



American Smoke

Iain Sinclair

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The visionary writer Iain Sinclair turns his sights to the Beat Generation in America in his most epic journey yet

“How best to describe Iain Sinclair?” asks Robert Macfarlane in *The Guardian*. “A literary mud-larker and tip-picker? A Travelodge tramp (his phrase)? A middle-class dropout with a gift for bullshit (also his phrase)? A toxicologist of the twenty-first-century landscape? A historian of countercultures and occulted pasts? An intemperate WALL-E, compulsively collecting and compacting the city’s textual waste? A psycho-geographer (from which term Sinclair has been rowing away ever since he helped launch it into the mainstream)? He’s all of these, and more.”

Now, for the first time, the enigma that is Iain Sinclair lands on American shores for his long-awaited engagement with the memory-filled landscapes of the American Beats and their fellow travelers.

A book filled with bad journeys and fated decisions, *American Smoke* is an epic walk in the footsteps of Malcolm Lowry, Charles Olson, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, Gary Snyder, and others, heated by obsession (the Old West, volcanoes, Mexico) and enlivened by false memories, broken reports, and strange adventures.

With *American Smoke*, Sinclair confirms his place as the most innovative of our chroniclers of the contemporary.

American Smoke Details

Date : Published November 2010 by Beat Scene Press

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Author : Iain Sinclair

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From Reader Review American Smoke for online ebook

J Murnaghan says

Dense. Page-for-page contender in category of sheer prose pleasure.

Rupert Reynolds-maclean says

I think I would have lined this a lot more if I read some of Sinclairs books and more Beat writers work beforehand. It's one of those books I've read that I appreciate but can't say I really liked and I probably would have given up had I not been on holiday with nothing else to read.

It has made me more interested in everything he was talking about though and I did like the style on which he wrote it which was fairly different to a lot of other prose.

There were some lovely moments in there but that's about it.

Paul M.M. Cooper says

Since making his name with the essay collection *Lights Out for the Territory* (1997), Iain Sinclair has pushed the boundaries of modern writing from one extreme to the other. Whether it's walking counter-clockwise around the M25 'to see where it leads', or repeatedly trying to infiltrate the London Olympic Park in the run-up to the games, he's an explorer as much as a writer, unravelling as he walks, peeling away history and literature as they settle in layers on every place he encounters.

In the time since selling his hand-written poetry collections on the streets of Hackney, Sinclair has carved himself a niche as one of Britain's best-loved counter-cultural figures. Every book he has written over the last 16 years has been a work to admire. This is why it's such a shame that his latest hotly-anticipated book, *American Smoke*, is just that: smoke.

The book follows the lives of the American Beats, seeking to walk in their footsteps across the great continent and link their paths together across the "tribal and connected" American cultural scene of the 1950s and beyond. There are no dates, though. Events occurred, or didn't, somewhere in the smoke of time. Everything in *American Smoke* is relative.

'Everybody met everybody,' Sinclair tells us. 'Everybody f*****d... They feuded, fought, formed intense friendships, sulked for generations.'

At the core of the book is Sinclair following the single thread left behind by the modernist poet Charles Olson. He follows it as it winds across the continent through the lives and misadventures of the assorted Beats, including Kerouac, Malcolm Lowry, William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Roberto Bolaño. The result, unfortunately, is a featureless blur of other people's lives, their sad hometowns and washed-out photographs.

During the chapter entitled "There's No Home", Sinclair writes about how he wanted to "travel to places where I would be a stranger, without language or backstory", in order to subvert the expectations placed on a

writer, but this is the nagging problem at the heart of *American Smoke*. Whereas the Hackney laureate can bring the whole texture and history of London to life in a single sentence - the buildings of Spitalfields clustering around the Christ Church like kindling, for instance, or the rose red streets of Hackney - all we get from Sinclair's American experiment are skin-deep descriptions of tired waterfronts and run-down bars. The book feels rushed. It feels sprawling and featureless, like the continent itself, and in the end what we find ourselves reading is an account of a man getting lost in a place much larger than he is - truly the only way this story could ever end.

Although the book was published in London, it consistently uses American English spelling, which for me spelled either an attempt to engage with the textual culture of the book's subject matter, or an indication of where *American Smoke* is being most heavily marketed. This was the overall impression I walked away with: that Iain Sinclair is wandering away from what made - and still very reliably makes - him great.

The saddest aspect for me was the occasional self-indulgent tangents Sinclair engages in: an account of his trip down the Thames in a swan pedalo, for instance, or his "kodak-coloured excesses, the not-so-free festivals and stalled revolutions" of the late 1950s. In each of these moments, it feels as if Sinclair isn't so much writing a book about the Beats, but trying to write himself into the Beats. And in the end, the picture I came away with was this: while the Beats wrote exciting literature and lived wild lives, deep down they were dull, as all self-obsessed people are dull. Sinclair's book never manages to escape that situation.

This is not to say there aren't high points to *American Smoke*. Each sentence is highly wrought, and each page taken on its own is a fine work of art. Indeed, Sinclair is a stunning writer, at his best, and moments like the return to Bolaño's old stamping grounds, and the beach where Malcolm Lowry escaped to, and dubbed "Eridanus", are as erudite and polished as you can imagine.

The book has some delightful features, too. The hardback edition, for example, has a dust jacket that folds out into a map of the United States, with the Beat-related landmarks tactfully pointed out, and a guide to Jack Kerouac's endless circular journeys around the North American continent, searching for something he would never find.

The dust cover map creates an interesting interplay with the text itself, which is endlessly preoccupied with maps, but in the end winds up encapsulating why the book ultimately fails. The subjects of *American Smoke* are too big, disparate and myriad - like the smoke particles in an ash cloud. Sinclair is the master of narrow-and-deep, but not broad-and-shallow. This, sadly, is one knotted story he can't untangle by walking.

