Outside/Inside Fantastic London

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To cite this article: Jessica Tiffin (2008) Outside/Inside Fantastic London, English Academy Review, 25:2, 32-41, DOI: 10.1080/10131750802348384

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10131750802348384

Published online: 06 Nov 2008.

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Neil Gaiman’s (2000. London: Headline) *Neverwhere* and China Miéville’s (2007. London: Macmillan) *Un Lun Dun* are contemporary fantasy novels which create and explore fantastic doubles to the modern city of London. The fantastic mode provides symbolic literalization of any city’s tendency to estrange its citizens, to promise and simultaneously deny an absolute belonging which is impossible because of the city’s scale. The refraction of the real-world city into its symbolic fantasy counterpart, and in particular the crisis of belonging and agency suffered by the protagonists who move from one realm to the other, become political tools for the exploration of power, difference and control. Both Gaiman and Miéville investigate the city as a space of hybridity, as well as London in particular as an imaginative construct realised as a series of images. Their fantastic Londons playfully invert these images while emphasising the disenfranchised and rejected aspects of the real-world city, interrogating and subverting notions of accepted order. The protagonists of both novels ultimately embrace and validate the other city, which is established as valuable despite its apparent construction as a subaltern realm; however, the classic polarisation of the fantasy genre into self/other dichotomies is more prevalent in Gaiman’s mythologised realm than Miéville’s more Marxist awareness. Nonetheless, both texts successfully use fantastic Londons to explore and interrogate notions of sanctioned and unsanctioned cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Gaiman; hybridity; Miéville; multiculturalism; otherness; urban fantasy

Abcities have existed at least as long as the cities . . . Each dreams the other.  
*(Un Lun Dun 109)*

The modern city seems at first glance a curiously inappropriate concept to consider in the context of the genre of fantasy, which traditionally tends towards the epic quests in the verdant landscapes of its medieval romance antecedents. While famous fantasy cities
such as Tolkien’s Minas Tirith or Fritz Lieber’s Lankhmar, do exist they are nostalgically
medieval in nature, deliberately distant from the industrial noise and dense populations
of the contemporary metropolis. It is interesting, therefore, to find authors whose use of
the fantastic mode, and particularly the fantastic quest, embraces not only the modern
city, but also its political and cultural construction. Terry Pratchett’s Ankh Morpork
is the most famous current example, lovingly parodying both the fantasy city and the
historical realities of London and other metropolises, but its cultural pastiche is both
comic and genre-based – Pratchett is more interested in pillorying fantasy traditions than
he is in providing a sustained commentary on any real-life metropolis. London Below
and Un Lun Dun, however, the fantastic cities of China Miéville and Neil Gaiman, offer
something slightly different: they create fantastic versions of the actual city of London,
and their differing visions, co-existing with the city’s real-life identity, fascinatingly
reflect and refract its cultural and political realities.

The city is a defining feature of contemporary Western life, its densely impacted locus
of culture and meaning agglomerating and compressing a large proportion of human
experience, to an extent where it comes to overshadow other modes of living. Urban
space proclaims the triumph of capitalism, the dominance of industry, the universality
of the consumer ideal; but it is also multivalent ground, its scale and density permitting
a breadth of human and cultural tapestry which is, in today’s age of globalisation and
drifting populations, essentially hybrid. The city’s multicultural space is, however,
paradoxical in its promise of cultural belonging, in that the scope of its possibilities
both includes and excludes. Many cities exhibit tensions between native and immigrant
cultures; these obvious divisions act as an intensification of the more general process
by which the city as a whole ultimately excludes any of its dwellers. The individual city
dweller, whether native or immigrant, is unable to participate in the totality of the city
because of its scale, and is thus always isolate against the ideal of belonging, excluded
from the notionally absolute, perfect, life of the city.

