



London and the South-East

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David Szalay's debut novel is set in the alcohol-sodden, materialistic, insecure and increasingly sham world of a telephone salesman. The salesman in question is Paul Rainey, a 40-year-old functioning alcoholic on anti-anxiety medication who commutes into London every day from Hove.

London and the South-East Details

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Author : David Szalay

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From Reader Review London and the South-East for online ebook

Ed says

Read: Jan 2018 - 340 pp

It must annoy the author, David Szalay, who was Man Booker Prize short-listed for "All that Man Is", to read that reviewers find echoes of Martin Amis in his work. Nonetheless, I think that is an unavoidable reaction to this book. This is not to demean Szalay's achievement, but to suggest a certain similarity of tone, character, and subject. This brilliant novel is relentlessly dark, a tragicomic look at a salesman's life spiraling downward as his career prematurely ends and his marriage falls apart. However, the novel ends not with the death of a salesman, but [SPOILER] with a glimmer of hope as "Portland Villas throbs with the dusky peace of wood pigeons. The moon floats up pale and ethereal in the sky. Tired, Paul half turns for a last sweep of the quiet street, then unlocks the door - it has panes of glass frosted to look like silk - and enters his house."

Hotspur says

Flaubertian. The author is able to remain objective, and tell the story of Paul, a pale flabby drunk hack salesman who has a sort of self-made midlife crisis, without sentimentality. And yet, he still conveys a sense of humanity in his depiction. That is very very hard to do, and worth 5 stars even if the novel has a few other issues.

I do have a few complaints, and that's his relative lack of character development in everyone else but the main character (although, I do think he paints Heather well, just not fully). If he does that, he will truly be writing classics. And with his last book, All That Man Is, he shows he can embody multiple different male characters in short story form; now he just needs to put it all together.

Also, the whole grocery store sting, seemed to me as an unrealistic part of a very realistic novel. It seems off that a bigger grocery chain would allow store produce managers to order their own product from any supplier, and said manager would somehow pocket any money off the top (in difference in prices between approved suppliers and off the back of the truck type of suppliers). I put myself through college and grad school stocking shelves, and then as a dairy and frozen food manager at a grocery store. There's no way to order anything but from the grocery store warehouse, and no one is pocketing anything if there's a difference but maybe bonuses to the store manager for lack of shrink or waste.

The ending wasn't terribly satisfying, but it was realistic in terms of his relationship with Heather. I am not sure any company would take back someone who stole half their sales team either. But those are minor quibbles of plot, since this is such a realistic look at a sad sack lower middle class salesman.

Mark Joyce says

Exceptional. As other reviewers have noted this is an unflinchingly bleak, depressing but also very funny novel about mid-life disappointment and emotional disintegration. It is also a "London novel" and a social

document, providing an insight into the grey, soul destroying professional lives endured by the majority of the city's commuter population. This is not a demographic that gets a great deal literary attention, probably because they don't align easily with any of the standard Londoner stereotypes and are neither sufficiently poor nor obviously culturally interesting enough to make for compelling fiction in any but the most accomplished of hands. On the evidence of London and the South-East, David Szalay has such hands.

Sam Gilbert says

Almost unstintingly bleak and miserable.

Eric Sutton says

An utterly depressing book about the sad state of modernity, but I read it in a few satisfying gulps. Paul Rainey works a dead-end sales job, drinks too much, gets high too often, exists in a perpetual state of limbo. When a lead falls through, he finds himself without work and, for the first time in his life, in control of his destiny. The problem is that pursuing passions is often dangerous and disheartening, and before long Paul is working the night shift stacking shelves at the local grocery. What sounds like a complete shambles of a novel is, in fact, an intensely readable character study. It is Szalay's debut novel, and it contains the pitfalls of a debut: dropped story lines, cliches, an over-reliance of hedonistic tendencies. That said, he moves the story fluidly, possesses a knack for dialogue, and builds the tension to a taut climax. Moreover, he explores the capitalist conundrum of utilitarianism and artistry quite well, proving that we'll go to any wretched lengths to preserve our modernist trappings. While the book is by no means a home run, he's an exciting writer for his unflinching depiction of reality. His Man Booker shortlisted *All That Man Is* brings a refined, matured style whose roots lie firmly in London and the South-East. Fans of the former will certainly enjoy this novel as well.

