

The street where they live

Sex, money and real estate obsess the Londoners in this sprawling new novel

CAPITAL, by John Lanchester.
W.W. Norton & Co., 527
pages, \$26.95.

BY DANIEL AKST
daniel.akst@newsday.com

Capital” comes to us as a novel of ambition in every sense of the term. It’s a book whose characters are full of ambi-

tions, from the grandiose (snaring a 1-million-pound year-end bonus) to the desperate (avoiding deportation to a country run by a psychotic tyrant). But it’s also a novel that is itself laden with ambition — a big, serious, well-promoted and portentously titled book by accomplished English writer John Lanchester (“The Debt to Pleasure,” “I.O.U.”), which aims to portray the fullness of a complex place and time: London before and after the financial crisis. The egalitarian cast of characters encompasses practically the entire 21st century urban social spectrum, including preening bankers and striving immigrant tradesmen, Christians and Muslims, youth and old age. Real estate is an obsessive concern for all parties, as it is in every global city where prices are distorted by international wealth flows. And there are all the familiar signposts of the way we live now: greed, sex, alienation, a bubble economy, the Internet and the shadow of Islamic terrorism.

The central mystery running through “Capital” is who might be responsible for the unsettling postcards, sent to resi-

dents of a posh street, that proclaim: “We Want What You Have.” But the book has multiple plot lines that include the difficulties of banker Roger Yount and his wife, Arabella, whose frenzied spending can’t buy happiness; Zbigniew Tomaszewski, a Polish carpenter resolutely not looking for love; Quentina Mkfesi, the resilient Zimbabwean meter maid who can’t go home; the bickering Kamal brothers, who own the corner shop; and the elderly Petunia Howe, who has somehow survived her irascible husband and the many bewildering changes that have beset London during her long life. All the plot lines run through Pepys Road, whose namesake diarist chronicled London life in the 17th century.

At its best, “Capital” offers not just a snapshot of dynamic London but a complex portrait of modern life. Unlike some of his British contemporaries, Lanchester does not regard his characters as mere fictional utensils for a lot of social surgery; he actually cares about them, and therefore we do, too. But in laying out so many stories from so many points of view, the author has sacrificed narrative momentum. The result is a good novel that, nonetheless, seems plodding in places. Lanchester’s stately approach might have worked if, in advancing at the pace of a glacier, the



PHOTO BY RICHARD BAKER / IN PICTURES / CORBIS

book gradually gathered up the power of one. Sadly, it does not. While the author succeeds in bringing a wide range of modern Londoners to life and in making the case that no one else should want what they have (one has a brain tumor, for example), the book would need twice as many pages to fire up a plot big and heavy enough to do all of them justice.

Inevitably, on this side of the pond, “Capital” will draw comparison with Tom Wolfe’s more powerful (if less sensitive) “Bonfire of the Vanities.” Both books derive from a long and worthy tradition of sprawling social realism in fiction. But if “Bonfire,” in scorching the New York of the egregious 1980s with comic savagery, reminds us of Dickens,

Lanchester seems to be channeling Trollope, who cared more about character than plot. The author of “Capital,” for instance, is especially good at using immigrants to give us an outsider’s clear view of the many things whose foolishness is so much a part of the landscape that we no longer see it.

A Senegalese man walks past “expensive shops selling things which he could not imagine anyone wanting or needing or using: lamps which did not look as if they would emit any light, shoes no woman could stand in, coats which would not keep anyone warm, chairs which had no obvious way to sit on them.” Or one of the Pakistani Kamal brothers, who is repulsed by the commercial-

ization of sex and the national sport of binge drinking. Alcohol, he observes, “presided over weekend evenings like a king, like a malign archangel.”

The best novels of this kind — superb contemporary examples include Rohinton Mistry’s “A Fine Balance” and Alan Hollinghurst’s “The Line of Beauty” — are driven by great narrative energy to powerfully tragic conclusions. Many are ferociously witty as well. Lanchester follows a different path. It’s a pleasant journey, to be sure, and interesting enough that we don’t mind the mundane destination. Yet it’s hard not to wonder, when we get there, what all the fuss was about.

NOW ONLINE

Read an excerpt
from “Capital”
newsday.com/books