Much of this exclusion is curiously visual in nature. Hana Wirth-Nesher’s
characterisation of city life centres on precisely the notion of visual exclusion: she speaks
of the urban dweller’s perception of the city as a series of glimpses, a proliferation of
vistas limited and framed by the city’s bulk. She argues that the city is ultimately an
experience of ‘partly drawn blinds, taxis transporting strangers, noises from the other
side of a wall, closed doors and vigilant doormen, streets on maps or around the bend
but never traversed, hidden enclaves in adjacent neighbourhoods’ (1996, 8); thus,
‘Modern urban life . . . is a landscape of partial visibilities and manifold possibilities
that excludes in the very act of inviting’ (1996, 9). The scale of the city leads inevitably
to visual opacity or concealment, so that no individual can hope to experience and
absorb the full meaning of the city. As a result of this limitation of visibility the visible
city moves inward, becomes the city of the imagination: cultural space is continually
constructed within the individual’s own interior life. This accounts for the strong identity
of cities, their tendency to bulk in our minds even beyond their literal size: they are
emblematic, iconic, more than themselves because of the need to extrapolate beyond their reality to account for their hidden, exclusive spaces. Cities thus come to represent what Carl Freedman calls an ‘‘estranging epistemological nontransparency’’ (2003, 401). He elaborates: ‘‘Any modern capitalist city is, virtually by definition, a place of nontransparency and hybridity, a place structured more complexly and productive of more different kinds of experience than any single individual can truly take in’’ (2003, 402). The city is a paradox: it offers and refuses experience, estranges while it absorbs, promises belonging while simultaneously withholding it. In this it both encapsulates and becomes emblematic of the experience of the individual in contemporary Western society, the difficult amalgamation of belonging and otherness which characterises a contemporary lifestyle which is increasingly migratory. In modern city living, in keeping with its withholding of itself, identity becomes a complex construct whose constitution is shifting, tension-filled and abstracted, denying easy identification with place.

This problematized notion of metropolitan living is one reason why the city as iconic space so lends itself to fantastic depictions. The urban fantasy is currently a thriving and popular subgenre within fantastic fiction, its growing market share reflecting the progressively more urban experience of readers to whom nostalgic landscapes in the Tolkien mould, while attractive, are increasingly alien. The city’s tensions and oppositions are ideally suited to fantastic depiction, which in its classic provision of clear-cut moral and magical oppositions has the power to externalize issues as symbol: to create and then investigate an image of otherness. Co-existing with reality, the city’s fantastic double problematises both the real and the unreal, and thus the idea of the city itself. In this complex fabulist construction of the city, London serves as one of the most powerful examples, not only because of its history and identity as a locus of power, control and empire, but because of its imaginative identity, its recurring position as an icon of English literature. John Clute’s discussion of urban fantasy points out how far London as a literary construct has become inherently magical: it is ‘‘so irradiated with story and mystery that tales set there often have an air of the fantastic without in fact invoking the impossible’’ (1993, 975). In this sense it is inevitable that London should have developed its fantastic simulacra, the underground London life seen in children’s stories, such as Elizabeth Beresford’s classic tales of the Wombles or Michael de Larrabeiti’s Borribles, and also the more sophisticated texts with which this article is concerned, Neil Gaiman’s *Neverwhere* and China Miéville’s *Un Lun Dun*.

Neil Gaiman is a prominent figure in contemporary fantasy, his work encompassing a wide range of successful and critically-acclaimed material; he is probably best known for the *Sandman* graphic novels, but his output includes fantasy novels and short story collections, children’s and young adult writing and film and television screenplays. *Neverwhere* started life as a Gaiman-scripted television series in 1996, and was later adapted into a novel by its writer. The story’s hero, Richard Mayhew, a blandly successful businessman in the London of contemporary reality, is forced to negotiate the complex and dangerous byways of the city’s fantastic double, a magical under-
realm which co-exists with the familiar city. The denizens of London Below occupy
the dirty, desperate underworld of the poor and homeless, but their essentially subaltern
and other realm is superimposed upon that of heroic myth, insisting on the recognition
of value and significance in the traditionally valueless. Richard’s immersion in their
world is alienating, terrifying and finally, as he negotiates it, fulfilling: the contrasts
between his world and theirs, and the cultural shock this causes, are an exploration of
fantastic otherness. In his embrace of the fantastic otherworld, his narrative arc moves
inevitably towards an identification with this otherness and a denial of the hierarchy of
value which insists on its inferiority. His opening act of engagement with this world
is one of compassion for the other, transcending the rigid boundaries of his privileged
existence as he provides sanctuary to the injured girl, Door, whose obvious and visual
identity is that of the poor, homeless and eccentric. His story ends in his acceptance and
embrace of the underworld and his own mythological role in it as Hunter to London’s
underworld beast, and thus the embrace of the different. The novel provides a heroic
and subversive commentary on London in the same way that Gaiman’s Sandman stories
comment on world mythologies, or American Gods explores the mythic implications of
America’s hybrid culture.