Tina says

I was not familiar with author David Szalay before and discovered him via Instagram. There was a giveaway from the Book Club Cookbook and Grey Wolf Press. Lucky me, I won!

While the writing is sharp this is definitely a downbeat plot. You find yourself feeling very sorry for our main character, Paul Rainey. Can you imagine a career in telemarketing sales for a magazine which, sadly, is only subscribed to by the advertisers. Paul is depressed, drinks and smokes too much and finds little solace at home. He is on a treadmill that never gets him anywhere even though he would love a change in his life.

I thought it may be like *The Office*, but it wasn't quite. Real life glimpse of an ordinary middle-aged man drifting along in his unsatisfactory life. The cover grabbed me straight away and so I entered for a chance to win the book.

Jeremy says

The first half of *London and the South-East* by David Szalay reads like a sadder, pathetic version of *Glengarry Glen Ross*, just without the verbal pyrotechnics and machismo (though there is some of that too). Paul Rainey is in telesales, managing a team that barely sells anything, for a company that sole purpose is to sell ad space in business and manufacturing publications. His day starts with a 90 minute commute from the Brighton area (Hove, actually, the South-East of the title) to London (the London of the title), he usually starts drinking around noon at the local pub before, before going back after two hours to do more calls, going back to the pub, stumbling home drunk, sometimes blindingly so. When he has an encounter with an old co-worker, he thinks he has a better job offer waiting for him. But a petty grudge messes that up, and Paul is out of work. Thinking he can start again, Paul wants out of sales, but the only job he can land is for the night shift as a shelf stocker at the local Sainsbury courtesy of his smarmy neighbor. Paul is barely holding it together -- his marriage, his sobriety, his self loathing. The characters are desperate and sad, the lot of them. Populating a novel with them is not a bad thing, but it does take its toll. Szalay hints at a redemption arc for Paul, but slyly never delivers on it. Paul is stuck in his life. Work will always be work. Work will always be life. Who can say what it takes to knock him out of his torpor. And by him I mean us.

Anne Kadet says

I loved every page of this sad, sad book.

John Spiller says

This book has been heavily reviewed, so I don't have any stunning insights to add. For those considering reading this book, I will outline a few things to consider whether you should take the plunge.

Most of the negative reviews center on the downbeat nature of the narrative and the absence of likeable characters. While the plot is depressing and the characters are unlikeable, they do not disqualify this book from greatness. What puzzles me about such criticisms is that nothing about the thumbnail sketch for this book would lead one to believe that this was a feel-good story with relatable characters. So, if you are looking for a piece of cake instead of a slice of life, look elsewhere.

So, if you can get past a relentlessly depressing narrative, is this book worth a read? Yes, in my estimation. Szalay is masterful at dissecting the indignities of everyday life. The unpleasant commute. Dreary, pointless work. Empty consumption of alcohol. Early morning malaise following the consumption of alcohol. The existential crisis of "is that all there is?" The fluid nature of interpersonal relationships, both at home and work. Szalay gives voice to what many of us have experienced whether we want to admit it.

This is 5- star writing with a 4-star plot. Szalay takes pains to make this book as real as possible, which makes several implausible plot points somewhat jarring. These plot twist come later in the book, so they are more of a let-down than a disqualifier.

Nigeyb says

'London and the South-East' is a melancholic, downbeat novel but one that completely gripped me. Unlike most novels, work is at the core of this book, and - in this instance - initially at least, it's the dispiriting world of magazine advertising sales. This is a painfully forensic examination of the horror of the modern workplace and the work "relationships of convenience" that flow from it. Middle-aged Paul Rainey, the borderline-alcoholic protagonist, works for one of those free business magazines that arrive in the post and which no one reads. David Szalay has really nailed the minutiae of the workplace and, in particular, the world of selling. However sales is just the springboard for an unpredictable and original plot that was both realistic and credible, but also frequently very surprising.

'London and the South-East' is one of the most relatable books I've ever read. This sense of realism was further enhanced by my own familiarity with many of the streets and venues that appear in the book. Most impressively, these places were described with complete accuracy, and this attention to detail informs the entire book.

