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| **Colin MacInnes (1914-1976)** |
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| Colin MacInnes was an English novelist, essayist, critic, and radio broadcaster best known for his edgy commentary on popular culture and his series of three experimental novels set in 1950s London: *City of Spades* (1957), *Absolute Beginners* (1959), and *Mr Love and Justice* (1960). Known for a sociological approach to fiction that has often led to comparisons with George Orwell and Charles Dickens, MacInnes captured the diverse vernaculars, latest fashions, and musical trends of modern postwar London, with particular attention to the establishment-shocking lifestyles of black immigrants, teenagers, journalists, hustlers, and those who were not heterosexual. |
| File: macinnes.jpg  Figure Colin MacInnes by Ida Kar (copyright National Portrait Gallery, London)  Source: [*http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitLarge/mw118888/Colin-MacInnes*](http://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portraitLarge/mw118888/Colin-MacInnes)  Colin MacInnes was an English novelist, essayist, critic, and radio broadcaster best known for his edgy commentary on popular culture and his series of three experimental novels set in 1950s London: *City of Spades* (1957), *Absolute Beginners* (1959), and *Mr Love and Justice* (1960). MacInnes was born in London into a literary family; he was related to Rudyard Kipling, and his mother was the novelist Angela Thirkell, whose career served as both an example and, more frequently, a counterpoint to MacInnes’s own. Not long after World War I, his family relocated to Australia, where he spent his childhood and adolescence. Although the family returned to England in 1931, MacInnes regularly spent time abroad throughout his life, including intelligence work with the Army in Europe during World War II and a lecture tour for the British Council in Africa. These migrations, both voluntary and involuntary, affected MacInnes. While he lived permanently in England as an adult, he had the persistent sense that he was an outsider in terms of national, cultural, and social identity. The title of his first volume of collected essays, *England, Half English* (1961), signals both his personal ambivalence toward being ‘English’ and his abiding interest in what he perceived – and valued – as the hybrid nature of postwar English society more generally. His latter volume of essays, *Out of the Way* (1980), announces his continued identification with life on the unsettled periphery.  The challenge of belonging in contemporary England was also one of the main themes of MacInnes’s fiction from the late 1950s. In his three London novels, which were widely popular at the time of publication, he depicted the vibrant, transforming urban scene characterized by rebellious youth culture and the influence of migrants from Africa and the Caribbean who had arrived after the 1948 Nationality Act created the new status of Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies. (See the entry on Windrush for more on the Windrush generation.)  Known for a sociological approach to fiction that has often led to comparisons with George Orwell and Charles Dickens, MacInnes captured the diverse vernaculars, latest fashions, and musical trends of modern postwar London, with particular attention to the establishment-shocking lifestyles of black immigrants, teenagers, journalists, hustlers, and those who were not heterosexual (he personally identified as bisexual) (see [*http://blog.museumoflondon.org.uk/1950s-music-and-youth-culture*)](http://blog.museumoflondon.org.uk/1950s-music-and-youth-culture)). Like his postcolonial contemporaries, Sam Selvon and George Lamming, he wrote sympathetically about those who resided in the geographical and political heart of England but who nevertheless remained peripheral in crucial ways. In *Absolute Beginners*,  *File: Colin\_MacInnes\_-\_Absolute\_Beginners.jpeg*  2 Absolute Beginners, first edition, 1959  Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Absolute_Beginners_(novel)#/media/File:Colin_MacInnes_-_Absolute_Beginners.jpeg>  his most widely read novel, he combines a fictional landscape that celebrates racial and sexual diversity with the actual current events that would put this celebration in check. The novel ends with a scene of the violent 1958 Notting Hill race riots—a disconcerting coda to a story that otherwise “accurately reflects the innocence and the optimism … of the Macmillan era” (Gould xiii) (see [*http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/notting-hill-riots-1958*](http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/notting-hill-riots-1958)).  