While China Miéville’s alternate London shares themes with Gaiman’s, he is a more
overtly political fantasist than is Gaiman; his essentially urban imagination is energized
by his Marxist awareness, but it is also, as noted by critics such as Freedman and Joan
Gordon (2003b), very much about multiplicity and hybridity. His illustrated young
adult fantasy Un Lun Dun continues the ongoing fascination with city spaces seen in
his earlier works, the grimy under-London in King Rat, its refracted image in ‘The
Tain’, or the twisted, multivalently fantastic city of New Crobuzon in Perdido Street
Station or The Iron Council – Miéville himself admits that New Crobuzon, ‘the danger,
the intricacy, the mystery, the rich fecundity, the semi-autonomous architecture . . . is
London at heart’ (Gordon 2003a, 362). Un Lun Dun’s overt exploration of London is
at once an ecological fable, a fantastic underworld in the mode of Alice in Wonderland,
and a semi-allegorical narrative which recalls children’s classics, such as Norton Juster’s
The Phantom Tollbooth: its refracted cityscape is the site of linguistic and conceptual
play very similar to that of Lewis Carroll. In combating the evil Smog, the young
heroine Deeba must engage with the alien world of Un Lun Dun, peopled by surreal
figures impossible in reality: animated word-creatures, moving bridges, floating buses,
carnivorous giraffes; Skool, a school of small fish animating a diver’s suit filled with
water; Cavea, a man with a caged bird for a head; moil houses made from discarded
typewriters and televisions. The world of Un Lun Dun is made with the detritus of
London above, its people and animated objects bewildering precisely because they are
familiar and often despised artefacts recontextualised into an alien, estranging world
that is kin to Deeba’s own, and yet not. Her developing attachment to this otherness is
what sparks her quest to defeat the Smog: the narrative is carefully balanced between
her yearning to return to the safe, familiar world of London, family and school, and
her growing desire to defend the new strangeness of Un Lun Dun. As in *Neverwhere*,
the engagement is a defiant act of cultural redefinition, recognition of the value in the
detritus of culture, the people and things discarded by privileged, consumerist society.