'London and the South-East' is a painful exploration of how both work and home form the basis of our identity and our happiness, such as it is, and it's an unflinching look at commuting, selling, family, identity and compromise. It is bleak, dark, and quite brilliant. I look forward to reading more of David Szalay's work.

The day after I finished this book, David Szalay's latest book 'All That Man Is' made the 2016 Booker Prize Shortlist. If it's anything like as good as 'London and the South-East' then it will be well worth a read - my copy is on order and I cannot wait to read it.

Since writing my review, I've looked at other reviews and noticed this book is very divisive - it seems to be the bleakness and the shortcomings of many of the characters which alienate some readers. This would probably make it a great choice for a book group. I have chosen it for my own book group so I will find out and perhaps update this review.

Antonreiser says

You mix Fargo, Ken Loach and Bicycle Thieves (De Sica film) and you get part of the idea ...oh yeah...you have to add the splendid prose of Mr. Szalay...not so great as All that man is, (somehow losing force in the last 80 pages of the novel), but still a great read, specially if you enjoyed ATMI.

Aharon says

England may have lost its manufacturing base, but it's still tops in alcoholism and self-loathing!

Bonus: you'll get a lot of, "Oh, when are you going?"s, even after you say it's a novel.

Phil says

I confess I'd never heard of David Szalay when this novel, with its commonplace-yet-odd title and its cover (not the one on the Goodreads page) resembling some recurring nightmare of Martin Parr's, jumped out at me in my local library. I'm very glad it did. It's a painfully funny, hilariously true account of disappointed, self-deluding, alcoholic male middle-age. Determinedly downbeat, it's nevertheless very sharply observed, and some of the description shimmers, in a determinedly downbeat sort of way. Its subject - a man behaving badly and trying desperately to maintain his wilful lack of self-awareness in the matter - is reminiscent of Kingsley Amis at his best, and it contains at least one description of a hangover as fine as any in "Lucky Jim" or the rest of that writer's output. Unlike Amis, there's no misogyny - in fact, Szalay's characters, male and female, are all treated with a kind of rough compassion, regardless of their very obvious faults. A rare debut, one that coaxes engagement, horrible fascination, and compulsive readability out of ostensibly unpromising, unsympathetic raw material.

Vuk Trifkovic says

It's really like a BBC4 drama mini-series. Gray and gritty. Sharp. With a surprising support cast. Pre-breakthrough Olivia Colman as Heather, Mackenzie Crook as Martin. Danny Dyer as Eddy Jaw...

You kind of know the set pieces, the lines are insightful but not too deep. Yet, it all rings true and keeps you gripped until the end. You feel pretty good having caught it. A few years later, the author goes BBC1, gets lot of public acclaim with a new work. But the BBC4 feels like the original.

Gordon Kaplan says

Paul Rainey, the hapless antihero of London and the South-East, works, miserably, in ad sales. He sells space in magazines that hardly exist, and through a fog of booze and drugs dimly perceives that he is dissatisfied with his life – work, sex, weekends, the whole nine yards.

If only there were something he could do about it – and “something” seems to fall into his lap when a meeting with an old friend and fellow salesman, Eddy Jaw, leads to the offer of a new job.

When that offer turns out to be misleading as Paul's own sales patter, however, his life is transformed in ways more peculiar than he ever thought possible. (Description from the publisher – slightly edited.)

When I started reading London and South-East, I thought immediately about the movie Glengarry Glen Ross, and in fact Glengarry Glen Ross is briefly mentioned early in the book. What I really thought, though, as I got into the book was Mad Men: the booze, the cigarettes, and the sexism that permeated Mad Men permeates London and the South-East.

I wanted to give this book a five-star rating, because it is so well written; however London and the South-East is so relentlessly depressing and the characters are so totally unlikable that it was difficult to enjoy. Paul Rainey, the main character, is the most unlikable of all. He is Don Draper without a scintilla of his charisma. Bottom line is that I cannot give this a five-star rating no matter how good the writing is. I enjoy reading whether it's light reading or “important literary works.” It's hard to enjoy reading a book with characters so unlikable and a story so depressing, so I'm reduced to giving it a three-star rating.

