapters that imitate the styles of many English writers, such as Bunyan, Defoe, Blake, and Carroll. It, too, is set in London, the source of Ackroyd's vibrant muse. With unflagging vitality, he continues to celebrate the capital in his numerous books, reviews, television series, and plays for both radio and the stage.

SEE ALSO: Historical Fiction (BIF); London in Fiction (BIF); Postmodernist Fiction (BIF)

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