While neither Gaiman nor Miéville are postcolonial authors, both show parallels
to the postcolonial experience in their visions of fantastic Londons which speak to
multicultural identity, and which address the tension between belonging and alienation
– we are presented with the hero as an immigrant, reluctant at first, to a fantastic space.
This link is more overt in Miéville’s earlier novel *King Rat*, with its pervasive theme
of Drum & Bass, an essentially hybrid and multicultural musical form; *King Rat* also
shares with Gaiman’s *Anansi Boys* an interest in African and Caribbean mythologies and
characters. This tendency is paralleled in *Neverwhere*’s tendency to casually characterise
major characters – the Marquis, Hunter – as black; the television series makes this
cultural collage more visually obvious than do the understated descriptions of the book.
The effect is carried further in the visual representations of alternative culture which
characterise London Below, subcultures such as Goth and body-art in addition to Indian
food, medieval anachronisms and sewer people. These ‘other’ cultures are those of the
real London, moved to centre-stage and alienating Richard as outsider; they underline
and externalise the fact that he has always been an alienated outsider in a real-world
city that is “fundamentally incomprehensible”, “inhabited by and teeming with people
of every colour and manner and kind” (p. 9), and to which the fantastic otherworld
becomes a vivid mirror. This is a fascinating inversion which underscores the way in
which, as with Deeba in *Un Lun Dun*, the denizen of accepted London, who should be
safely ensconced in economic and social comfort, becomes ‘othered’, a marginal figure
in an unfamiliar space: as Wirth-Nesher argues, belonging is always an unattainable
ideal. John Clement Ball, discussing London as an essentially transnational city and
locus for postcolonial experience, comments: ‘Many who travel to London perceive
it as a place of struggle against overwhelming obstacles: marginalization, segregation,
and solitude; an alien climate and built environment; racism, poverty and cultural
conflict’ (2004, 6). This is precisely the experience of both Richard Mayhew and Deeba
in being thrown into the ‘other’ London: they become disenfranchised, removed from
the centre to experience the full alienation of the periphery; and yet their experience
demonstrates that the seeds of that alienation are always present in the ‘real’ city as well
as its intensification in the unreal one. Alternative Londons here come to operate in terms
of Foucault’s definition of the heterotopia: they are ‘counter-sites, a kind of effectively
enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the
culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’ (1967). By definition
heterotopias exist in reflective dialogue with the real-world existence of cultural sites:
they are mirrors that co-exist with and comment on the real and, like mirrors, Foucault
argues, they both create an unreal space, and force a definition of the self in relation
to the image (p. 1). The fantastic other in both of these texts is thus ultimately most
illuminating about its real-world original.
As a reflection of the real-world cityscape, these fantastic Londons exemplify the power of the fantastic as a form, and the visually-linked fantastic in particular, to dramatise and literally embody cultural issues through symbol. This works particularly well given the identity of London as a mythic construct as well as a real city, one whose construction works in highly visual terms, in the reduction of the city into its architectural sites and icons – Big Ben, the London Eye, the red London bus, even the gloom and grime of its Underground. In keeping with this tendency the visual cues of *Neverwhere* as a television serial, and the quirky estrangement offered by Miéville’s own line drawings, highlight the reliance of the familiar cityscape on the power of visual identification. The recreation of city as a series of emblems follows and draws upon the traditions of London’s representation in English literature, not just the English novel but also postcolonial literature, in which the solid visual icons of the city become deconstructed and obscured by literal and political distance. Ball argues that London in postcolonial texts is ‘largely unseen: known indirectly and by reputation. A distant, mythologized object of dream and desire, a signifier of Britain’s claims to political authority, cultural quality and centrality . . . it is constructed from impressionistic, repetitiously circulated images’ (2004, 6). Cities proliferate in our imagination, and even more so in the fantastic imagination, in which they offer more detail, more inhabitants who are more fantastically bizarre, more hidden enclaves which exaggerate and explore the operation of the city in the unconscious. Urban fantasy has the potential to interrogate and expose assumptions about the cityscape, and particularly the metropolitan cityscape, through its literalizing and re-fashioning of the familiar. In *Neverwhere* this can be seen in the London place-names which become embodied as people: the Earl of Earl’s Court, the Angel of Islington, Old Bailey. Miéville’s *Un Lun Dun* energizes the familiar city images on a more microcosmic level, with umbrellas becoming ‘unbrellas’, rubbish bins sprouting arms as binjas, or in the malevolent entity that is Smog. In both novels the images embody the city beneath or beyond, the aspects of London which slip through the cracks in the cityscape into a world which foregrounds alienation, difference and exclusion.

Ultimately this difference highlights what is effectively unsanctioned meaning, the re-discovery of the city in terms which deny its accepted notions of order and meaning. Not only do both books place ongoing emphasis on trash and decay, appropriating as valuable the matter which the ‘official’ order of the city rejects, but in that act of appropriation boundaries become blurred, hierarchies dissolve. Door is a homeless eccentric on the streets of London: in London Below she is the last remaining member of a powerful aristocracy. Miéville’s ghost boy, a member of a feared and despised out-class doubly condemned by his hybrid nature, half-human, half-ghost, is an important quest companion. Gaiman’s terrifying assassin Vandemar eats live frogs and pigeons and his associate, Croup, eats priceless T’ang dynasty statuettes; the pair deliberately, disorientatingly and monstrously transgress the conceptual categories which prevent us from defining living creatures or priceless art as food. Even the familiar names of tube
stations come, in *Neverwhere*’s refracted universe, to refer to strange and unfathomable people rather than finite locations. In *Un Lun Dun* this breakdown is seen in houses that are also jungles, clothes made out of the pages of books, bouquets of screwdrivers and spanners, the deliberate and often surreal redefinition of personhood to include individuals who are schools of fish or swarms of bees. The fantastic city appropriates and redefines the image of its cultural paraphernalia in a way which is essentially subversive, disrupting accepted order to play, instead, with hybrid possibility.

In this context it is useful to note Ball’s comments on de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*: he notes that ‘for de Certeau, the appropriative use of social space is analogous to the subversive transformations colonized peoples enacted upon the cultures imposed upon them’. This is useful for the purpose of this article precisely because, as Ball says, ‘de Certeau’s topic is not postcolonial resistance *per se* but the various ways in which cultural and social dominants are consumed or used: these uses he calls “‘tactics’ through which “the weak” can “turn to their own ends forces alien to them”’ (in Ball 2004, 9). The ‘other’ city of fantasy thus speaks directly to the individual’s experience of the city as othering, while simultaneously addressing and ameliorating that alienation. Gaiman literalises this subversion in the idea of ‘London Below’, analogous to Alice’s adventures down the rabbit hole: the subversive fantastic exists literally below the real city, in its underground stations. At times it colonises and interpenetrates the real, with the Floating Market, the perpetually moving gathering of London Below’s people, taking place in the sacred spaces of a deserted, after-hours Harrods (earlier identified as Jessica’s favourite shopping venue) with a blithe disregard for real-world notions of ownership. *Un Lun Dun*’s metaphors of subversion are more complex: Miéville is particularly adept at attacking accepted order, inevitably given his Marxist leanings, and the city space of London suffers continual incursions, relocations and inversions in its abcity mirror, denying the authority and ‘correctness’ of urban space. Thus buses leave the streets in order to float or climb the sides of buildings; uniforms are worn as fashion; city smog is sentient and destructively motivated; rubbish is a pack animal or an endearing pet; the sun itself is a doughnut shape which denotes the familiar, real-world sun as absence rather than presence. The other city is directly subversive, attacking and penetrating the potentially monolithic culture of the ‘real’ city, in a way which mirrors the postcolonial ‘reinvasion of the centre’ identified by Ball in the contemporary, hybrid London, in which ‘the metropolis that once possessed a large portion of the world now contains a transnational ‘world’ that is increasingly taking possession of it’ (2004, 4). The fantastic is able to externalise and explore, in these vivid images, anxieties about a city which is no longer a unified cultural space.

At the same time, the power of the marvellous as a mode is its ability to refigure that invasion as exciting rather than simply threatening: the other world is alien, yet its hybrid union between familiar and unfamiliar is conceptually invigorating, charged with its own significance. This follows the tendency of magical quest-narrative to see the otherness of the magical as ultimately desirable — to explore the utopian notion which allows its
heroes to integrate inevitably with their environment. Both Richard and Deeba, while initially alienated by the alternative city, are drawn to its strangeness, and eventually embrace that strangeness either in preference to, or in addition to, their own worlds. This identification is emphasised by the way in which both novels, as fantastic quest narratives, pivot around the averting of apocalypse, the destruction of the city, either by Smog or by the mad Angel of Islington: in all their bizarre and unfamiliar hybridities, both cities are, to the heroes, absolutely worth saving. Their value also prevents the kind of process common to quest romance, where the environment becomes no more than an escape from mundane reality, a testing ground for the hero’s moral development, to which it is backdrop and catalyst. The fantastic realms in both these novels may enable the growth of the hero, but the sites become protagonists on equal terms with the characters who explore them.

