

# WORD on the street



Jerry White

**Dan Carrier** talks to social historian Jerry White, co-editor of a book of essays that discuss what London novels say about the city



about London and use them to show the organic nature of our society.

Editor Jerry White moved from Dorset in 1970 to work as a public health inspector for Islington Council. He inspected the borough's homes and held slum landlords to account. His work gave him first-hand experience of the type of changes the novels speak of.

"Gentrification was happening and we'd find tenants being winkled out," he recalls. "There was lots of pressure being applied by landlords to get elderly tenants moved and do the houses up."

Gerry was given a ringside seat into the peculiarities of north London's housing crisis and it led him into writing his first book in 1980: *Rothschild Buildings: Life in an*

*East-End Tenement Block 1887-1920*.

He has written other books on London's social history and this background prompted the collected volume he and his co-editor Andrew Whitehead have produced.

"London novels are a wonderful source for the historian who is researching London's past," says Jerry.

"They tell us about the ordinary Londoner making their way in the city, and these novels can bring us closer to the real life of this city. As well as providing fascinating characters, the novels also speak of the streets that make up the city. A small library of fiction has been constructed around the desires and temptations that have brought people to London; and the joys,

tribulations and disappointments of metropolitan life once they arrive there."

Co-editor Andrew Whitehead notes that there are so many books that are not well known but which give a real insight into the story of our city.

"We wanted novels that provided a microscopic view of a part of London and then we wanted to revisit it and see what it is like now," he says. "We tried to bring the novels up to the present day so it offered a view of how the city changes."

While new buildings and social change have had a profound impact on areas such as the old Jewish East End, the clues of the past are still there if you know where to look. Writer Nadia Valman chose Israel Zangwill's *Children of the Ghetto* (1892), and notes that his East End was not "a place of degenerate brutality but social warmth and political and religious faith." But Zangwill says

the heroine of the tale, Esther, lives by "some of the vilest quarters and filthiest rookeries in the capital of the civilised world". Nadia returns to Zangwill's East End looking for the streets and its community. She notes that while the old Jewish communities have moved out, there are still remnants if you know where to look: "The strongest continuity with Zangwill's East End is Petticoat Lane market," she says.

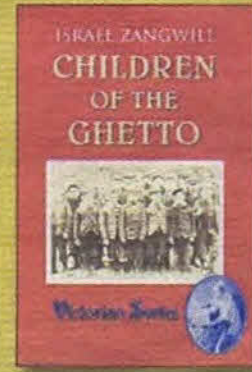
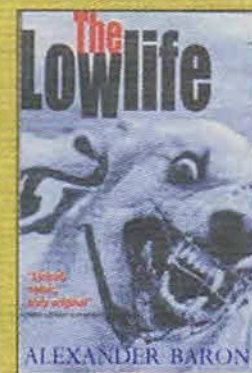
"It remains defiantly ungentrified and unpicturesque. The market still sells cheap clothing and is particularly crowded on Sunday mornings, with

the faint echo of the banter and swagger Zangwill records in his novels."

● London Fictions. Edited by Andrew Whitehead and Jerry White. Five Leaves, £14.99, [www.fiveleaves.co.uk/](http://www.fiveleaves.co.uk/)

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● Jerry White is giving a talk on the topic "The aliens in our midst: intolerance in London during the First World War" at the Camden History Society AGM on June 20. St Mary the Virgin, corner of Elsworth Road and Primrose Hill Road, NW3 3DJ. Free to members but open to non-members for £1. AGM 7pm (members only); talk 7.30pm. [www.camdenhistorysociety.org/](http://www.camdenhistorysociety.org/)



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