So *American Smoke* is a failure, if a beautiful one. By the final page, we feel like we have caught sight of the darlings of the Beat Generation the way we catch sight of Bigfoot: through the mist, or smoke; blurred, and through another person's lens.

Tosh says

As a reader of Iain Sinclair books, one is just on the journey that he's taking. I'm happy to have him as my guide to the underworld that is London, but now, he's on my home turf, meaning America. Not only America, but it's Beat America. Sinclair journeys to the actual locations, but more important he journeys in the text of the Beat's literature. As well as follow their footsteps. And no, since it is Iain Sinclair, we're not getting a tour like on a tourist bus - the material for him is a empty canvas and he pulls out information, both

facts and legend, and composes it on that canvas, which eventually becomes the book we're reading. I prefer the Iain way of lit-history than say to read, so-so did that and they didn't do that, etc. Also it is not only the big three in the Beat world, but also a lot of stuff on Charles Olson, Ed Dorn, Lew Welch, and so forth. It is a very subjective approach to the Beats and their culture, and this is what makes this book fantastic.

Brian says

A relatively slim volume, 'American Smoke' is an extract from Iain Sinclair's forthcoming (2011) book 'Ghost Milk: Calling Time on the Grand Project'. Sinclair's prose is as sinuous and dreamlike as ever, and from the few pages here, which narrate a portion of an alternative US road trip without recourse to the car, I'm looking forward to reading the full book next year.

Colleen says

Name dropping travelogue of Beat Poet tour of the US. Didn't get vaguely interesting until the author visited Burroughs (but of course Burroughs was old and we didn't get much insight into his life except that his current schedule is centered around a methadone fix and a drink). As for what drove these Beats to reject the worldview of post-war America, barely sketched. Disappointing and excruciating to read.

Sam says

This is bohemian literature about literary bohemians. Sinclair meets with the bohemians, and people who knew them, and walks around the places where they lived (or live), and his prose travels where his mind travels, through time & place, meandering, off on tangents; digressions are him. I agree with the jacket blurb reviewers who say that Sinclair's writing is inspired but you're more likely to enjoy this if you're someone who's interested in the Beats.

Grace Morales says

Me ha fascinado. Soy fanática de la GB y este road trip es una maravilla. Me gusta mucho Sinclair. No hay palmadas en la espalda. Es todo como taan 1974... Incluso, hasta un poco 1844...

World Literature Today says

"Sinclair has been known for his interest in psychogeography, and American Smoke exhibits throughout a keen sense of what D. H. Lawrence called "the spirit of place"—most notably, in a few lines, of Seattle's Pike Place Market, where the details of "Heroic metaphors of success" make even the most jaded stop and look again." - Robert Murray Davis, University of Oklahoma

This book was reviewed in the November 2015 issue of World Literature Today. Read the full review by

Al Maki says

The book is the story of an extended road trip by an Englishman in North America, meeting and interviewing his literary heroes, primarily beats. Gary Snyder is one of my favourite writers and when somebody publishes a book with a chapter about him I read it to see what I can learn. Not much in this case. I think it would be possible to precis the chapter in one or at most two paragraphs. Snyder could probably do it in a few terse stanzas. The book seemed to say more about Sinclair's finding North America foreign than about the lives or thoughts of the writers. Since there were a number of chapters devoted to the region I call home and two about the city I've lived in for fifteen years I can say his grasp of factual detail is not to be relied upon.

Doc says

exceptional prose, but gossipy

Stuart says

Would have liked it a lot more if it were half as long and edited by someone who's not in love with the sound of his own voice. Arty and affected, this guy just can't go a paragraph without trying to remind us that he, too, has a poet's soul. After a hundred pages it's just embarrassing, like that friend of a friend who just won't stop bugging you to read his manuscript. The only redeeming point was being introduced to Charles Olson, who sounds worth checking out.

Rose says

Iain Sinclair's American journeys in search of Charles Olson, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, William Burroughs, Malcolm Lowry and others. His descriptions and observations are interesting, but it is easy to get lost in his spiraling style as he does not indicate any dates, and hops from place to place at seeming random. Still it is a great experience. It was surprising to find a few nods to H.P. Lovecraft. I also enjoyed his coverage of some antiquarian book dealers.

Joe says

As a big fan of many Beat writers, this book was a disappointment. Perhaps Sinclair's road trip is too late by decades. The Gary Snyder visit is interesting, because Snyder is very well practiced at handling this sort of fly-by literary tourism. He's gracious, but also insightful enough to ask Sinclair what he wants. And it's clear that Sinclair doesn't know.

That's OK for a road trip book I suppose. It's a journey of discovery, right? But all I discovered was that I was bored. Reading about what Sinclair and his wife ate at some hotel on their way to visit old Beat icons put me to sleep. Better interviews would have helped. Imagine what Geoff Dyer could have done with this trip (besides adding sex and drugs).

Alana says

If I knew more about Beat writers and the high points of beat writing history, this book may have been more interesting. As I am, and as it is, I read it because I considered it in the category of cultural vegetables. The author, an Englishman who traveled to various spots around North America and Europe to walk in the footsteps of some Beat writers, has a great knack for description and poetic disassembly. Though I often couldn't figure out where he was, and sometimes even what he was talking about, I figured that was par for the course reading a book by someone who is so enamored by the Beat style.

Though the book's cover suggests this is a travel memoir, it's not. It is a series of musings and name drops from someone who is deeply in love with a writing style and lifestyle that don't resonate as they once did.
