



The City in Literature: An Intellectual and Cultural History

By Richard Lehan

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This sweeping literary encounter with the Western idea of the city moves from the early novel in England to the apocalyptic cityscapes of Thomas Pynchon. Along the way, Richard Lehan gathers a rich entourage that includes Daniel Defoe, Charles Dickens, Emile Zola, Bram Stoker, Rider Haggard, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Theodore Dreiser, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Raymond Chandler. The European city is read against the decline of feudalism and the rise of empire and totalitarianism; the American city against the phenomenon of the wilderness, the frontier, and the rise of the megalopolis and the decentered, discontinuous city that followed.

Throughout this book, Lehan pursues a dialectic of order and disorder, of cities seeking to impose their presence on the surrounding chaos. Rooted in Enlightenment yearnings for reason, his journey goes from east to west, from Europe to America. In the United States, the movement is also westward and terminates in Los Angeles, a kind of land's end of the imagination, in Lehan's words. He charts a narrative continuum full of constructs that "represent" a cycle of hope and despair, of historical optimism and pessimism.

Lehan presents sharply etched portrayals of the correlation between rationalism and capitalism; of the rise of the city, the decline of the landed estate, and the formation of the gothic; and of the emergence of the city and the appearance of other genres such as detective narrative and fantasy literature. He also mines disciplines such as urban studies, architecture, economics, and philosophy, uncovering material that makes his study a lively read not only for those interested in literature, but for anyone intrigued by the meanings and mysteries of urban life.

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Editorial Review

Review

...an ambitiously wide-ranging and erudite account of not simply how western novelists have depicted the city in their work but of how the very form of the city has influenced the novel. [Lehan] displays more affinity for literary theory than for the texture and life of cities, and accordingly the discussion takes place on a fairly abstract plane.... [H]owever, the city is built as much upon imagination as with concrete and steel, so there is something to be said for Lehan's approach. -- *The Los Angeles Times Sunday Book Review*, Tom Vanderbilt

About the Author

Richard Lehan is Professor of English at the University of California, Los Angeles. His books include *The Great Gatsby: The Limits of Wonder* (1990).

Users Review

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