In 1975, MacInnes published a book-length essay, *No Novel Reader*, defending the novel as a socially necessary art form in the face of competition with an ever expanding consumer market for other kinds of media. ‘If the “great novel” is not … characteristic of our fragmented, rapidly changing society,’ he contends, ‘what novelists do offer is a far more informed and accurate picture of particular aspects of our lives’ than that provided through feature films and television (*No Novel* 52). In his efforts to illuminate accurately the diverse experiences and identities characterizing postwar London, MacInnes was a distinct contributor to a period of literary history that typically has been dominated in scholarly accounts by the more culturally and socially homogeneous concerns of the Angry Young Men—a movement from which he intentionally distanced himself.  Despite MacInnes’s defense of the novel as socially valuable, he himself was less successful as a novelist after the 1960s. He did, however, continue to publish prolifically until the end of his life. Reflecting his broad interests in literature, music, art, architecture, politics, and other aspects of popular culture, he regularly contributed book reviews and essays to publications including *Encounter*, *Gay News*, the *Observer*, *New Society*, and the *New Statesman*. In longer works, his pursued everything from literary criticism, as in *No Novel Reader* (1975), to cultural history, as in his lineage of the British music hall, *Sweet Saturday Night* (1967), to a collaborative visual documentary of the modern city in a book-length photo essay (*London, City of Any Dream*, 1962). He also continued to investigate and represent less socially conventional sexual identities in his long essay *Loving Them Both: A Study of Bisexuality* (1973). MacInnes’s work has been in and out of print since the 1970s, but his fiction gained a second life in popular culture in the 1980s. *Absolute Beginners* inspired Paul Weller to write a song of the same name for The Jam (see [*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9glU6WzsdM*)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v9glU6WzsdM)), and Julien Temple adapted the book into a musical film (see[*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoScx5FUkas*)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoScx5FUkas)) in 1986. The film was panned by critics, but its campy interpretation of the novel, including a performance by David Bowie (as well as a related song and music video ([*https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8NZa9wYZ\_U*](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8NZa9wYZ_U)), suggest the appeal of MacInnes’s work, particularly its celebration of defiant outsiders, for the postmodern era. In the twenty-first century, he has received renewed scholarly attention in relation to postcolonial literature, youth culture, queer writing, and modernism in the 1950s and 1960s.  MacInnes died of cancer in 1976.  List of Works  *To the Victor the Spoils*. (1950) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *June in Her Spring*. (1952) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *City of Spades*. (1957) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *Absolute Beginners*. (1959) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *Mr Love & Justice*. (1960) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *England, Half English*. (1961) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *London, City of Any Dream*. (1962) London: Thames & Hudson.  *Australia and New Zealand*. (1964) New York: Time Life.  *All Day Saturday*. (1966) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *Sweet Saturday Night*. (1967) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *Westward to Laughter*. (1969) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *Three Years to Play*. (1970) London: MacGibbon & Kee.  *Loving Them Both: A Study of Bisexuality*. (1973) London: Martin Brian and O’Keeffe.  *Out of the Garden*. (1974) London: Harper Collins.  *No Novel Reader*. (1975) London: Martin Brian & O’Keeffe.  *Out of the Way: Later Essays*. (1980) London: Martin Brian & O’Keeffe.  *Absolute MacInnes: The Best of Colin MacInnes*. (1985) London: Allison & Busby. |
| Further reading:  Bentley, Nick. (2003) “Writing 1950s London: Narrative Strategies in Colin MacInnes’s *City of Spades* and *Absolute Beginners*,” *Literary London Journal* 1 (2): n. page.  Davis, Thomas. (2016) *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life*, New York: Columbia UP.  Derdiger, Paula. (2016) “To Drag Out a Rough Poetry: Colin MacInnes and the New Brutalism in Postwar Britain,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 62 (1): 53-69.  Ferrebe, Alice. (2005) *Masculinity in Male-Authored Fiction 1950-2000*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.  Gould, Tony. (1983) *Inside Outsider: The Life and Times of Colin MacInnes*, London: The Hogarth P.  MacInnes, Colin. (1975) *No Novel Reader,* London: Martin Brian & O’Keeffe.  Low, Gail. (2005) “Streets, Rooms and Residents: The Urban Uncanny and the Poetics of Space in Harold Pinter, Sam Selvon, Colin Macinnes and George Lamming,” *Landscape and Empire: 1770-2000*, Ed. Glenn Hooper, Aldershot: Ashgate.  McLeod, John. (2004) *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis*, London: Routledge.  Sinfield, Alan. (1989) *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain*, Oxford: Blackwell. |