

Andrew O'Hagan: "Caledonian Road" [C1]

L'autore scozzese trasforma un'iconica strada di Londra nell'asse portante del suo romanzo sociale, un affresco contemporaneo del Regno Unito post-Brexit.

London's Caledonian Road, known as the 'Cally' by locals, runs north-south through Islington, a residential [borough](#) in the north of the [inner city](#). The street is the setting and name of Andrew O'Hagan's latest novel, an ambitious social satire that's more than six hundred pages long and includes nearly sixty characters. Inspired by the work of Charles Dickens, as well as Tom Wolfe's more recent New York City-set epic [Bonfire](#) of the Vanities, O'Hagan gives voice to a diverse cast of characters who live on or around Caledonian Road. He reveals how people from very different social backgrounds can be interconnected by hidden networks of power.

BETWEEN WORLDS

O'Hagan has published nine novels since his debut, [Mayflies](#), in 2000, and has been nominated for the Booker Prize three times. He has also written non-fiction and literary articles. While he dresses in an archetypal upper-class style, complete with [cravat](#), O'Hagan has Glaswegian working-class origins and was brought up on a [housing estate](#) in Ayrshire, [Scotland](#). Born in 1968, he describes growing up in a home with no books at all, except the [phone book](#), [a far cry from](#) the [book-lined](#) study in which he appears in publicity photographs today.

SOCIAL HIERARCHY

O'Hagan was the first in his family to attend university in [Scotland](#), after which he moved to London, where he was lucky enough to [land](#) a job as an editorial assistant on the literary magazine the London Review of Books. He came into contact with prestigious published authors on the London literary scene while he [honed](#) his own writing skills. O'Hagan currently lives in

Primrose Hill, an [affluent](#) London district west of Caledonian Road; however, his working-class roots have stayed with him, he explains. His dual intention with Caledonian Road was to entertain readers yet also challenge those [further up](#) on the notoriously rigid British social hierarchy to observe how their lifestyles (his own included) may impact those with fewer resources and less access to power.

MEN WHO WEEP

The main character in Caledonian Road is Campbell Flynn, described as a fifty-two-year-old “art historian and celebrity academic.” At the start of the novel, Campbell is married to the daughter of a countess, and living what appears to be a comfortable life in a large house near Caledonian Road. However, Flynn suffers from a nervous condition, and struggles to maintain his expensive lifestyle. This leads him to write an ill-advised self-help book for men called Men who [Weep](#) in their Cars.

PLOT SPOILERS!

Campbell becomes friends with one of his students, a man of Ethiopian-Irish [heritage](#) called Milo Mangasha. As they talk about Campbell’s powerful friends and [acquaintances](#), Milo begins to suspect that some of them are involved in criminal activity. Using his online skills as a hacker and a researcher, Milo begins to uncover a complex web of crime and [cover-ups](#). He finds evidence that connects politicians and people traffickers, Russian oligarchs and even rappers. Milo begins to realise the extent to which the rich and powerful can get away with literal murder, while those without money or influence pay the price for any small error of judgement or minor [misdemeanour](#). Through Milo and his companions, Campbell gets a taste of life as a North London gang member, with all its aspirations to creativity, [dodgy dealings](#), and moments of [elation](#) and [despair](#). Through Campbell, Milo is able to access select powerful [lawbreakers](#), and work to bring them down...

LISTEN CAREFULLY

To find out more, Speak Up spoke to Andrew O'Hagan. The author began by describing why he wrote *Caledonian Road*. As he explained, listening to all kinds of people and taking their life stories seriously was fundamental in creating his many characters. Andrew O'Hagan (Scottish accent): A lot of a novelist's life, if they're a social novelist, that's to say, a novelist who's interested in society and the differences between people economically in terms of the work they do or the backgrounds they have, that kind of novelist does a lot of research. I spend a lot of my time looking for the language that's right for my characters, listening to people, interviewing them. I've worked as a journalist for a long time. I know how to conduct an interview and how to look for facts. And if I say it took ten years to write this book, a lot of those years were spent researching. Even while I was writing, I'd go back again, for example, to meet with Bangladeshi women who were working in a [sweatshop garment factory](#) in Leicester. Those people are in the novel, I didn't invent them [from thin air](#). I, in a sense, animated them from reality. And that's often my job.

TAKING RISKS

Conducting the research necessary to capture the voices of sixty characters, all from different social backgrounds, from politicians to gang members, was a challenge and a risk, as O'Hagan explains. Andrew O'Hagan: If you do not know how twenty-year-old, eighteen-year-old boys in North London in gangs talk to each other, don't go near it, you know. So [I made it my job](#) to find out, which is risky, obviously. I mean, you need to have some courage to create sixty characters who aren't from your background... maybe one is, Campbell Flynn is. My central character, obviously, his voice is close to mine; and that's very useful to be able to inject an autobiographical energy into a character. But the others, dukes and duchesses, you know... I grew up on a [housing estate](#) outside Glasgow. I can't [overemphasise](#) how distant some of those people were from me socially. But that was the adventure, to discover through language who these people were and how I could realize them on the page. That's what excites me, it's all about language. It's my [clay](#), it's my [tools](#), it's my medium... All that I've got is my imagination and language.

That's what I sit down with every day at the desk. If I lose either one, it's over. I have no book, I have no story. It's a thing constructed with language.

THE LEGACY OF DICKENS

O'Hagan is a huge admirer of Charles Dickens, the 19th-century novelist famed for his incisive social commentaries set in London. O'Hagan talks more about the influence of Dickens on his work. Andrew O'Hagan: Any social novelist, especially using English, feels the force and the presence of Charles Dickens. He was a wonderful writer of the Victorian era who really had a huge heart. He was interested in human comedy, in human tragedy, but in human nature all round. He captured hundreds of aspects of human nature: self-dramatisation, [self-pity](#)... genuine human qualities that we should never [take for granted](#). So, he's an influence on any of us who are trying to create a multiplicity of characters in a book... Dickens takes you [outdoors](#) and into that great busy highway whether it be Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, Berlin, London... we share characteristics and it's the multiplicity. If we walk outside this building now into the street, there's a chance that we'll meet a great universality of types.

HIGHLIGHTING INEQUALITY

Social inequality and [unfairness](#) are themes of O'Hagan's novel. The author criticises the hypocrisy and exclusivity of middle-class liberals who [take little action](#) to [address inequities](#) and may intentionally reinforce them. Andrew O'Hagan: The book is essentially a satire. It's a comedy with a very dark message about [unfairness](#), inequality... this notion of being able to [conceal](#) your [deeds](#) or your actions or your thoughts if you have the power. And that's one of the things that comes with money and power, is being able to get away with it. Some of the biggest criminals in our society really are the richest and the most powerful. They might even be government figures, they might be leaders of the Church, they might be people of authority. You know, the jails are full of poor people who stole a watch or committed an act of violence, which of course is [reprehensible](#), but I think if Dickens were alive today, he'd look at the jails and say why are none

of the rich people in jail? [Tax avoiders](#), genociders... individuals who really do terrible things to a lot of people, rob people of their dignity, of their lives, of their earnings. Those people get away with it because that's what power does and I wanted this novel to actually demonstrate that, rather than just say it.

Glossary

- **further up** = più in alto
- **I made it my job** = ne ho fatto il mio lavoro
- **outdoors** = all'aperto
- **Tax avoiders** = evasori fiscali
- **Mayflies** = effimeri
- **phone book** = elenco telefonico
- **book-lined** = pieno di libri
- **lawbreakers** = trasgressori della legge
- **unfairness** = ingiustizia
- **borough** = distretto
- **cravat** = foulard, fazzoletto da collo
- **honed** = affinare, perfezionare
- **elation** = euforia
- **take little action** = agire
- **deeds** = azioni
- **housing estate** = complesso residenziale popolare
- **Weep** = piangere
- **from thin air** = dal nulla
- **clay** = argilla
- **tools** = strumenti
- **inner city** = centro della città
- **affluent** = benestante
- **acquaintances** = conoscenti
- **misdemeanour** = reato minore
- **dodgy dealings** = traffici loschi
- **sweatshop garment factory** = fabbrica tessile sfruttatrice
- **self-pity** = autocommiserazione
- **conceal** = nascondere
- **a far cry from** = lontano anni luce da
- **land** = ottenere
- **despair** = disperazione
- **overemphasise** = esagerare
- **take for granted** = dare per scontato

- **address** = affrontare
- **inequities** = disuguaglianze
- **reprehensible** = riprovevole
- **Bonfire** = falò
- **heritage** = origini
- **cover-ups** = insabbiamenti, coperture