

Introduction to *The Raker* by Andrew Sinclair for Valancourt Books.

Introduction

Andrew Sinclair is a genuine man of letters, of a type that is increasingly rare these days. His privileged background (Eton and Cambridge) led to a varied career encompassing film-making (he directed Peter O'Toole, Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor in the classic film of Dylan Thomas's *Under Milk Wood*), biographies, social histories, and an impressively diverse series of novels. He did his National Service as an Ensign in the Coldstream Guards from 1953-55, an experience that provided him with the material for his darkly comic novel, *The Breaking of Bumbo*, which featured the first in a long line of misfit male protagonists in his work. In his later fiction, Sinclair increasingly turned to the myth and legend, most notably in the three linked novels *Gog* (1967), *Magog* (1972) and *King Ludd* (1988), collectively known as 'The Albion Triptych.' A Fellow in American Studies of five universities, Cambridge and Harvard, Columbia and Stanford and University College London, he has produced major accounts of Jack London and John Ford and even Che Guevara. His work frequently blurs the lines between fact, fiction, and analysis, perhaps most spectacularly in *The Facts in the Case of E.A. Poe* (1979).

The Raker is Sinclair's fifth novel, and offers on one level a realistic account of the life of Adam Quince, newspaper obituarist at an unnamed London daily, but on another, a phantasmagoric, gothic vision of a city of death, inhabited not just by those caught up in the drudgery of modern urban life, but by the ghosts of their predecessors. Quince's life of tedium, partially relieved only by the bullying of his boss Noyes and the embraces of his ageing mistress Lottie, is measured out by the index cards of the dead and the dying which he monitors in his basement office "morgue." Sinclair evokes the cynicism and brutality of newspaper life by demonstrating how an obituary submitted by the friend of a controversial political activist is rewritten by Quince and Noyes until the bland platitudes of the original are transformed into a damning *ad hominem* attack.

What takes Quince's life into another dimension is his chance encounter with the enigmatic John Purefoy, whose obsession with death and its representation is overwhelming. The two become engaged in a tug-of-war over an actress, Nada Templeton, with whom Quince becomes obsessed. She is near death when she is introduced, a condition that excites Purefoy and simultaneously repels and attracts Quince. Purefoy is 'The Raker', named after the men charged with keeping the streets clean during the plague epidemic in London in 1665. Purefoy explains the nickname by quoting by heart a passage from Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, where the author himself cites the ordinance of the Mayor for the maintenance of cleanliness in the streets: "That the sweeping and filth of houses be daily carried away by the rakers, and that the raker shall give notice of his coming by the blowing of a horn, as hitherto hath been done." Interestingly, this is the only reference in Defoe's work to the raker, so Purefoy has taken on the mantle of an insignificant figure, in keeping with his nihilistic philosophy. Indeed, Purefoy's maddening impulse to erase himself from life appears, paradoxically, to be his *raison d'être*.

Sinclair's prose style reflects the two levels of the narrative. In the realistic descriptions of London streets, dingy bedsits, hospital waiting rooms and smoky offices, a naturalistic mode predominates, though always with some oddly disturbing detail: for instance, the opening of the novel features a Fleet Street accident in which, bizarrely, a badger is run over. Later in the novel, as Quince's life begins to disintegrate, his drunken ramble across the city is dramatised by Sinclair in a wild free indirect style that anticipates his later experimental writing in *Gog* and *Magog*. It is here too that the weight of London's history, with its countless dead, weighs unbearably on the man whose business is the recording of death. In an extraordinary stream-of-consciousness passage, Sinclair overlays the modern urban scene with the ghosts of London's history:

The graves are opening. Opening the plague pits. Giving up their long-dead. Giving up the rotted, the sore, the wasted. All the rooms of the city are cemeteries. Giving up their long-dead. The badger is walking, down the Fleet river. The dead press about him. Rise, Adam, rise now. Till London is a street map, a forest, an estuary. In the black gaps of streets or sewers or rivers or ditches, the dead pack and scrape each other. And who, who the dead of London?

As the novel reaches its grotesque climax, Quince's disorientation leads him to a final confrontation with the Raker, from which only one of them can emerge.

The Raker is at once a period piece, firmly set in the concretely described London of the early sixties, yet also strangely timeless, with its echoes of the seventeenth century, and its presentation of the flamboyant Purefoy, who seems to transcend period, but who has the style of a Wildean aesthete. The novel shows Sinclair at his most engaging, in a narrative which is as entertaining as it is disturbing.