Richard Mayhew’s journey, in particular, allows him to align London Below with self-discovery, his alienated self becoming a heroic self. The real-world city functions for him as negative space, associated with lack of individuality or happiness, and the inevitable city-effect of alienation from success and the ‘ideal’ represented by his fiancée, whose security in money and corporate success turns out to be equally illusory. The undercity is ‘other’ in its subterranean dirt, tacky colour and characters who exemplify the underclass; nonetheless, the dominant culture of ‘success’ is one which the novel ultimately deconstructs, revealing as spurious. While the undercity’s identification is a powerfully visual categorisation of otherness in bizarre clothes and unkempt appearances, these ‘other’ categories are the locus of power, knowledge and self-awareness. The division between sanctioned and unsanctioned cultural space is not as clear in Un Lun Dun, which relies to some extent on the conventions of children’s fantasy. The child’s world is framed in security with a cyclical return to the domestic sphere, rather than the ultimately isolated identity-testing of Richard Mayhew. Deeba’s integration with ‘Un Lun Dun’ is partially about her own sense of empowerment and agency, but also relies on her simple enjoyment of the whimsical hybridities of the abcity and the friends she makes there: Curdle, the puppy-like animated milk carton, the mischievous ghost-boy Hemi, the talking book of prophecy, the crew of the floating bus.

It is, of course, inevitable to some extent that the conventions of magical writing work against the kind of political exploration of multiculturalism which these texts potentially offer: by definition, the magical quest must affirm the integration of the successful hero with the ordered realm, and thus with official, sanctioned notions of cultural identity. Both authors offer a sophisticated awareness and interrogation of this problem; however, despite the similarity in the two texts, their mutual interest in the individual negotiating and coming to terms with difference, their approaches and conclusions are very different in terms of their treatment of otherness. While retaining its nature as a heroic quest-narrative, Un Lun Dun deliberately provides a deconstructed and interrogated hero as a counterpoint to its deconstructed and interrogated London:
where Un Lun Dun itself is the province of the discarded, the inverted and the broken, the teenaged heroine is also not the heroine, but a marginal figure, merely the sidekick to the genuine, destined heroine who is defeated early in the process. This, as much as the disenfranchised city itself, points to Miéville’s interest in the politics of reality quite separate from the predestinations of genre, in a way which sets him somewhat apart from Gaiman: where Gaiman’s marginalised figures are empowered by their mythic resonance, Miéville’s reject the totalitarian structures of myth. Gaiman, as always, is exploring the power and significance of myth on its own terms; Miéville admits his own interest in fantastic liminalities, ‘blurred interstices, grey areas, hard cases – but as part of a social and historical totality’ (in Gordon 2003a, 364; original emphasis).

Miéville’s political awareness here is important: he has in various interviews explicitly rejected certain implications of Tolkien’s influential fantasy, denying fantasy’s traditional offering of consolation – in Miéville’s terms, the real world is inevitably about struggle, and it is impossible to ‘posit societies as internally coherent, consistent, bounded, and essentially safe. They are fractured and dangerous. The dynamics tearing them apart . . . are intrinsic’ (in Gordon 2003a, 373). His London and Un Lun Dun exist in ongoing dialogue, and his heroine Deeba never forsakes one world for the other: she reserves the right to move between both, valuing both. Gaiman’s Richard Mayhew, on the other hand, rejects the above-world accepted order to embrace the richer life of the other, fundamentally divided from, and incompatible with, the real, and which in fact denies him his identity in its accepted order as soon as he touches the dangerously other. His sterile relationship with his fiancée, Jessica, stands in sharp contrast to Deeba’s affection for her parents. Gaiman’s reliance on undisturbed mythic structures is mitigated by his infusing of those structures with reality, at least in the sense of grime, danger and betrayal as a counter to fantasy’s characteristic idealism, but in some ways the narrative’s conclusion is orthodox. