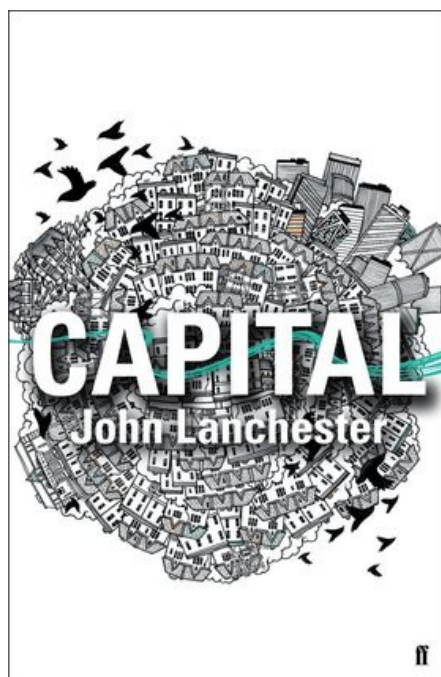




Capital

John Lanchester

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Capital

John Lanchester

Capital John Lanchester

From the best-selling author of *The Debt to Pleasure*, a sweeping social novel set at the height of the financial crisis.

Celebrated novelist John Lanchester ("an elegant and wonderfully witty writer"—*New York Times*) returns with an epic novel that captures the obsessions of our time. It's 2008 and things are falling apart: Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers are going under, and the residents of Pepys Road, London—a banker and his shopaholic wife, an old woman dying of a brain tumor and her graffiti-artist grandson, Pakistani shop owners and a shadowy refugee who works as the meter maid, the young soccer star from Senegal and his minder—are receiving anonymous postcards reading "We Want What You Have." Who is behind it? What do they want? Epic in scope yet intimate, capturing the ordinary dramas of very different lives, this is a novel of love and suspicion, of financial collapse and terrorist threat, of property values going up and fortunes going down, and of a city at a moment of extraordinary tension.

Capital Details

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From Reader Review Capital for online ebook

Matthew Gaughan says

I was hoping, given the title of the book and Lanchester's excellent series of essays in the LRB on the financial meltdown of 2007/08 and its consequences, that Capital would be a great novel about the partial collapse of neoliberal capitalism. Instead, its title is quite straightforward: it's a book about London. Money is a central theme, but it's a thin thread in a novel which is a sequence of short stories that hang together well but don't excite. There are far too many characters, each one an easy stereotype - immigrant, banker, footballer, hot nanny. After a huge number of chapters that suggest a powerful climax and just as a handful of the characters hint at becoming interesting, the book abruptly finishes. It's easy to read, despite being a bit boring at times, with some enjoyable observations of Britain's least likeable city and a keen understanding of how a street can define the history of an area, but it fails to rise above the obvious and superficial, trying too hard to be big and important.

Rob says

This book started off very promising. Set against the backdrop of a very wealthy London neighborhood just before (and during the beginning of) the financial crisis, the book explored the lives of several very different people. A banker, his selfish wife, a refugee, a soccer phenom imported from an African village, a dying woman, her daughter, a Polish laborer, a family of Muslim immigrants, and a couple others.

I have to say, the first third of the book I was very into it. Plots were developing, characters were painted (I'm not going to say developed since most were pretty one-dimensional), and I was fascinated to see how he was going to tie it all together. As a reader, you *know* that the financial crisis is going to happen, and *know* that it's going to affect all these people. So there's tension.

The thing is...nothing really happens. The stories all wind themselves out. There is almost no interleaving between the characters or plotlines. And the financial crisis hardly changes anything. For such a long book, it was very, very frustrating to get to the end and feel, "Wait, is that it??"

Clearly I'm not a fan.

A. says

John Lanchester had me hooked from page one of this 500-page novel. My expectation was that he was going to show us how the financial meltdown of 2008 effected the lives of the people on one London street. He does that to some extent, but what he really delivers is an intimate look at life right before the crash happened.

The people of Pepys Road are mostly upper and upper middle class folks and Lanchester takes us in and out of their houses in smoothly written prose that is just the right mix of intimacy and distance. In addition to the homeowners on the street, he delves into the lives of the handymen, meter maids and nannies on the block as well as their relatives and friends. He creates a kaleidoscope view of the block that bridges class, race and religion. This seeming homogenous street is shown to be much more diverse than we would realize at first glance.

Money is the obvious thread running through the novel, but equally important are questions of identity. One character is an artist who does his work anonymously, another is a refugee working under an assumed name, the housewife getting repairs doesn't call the Polish contractor by his name and a banker steals passwords to conduct trades. The main thing that binds the characters is that everyone on the block has been getting postcards that say "We Want What You Have." The postcards are pictures of their front doors and it starts as an oddity and ends up feeling menacing. Afterall, once we know what the people have, dysfunctional marriages, terminal diseases and homesickness for Africa, the question is why would anybody want it.

Peel away the posh houses and the expensive cars and even before the crash there was a lot of misery. Although, no one has it as bad as the meter maid (a refugee from Africa desperately seeking asylum in a society that doesn't really care).

I'm a bit heartbroken that I've finished the book. So sad to leave all these amazing characters and their stories. The mystery behind "We Want What You Have," may be over, but their lives go on and I can't help but wonder what happened in 2009.

Jill says

Take Sebastian Faulks' *A Week in December*, add in healthy dollops of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* and Hector Tobar's *The Barbarian Nurseries* and you'll have some idea what to expect from John Lanchester's *CAPITAL*.

Like these other books, *CAPITAL* presents a panoramic view: in this case, of London at the cusp of a new and turbulent economic age. He focuses on a cross-section of residents and workers on a fictional and prestigious London treat including a well-heeled banker and his shopaholic wife and Hungarian nanny, an elderly widow dying of a brain tumor and her middle-aged daughter and alternative-arts grandson, a talented Senegalese young soccer player on the cusp of stardom, three Pakistani brothers with varying degrees of political involvement, a Polish builder, and a political refugee from Zimbabwe who is supporting herself on forged work permit.

Each has his or her own ambivalent relationship with money. One reflects, "It was brash and horrible and vulgar, but also exciting and energetic and shameless and new...If the city was one huge shop window, she was on the outside on the pavement, looking in." Indeed, "having a house in Pepys Road was like being in a casino in which you were guaranteed to be rich." The haves and have-nots are clearly delineated and to muddy the waters, someone is sending creepy postcards to all of them, stating, "We want what you have."

Those of foreign origin – the Polish builder, the Zimbabwe refugee, the Hungarian nanny, the Pakistanis – appear to have a stronger moral compass than those for whom wealth is a given. They are the fiber of the story, a direct contrast to those who enjoy ease and comfort. This is, perhaps, my biggest gripe: the all-too-often stereotypical portrayals of the characters. Arabella, the shopaholic wife, has virtually no redeeming characteristics, for example. The Pakistanis – well, we know what's going to happen to at least one of them because it is highly telegraphed.

That being said, this is a good London saga, with interwoven characters who hold your attention. It may not be the quintessential London novel – as is being touted – but it's intriguing nonetheless.

David Cheshire says

This is a bang up-to-date book written in an old fashioned way. Each chapter about half a dozen pages; each focuses on one of a cast of characters living in or linked to a single London street where houses have reached the million pound mark, even more with the extensive renovations done by the more prosperous. So we meet a lawyer, a footballer, a banker, a dying woman, her daughter, an asylum seeker, an immigrant Polish builder, a conceptual artist... As a "state of the nation" novel it sounds and is schematic. We follow the characters through personal crises against the background of the great banking crash. Ideas or meanings are rarely discussed; the focus is squarely on the characters. Yet the structure and texture of the novel lull the reader into something like a slow-moving mosaic of real lives, some familiar, some strange and exotic. I found it strangely gripping, a page turner, stories of now told with honesty, humour and compassion but without melodrama or over-wrought prose. Few lessons are drawn or even suggested; ideas are left unexplored; character is all. Here they are, says Lanchester almost dispassionately, make of them what you will; maybe a hint of, aren't they (we) strange? But they're also very human, and Lanchester makes us care about them for a year or so in their lives and times.

Alan says

I enjoy titles which have layers of meaning. I enjoy the cleverness and I appreciate the sign-posting they provide so I can make sure that I don't miss a thread woven into the story. As layered titles go, John Lanchester's Capital isn't particularly difficult to penetrate: there is Capital as Money, and there is Capital as London and the fact that, to Lanchester, the first defines the second adds an admirable tidiness to the layers. All in all, it's a good title. The only problem is that it's been given to the wrong book, for Lanchester's novel betrays both readings.

Capital is an infuriating book, superficial, glib and shallow. It mirrors prevailing opinions and prejudices, but not prevailing spirit. It is filled with stereotypes but few characters and no people. It doesn't even scratch the surface of what makes London the city it is; it records a pulse but no heartbeat.

The depiction of Finance, from Roger Yount's dashed bonus hopes to the collapse of Pinker Lloyd, is at best simplistic, at worst childish and unrealistic. The connection back to London is through a single front door - No 51 Pepys Road - behind which lives a family carefully constructed to conform with our most obvious preconceptions.

Yet, Lanchester's prologue astutely observes that there is a wider connection, a shift in the community's perceptions and values tied to the infectious heart of greed and aspiration. Sadly, the Prologue remains the best part of the book.

The microcosm device - a single street in London, Pepys Road - falls far short of its intent. Lanchester attempts to overcome the weaknesses of such an unrepresentative device by including a selection of peripheral characters who have a recurring relationship with the street: the builder, the traffic warden, the nanny and an assortment of relatives. But the links are too tenuous, too fragile. Often the link is made simply through an event rather than through the complex social connections that knit a city together. We are given the strands of wool but never the pattern.

The drama of community lies not in its connections, but in its dependencies and the conflict between what is valued and what is believed to be valuable.

It would take far more time than I wish to spend to write in detail of all the things that frustrated and irritated

me about this book: from the weak plot resolution; its disjointed, episodic structure that reads like a series of newspaper observations; the deliberate pandering to topical public opinion in place of deeper analysis; the technical flaws and the improbable and implausible plot developments.

Capital is a book that touches on many issues but fails to go to the added trouble of exploring any of them. It doesn't do London justice nor does it do justice to the profound impact that the banshees of Finance and Fear have had on us all.

Edmole says

I wanted to read this as it is set on a fictionalised Pepys Road, a couple of stone's throws from my new home in Brockley, moving to which from Finsbury Park has knocked a year off my life.

Pepys Road is one of the many places around London built to house the Lower Middle Class in Victorian Times which have got more and more valuable in the seemingly endless post war housing bubbleboom. It's a mystery, told from the perspective of a few residents of the road - someone is gently stalking the residents of the street, dropping postcards through their doors saying 'We Want What You Have', and posting pictures and films of their houses online. Stalking crossed with reversed NIMBYism.

The We Want What You Have campaign continues through the book, but Lanchester cleverly avoids it being the main focus, instead calmly and empathically telling the first person perspective stories of people on the road swept up by or into the kind of weird wealth that characterises, forms and deforms London. A Polish Builder eyeing the money fountain of the rich and mopping some of it up with his big strong arms and his tools, a banker and his vulturous wife who have it all and spend it on nonsense, an older woman who is dying without her long-passed husband and her daughter who nurses her throughout, horribly aware that her Mum's death will make her a Property Millionaire, a Muslim family who are one rolling family row which covers up how much they love each other. There's even a waffeur theenly disguised Banksy in there, yeah?

So while We Want To Know Who Wants What They Have, Lanchester points out that we might well want what they have, but like everyone else, they don't know if they want what they have, and whatever happens, no one gets to keep it.

It was very enjoyable to read a book in a London I recognised, and I now think about this book whenever I scoot past Pepys Road on my bike.

Ed

Ian Mapp says

I read Mr Phillips a long time ago... couldn't remember if I liked it or not. This book was getting good press and ideally suited for my tastes. London. State of the Nation. Comedy.

Lets give it a go.

It's a lengthy book in very short chapters and an incredibly simple premise. The inhabitants of a South London Street are receiving sinister, anonymous "we want what you have messages". Like that film where

the owners are left videos of their house on the doorstep. I forget the name.

This allows us to discuss the population of this street. We have the old lady who's house is about to be inherited, the asian shopkeepers, the polish builder (not living there, but working), the banksy style art terrorist, the teenage African footballer and my favourite - The Younts.

Poor old Roger Yount. 40 Year old banker, dreaming of his £1m bonus simply to keep his wife and kids in the two house life they have become accustomed to. The book is nicely building when it reaches its peak at Xmas time.... Roger gets a 30k bonus and gets home to find out his wife has left him for the festive period with one of the greatest letters of all time. Loved the sign off. Bloody Arabella.

Short chapters work well and the book moves forward but it does seem a touch flimsey. There's no key pay off and no apparenent wider picture of London or the UK. I think I got more from watching Julian Temple's Babylon London - where it revealed that 40% of londoners today were not even born in the UK.

That said, there is a range of humour, from gentle, to laugh out loud. Some memorable characters and some reasonable state of the nation commentary.

A pleasure to read.

Bobbie Darbyshire says

I've formed the habit of checking on the one-star Amazon reviews (there are always some) of each book I read, to decide if I share their view. At time of writing, this book has 452 reviews and averages 4 stars, so what did the 25 odd-readers-out take exception to? Well, in summary they say (a) the characters are stereotypes, (b) it doesn't have much story, and (c) it is padded with too many words. Do I agree? (a) No, this criticism in my view entirely misses the point. The cast is indeed chosen to represent various stereotypes of people we can glimpse every day in a South London suburb, but they are drawn with considerable skill, love and insight to reveal them as individuals. I particularly loved the Polish builder, the Zimbabwean traffic warden and the investment banker and his ghastly wife. (b) There is not much story in the dramatic sense, but this is not a book about heroes and villains; it's a tapestry. Each character's life had enough development to hold my interest, amuse or involve me, while adding to the multi-faceted picture of London life in 2008 that is the point of the book. (c) The style is quite baggy and prolix; some of the (admirably short) chapters are a little static and repetitious; some of the prose could be punchier. That said however, it reads easily, and has plenty of pithy moments, e.g. "... at the weekend quite a few other bankers [and their wives] could be seen [on the Common], their pushchairs so big and unwieldy they were like infant SUVs." I enjoyed it :)

Lisa says

This book details the events and past history of several families in Pepys Road, Lambeth from late 2007 to late 2008. I liked most of the characters, my favourite probably being Ahmed and Roger. There's a woman nursing a dying relative, a lost fortune found, the ubiquitous Eastern European builders and nannies, the crash of the banking system, Muslim terrorism, the lazy spoilt wife of a banker and the Asian family working all the hours that Allah sends in their newsagent/mini-mart shop plus a local prankster irritating the whole street which rapidly gets out of hand, necessitating the local police being called in to investigate. I loved it and read the bulk of it in one night - I couldn't put it down until I really needed to sleep, in my anxiety to see what happened next. I especially enjoyed seeing the various strands tied up, with a lot of satisfaction at the

lesser pleasing characters receiving what could childishly be called 'just desserts'. If you love family sagas, a lot of strands in your story and a fast-moving story then do beg, borrow or steal a copy when it comes out.

Breakingviews says

By Peter Thal Larsen

Banking is fiction's hidden profession. Despite decades of financial expansion, novelists and playwrights have struggled to imagine a contemporary Shylock or Augustus Melmotte, the shadowy star of Anthony Trollope's "The Way We Live Now". A quarter of a century has passed since Tom Wolfe dreamt up Sherman McCoy, the bond trader who personified the arrogance and greed of an earlier boom in "The Bonfire of the Vanities". With the crisis wreckage still smouldering, the characters in most contemporary novels are more likely to be found robbing a bank than working for one.

Roger Yount, the anti-hero of John Lanchester's "Capital", is therefore a rare breed. As head of the currency trading department at a mid-sized City of London investment bank in late 2007, he is well-placed to anticipate the imminent market storm. Except that Yount, who has a tenuous grasp of the complex strategies used by his traders, doesn't see it coming. Instead, he sits at his desk trying to calculate the size of his bonus. Then he lists the expenditure – mortgages, private schools, nannies, second homes, skiing holidays, taxis – that will consume his cash. Sherman McCoy complained he was "going broke on a million dollars a year". Yount's lifestyle requires the same figure - in sterling.

Lanchester, whose previous book, "Whoops!", was an entertaining explanation of the crisis, does a good job of capturing the atmosphere inside a modern investment bank with its multinational collection of (mostly) men, engaged in the meritocratic pursuit of wealth. Privately educated, well-mannered, and British, Yount epitomises the entitled, Land Rover-driving breed that colonised London's more desirable residential areas in the last decade, making them all but unaffordable for everyone else.

Lanchester shares the modern Londoner's obsession with property values. The book opens with a detailed description of the homes in Pepys Road, the "ordinary street in the capital" where Yount lives with his wife, Arabella, and two young children. Built by the Victorians for the lower middle classes, the terraced houses have been so pumped up by cheap credit that they are now worth millions: "Having a house in Pepys Road was like being in a casino in which you were guaranteed to be a winner".

Yet in its attempt to look behind all the doors of Pepys Road, the novel loses its way. Lanchester introduces us to a bewildering cross-section of characters: the Pakistani family who run the local newsagent's, the Polish builder, the African Premier League footballer, the illegal immigrant working as a traffic warden, the old woman dying of a brain tumour, and the Banksy-style artist whose main selling point is his anonymity.

It's a valiant attempt to capture the diversity of life in the capital. However, Lanchester struggles to manage the different story lines. His solution is to carve up the book into many small sections - its 600 pages are divided into 106 chapters - and jump between characters. Unfortunately, these snapshots reduce most of the players to two-dimensional stereotypes. Moreover, despite their physical proximity, they barely interact. This, presumably, is Lanchester's point, but it hardly makes for a coherent narrative.

In the confusion, Yount gets less attention than he deserves. Though he ambles through situations rich with potential for exploring the anthropology of London investment bankers - a shooting weekend in Norfolk, a team-building poker night, a charity dinner - the scenes feel half-finished, as if Lanchester is too impatient to move on to the next section. Even Yount's downfall, when it inevitably arrives, proves something of an

anticlimax.

Parts of “Capital” will resonate with anyone who has lived or worked in London over the past decade. Whether it will appeal to readers without direct, recent experience of the city - and the City - is less clear. Either way, Roger Yount is unlikely to join the thinly-populated pantheon of famous fictional financiers. Perhaps that will only be expanded when the rubble of the crisis has finally been cleared.

Cathleen says

Another masterful novel by Lanchester

I'm now officially a member of the John Lanchester fan club. I've read three of his novels: Mr. Phillips, The Debt to Pleasure and now Capital. What strikes me as remarkable about Lanchester's novels is that they are all so utterly different in topic and in tone, and I'd happily reread each one multiple times to relive the reading experience of being absorbed in the novel and in awe of his writing.

Capital is one of those luxuriously long, let-yourself-get-lost in the neighborhood of Pepys Road, a street transformed from middle-class to affluent over a few decades. Lanchester uses those economic striations to follow the long-time residents, newer arrivals, and those who work for the newly rich. Set around the time of the 2008 crash, everything either directly or indirectly relates to capital.

Chapters alternate among the characters in the novel. Lanchester skewers the upwardly mobile showing them obsessed with vapid consumerism. At certain points of the novel, characters like Arabella and Roger seemed almost too oblivious to be believable. Lanchester portrays the working-class characters with rounder brush strokes. It's a slice of London life as detailed and as obliquely observant as some of my favorite 19th century novelists have provided.

F.R. says

The first two definitions for ‘capital’ in the Oxford English Dictionary run thus:

Capital ? noun

1. The city or town that functions as the seat of government and administrative capital of the country or region: *Warsaw is the capital of Poland.*

* (with modifier) a place associated more than any other with a specified activity or product: *the fashion capital of the world.*

2. (mass noun) wealth in the form of money or other assets owned by a person or organisation or available for a purpose such as starting a company or investing: *rules of return on invested capital were high.*

* the excess of company's assets over its liabilities

* people who possess wealth and use it to control a society's economic activity, considered collectively: *a conflict of interest between capital and labour.*

* (with modifier) figurative a valuable resource of a particular kind: *there is insufficient investment in human capital.*

We could of course go further and look at the word's prominent role in capital letters, or indeed at its more

blood thirsty interest in capital punishment, but John Lancaster's novel is very much an exploration of the first two definitions. Here we have the modern state of the nation epic novel. The kind of thing Charles Dickens earned a crust by, or Anthony Trollope pulled off in 'The Way We Live Now'. Indeed Trollope's book is a fine comparison, examining as it does similar concerns about money and its effect on London.

Yes, London is the capital in which the action takes place, but more specifically Pepys Road in the affluent South West of the city. (It's fitting that the street in a book about the comings and goings of London life, should be named after the finest diarist of the comings and goings of London life). Here we follow various characters, either living or visiting: the high flying banker, the corner-shop owner, the widow who's been in the street her whole life, the Polish builder, the Hungarian nanny, and a contemporary Banksy-style artist. The narrative follows their lives and their fortunes through the 2007 and 2008 financial crash, putting human faces to the stark black and white headlines.

However despite some fine passages and some excellent stretches, it seems that the state of the play novel is harder to pull off than it used to be.

Firstly a Dickens or a Trollope (or a Gissing, for that matter) had far greater success in making their characters interact. True, in the realistic modern London novel that's harder to do. There is no forum in which everybody in a community would come together and chat and get to know each other. No local factory where everybody works. No regularly thrown street parties. No local pub which everybody goes to. (Pay attention, 'EastEnders'. You are portraying an absolute fiction). As such some outside element has to be introduced. This Lancaster does by having a series of mysterious photographs, each showing a photo of a character's own front door, sent to residents under the banner of 'We Want What You Have'. It's a creepy touch that serves as the initial motor of the story, (although it's one that will be a tad familiar to anyone who has seen Michael Haneke's 'Hidden'), but it's also one largely perfunctory and is parked in the sidings for long stretches of the novel. (As a whodunit as well it's not overly successful, there's a character so ridiculously tangential to proceedings that he's fairly easily picked out as the logical suspect). It works to give a connection to the characters, the same concern they all have in the back of their minds and for one chapter does serve to bring everybody together in a big community meeting. However it's a scene I felt was oddly botched. It should have been a cornerstone of the book, with the invisible lines between these characters breaking apart momentarily – perhaps fleeting friendships would flare up, perhaps even some innocent flirting. There might even have been a connection made which lasted beyond the meeting, a chance for two characters, who hitherto barely knew each other, to stand chatting on the street. Instead the friendly policeman (not a Pepys Road resident) doing most of the talking.

So okay, the interaction between characters is not overly satisfying, but then the more of the book I read (and it is a long book) I wondered about the reality of the characters chosen. Were they characters, or were they merely symbols? I liked the set of chapters detailing the Younts, the most upwardly mobile figures in the book, but they are clearly characters who must obey Chekhov's rule. Can a banker introduced in act one, not have suffered a humiliating fall by act three? Similarly the Muslim family in the corner-shop. Can a young Muslim man be introduced in a twenty first century novel and not be arrested on terrorism offences by act three? These are interesting characters, I liked them, but clearly they have their own dramatic rules to follow and so lose their free wills – becoming obvious symbols in a greater thematic plan.

Other strands are less successful. Following a Zimbabwean traffic warden trudge around the streets just feels a bit of a, well, trudge. While the Banksy-esque just feels as if Lancaster wanted to have a pop at the absurdities of modern art, but knew he didn't have enough material for a whole book, and so littered it through this one. See also the Premiership footballer, who barely makes it above the level of a cypher.

As you may have guessed, this is a very cosmopolitan novel. It's a novel which embraces the cosmopolitan, where all the characters are comfortable with it. So it's noticeable that one strata of society not represented is the indigenous working class. Yes, it's a street which has now become wealthy, but inclusion is made of

visiting Polish builders and Hungarian nannies. Why isn't there anyone British? Why isn't there someone who can give the 'fings ain't what they used to be' point of view? This is a very liberal novel (a view and standpoint I share), and it's a book where everyone readily accepts this new way of things. In a Britain where the right wing press will regularly hark on about illegal immigrants and British jobs for British people (both things which I know are touched upon in the sections concerning the Zimbabwean traffic warden), it does feel odd that no one makes any overt comments. They would not be views I share, but they are views which clearly exist and if one is writing an epic state of the nation London novel, it seems odd not to acknowledge them. If a writer is going to capture a panorama, to portray life as it happens, life in the raw, then that voice – no matter how unpalatable you may find it – also needs to be heard.

A lot of 'Capital' is successfully pulled off – with lonely widows, Polish builders and city bankers captured with real skill and empathy. Some parts are better than others, but there's a lot more good here than bad. And while it's unfair to judge it solely on how well it stands up against masters like Dickens, Gissing or Trollope, it can hold itself high as something of a success in portraying modern London.

London living is essentially village life. Your area of the city is your village and so you know that part of London and really have little clue about other areas – those are other people's villages. For example, I have lived in the South East of the city for fourteen years, and so somewhere like Kilburn (in the North West) might as well be on Mars. I'm shortly to move to the suburbs to embark on a quest to become Leonard Bast, but I will always have an affection for London writing. This book doesn't capture my village, but it does clearly capture a village in London and at its best, creates a vivid and human portrait.

Ben says

In the late 1980s I went to an exhibition of the work of three of the great British architects of the twentieth century--Richard Rogers, Norman Foster and James Stirling. I think it was Rogers who was quoted as saying that cities exist for one reason only--as a place for people to meet. I've never forgotten that.

Capital is a book not so much about a city as about its people. Its epicentre is a south London street, Pepys Road--Everystreet, in all but name. Its dramatis personae are the street's residents: the banker and his wife and children, the Pakistani family who own the corner shop, the widow living out her final years in the house where she was born, the up-and-coming football star, the immigrants both legal and illegal, the tradesmen and traffic wardens, the artists and artisans, the sons and the lovers. Added to this is the slightly menacing presence of the houses of Pepys Road, every one of them a tyrannical god demanding constant tribute, whose market value bestows arbitrary blessings or curses on its owner.

This is a "slice of life" novel portraying the people of Pepys Road through the course of a year, from December 2007 to November 2008--the year that saw the collapse of the merchant banks, the beginning of the credit crunch, against a backdrop of commuter journeys and low-level antisocial behaviour and the constant rumble of the threat of terrorism. All play a role in the drama of the residents of Pepys Road.

The story is told at the personal level, switching from one character to another, showing for the most part lives that intersect by accident rather than a homogeneous community. It is a story of the everyday grind rather than of heroism or achievement: most of the characters are simply getting on with their lives, some more competently or more successfully than others; only one or two of them are drawn with out-and-out contempt.

There is no single narrative thread, no grand conclusion, but by the end of the novel every character has seen some kind of resolution in his or her life. In many ways these are not characters to inspire or enthuse; one is

more likely to spot an unflattering or self-destructive character trait, and check in the mirror to see that one has not developed it oneself. This makes it all the more satisfying to encounter the few surprising moments of personal strength and dignity and courage, amid the everyday successes and failures and the lives of quiet desperation.

It's a good read, with some moments of real humour and surprise, and a good many characters whom you wish well at the end. (OK, and one you don't...)

And what of London itself? The capital is a constant presence, perhaps the least palatable character, an unforgiving and all-devouring deity to many of its citizens. To every one of Lanchester's characters the city has held out some lure or other--wealth, fame, security, justice, notoriety, fairness, fulfilment in all its forms. Every one of these promises is tested to the limit in the course of the book; nearly all are found wanting.

Not quite all, though. But it is telling that the characters who emerge stronger at the end, more fulfilled and better equipped to cope, are those who do not bow down and worship the golden calves of the Capital, but treat it in Lord Rogers' words as a place for people to meet; those who turn their backs on London's gaudy promises, and find what they need inside themselves and their fellow man.

Meera says

It's not the definitive London novel, however hard it tries to be. I did enjoy reading it, but I think its pretty much a copy of the idea of Sebastian Faulks' *A Week in December*, which does this same story better. A cross section across London society, cleverly encapsulated in the idea of people living in the same road and how their fortunes and misfortunes intertwine: the rich family in which the father works in the city, the poor pensioner who has lived in her house through the years to see it become worth over a million, the Muslim idealist, the African footballer, the illegal immigrant escaping an oppressive regime... it gives a great perspective into the diversity of people living in London. I enjoyed the viewpoint of the horrendous moneyed and spoilt Arabella, but some of the characters remained little more than sketches. Living in South London myself, I also enjoyed the descriptions of areas I know well. I also expected more of an analysis of the money problems in the city, given Lanchester's experience in writing about this, and again I think Faulks' provided more insights into this topic. However, its hard to put down, and I did want to carry on reading about the people even after 500 pages of this weighty tome!

BookBully says

A great multi-character look at London in 2008. Lanchester is a master at delving into the stories of individual families living on a single street in the City. Recommended for readers who enjoyed "The Line of Beauty" by Alan Hollinghurst; "Crossing California" by Adam Langer; and the novels of Zadie Smith. Another case where I would have given 4.5 stars if it were possible on GoodReads....ahem!

Larraine says

Although it's early in the year, this novel is a finalist in my "favorite book of the year" contest. I hadn't read anything by John Lanchester before so I was unprepared for the elegance, humor and irony in the language.

The book takes place in London, just before the economic collapse. We meet a wide range of characters centering around a street called Pepys Street that has recently become gentrified. The homes are bought by the up and coming who then pour lavish amounts of money to make the homes into their own personal palace to include digging basements, raising roofs, expensive sound systems, the latest in kitchens (although they often don't cook) and luxurious baths. We also meet the immigrants - some legal, others not. Winding it's way through the book is a common thread. Every resident is getting weird postcards that say "We Want What You've Got." Then a DVD arrives showing front doors, bay windows, Christmas decorations and more. This was so well written, that I traded in my book credits for bookmooch.com and paperbackswap.com in order to pick up a few of his older books. I'm not sure when I'll get to them. Right now my library pile is two books deep. Then there are all the books I've swapped and bought over the years..... "So many books. So little time." However, I think I'll DEFINITELY make reading at least ONE of them a priority - and soon!

aPriL does feral sometimes says

I could write paragraphs about the book in a serious review, but why bother? Essentially, there was too little drama, very small trauma, and no lessons learned that made for dramatic or special satisfaction. Very small potatoes. The best I can do is to describe the story as a literary cozy with very little charm or anything sparkly about it.

Amy says

What a cool book! It follows the lives of the residents of a posh street in London around the time of the financial crisis. Although there is a bit of mystery at the heart of the novel, I was just fascinated by the peek inside the lives of the well-to-do--and the people who worked for them. I picked it up right before I went on vacation and it was the perfect airplane novel.

Tim says

This book is almost a pure delight. Sprawling in scope (the City, property, money, the upper-middle classes, the immigrant classes, sport, sport as business, work, love, and did I say property?), deeply insightful, and thoroughly engaging. It's set largely on the (fictionalized) Pepys Road (an inspired name), which affords Lanchester a view that is both microscopic and macroscopic:

"Over its history, almost everything that could have happened in the street had happened. Many, many people had fallen in love and out love; a young girl had had her first kiss, an old man had exhaled his last breath, a solicitor on his way back from the Underground station after work had looked up at the sky, swept blue by the wind, and had a sudden sense of religious consultation, a feeling that this life cannot possibly be all, and that it is not possible for consciousness to end with the end of life; babies had died of diphtheria, and people had shot up heroin in bathrooms, and young mothers had cried with their overwhelming sense of fatigue and isolation, and people had planned to escape, and schemed for their big break, and verged out in front of televisions, and set fire to their kitchens by forgetting to turn the chip pan off, and called off ladders, and experienced everything that can happen in the run of life, birth and death and love and hate and happiness and sadness and complex feeling and simple feeling and every shade of emotion in between."

Another line I noted, which struck me with its essential rightness: "Smitty had learned the following truth: the person doing the worrying experiences is a form of love; the person being worried about experiences it as a form of control."

Highly, highly recommend.
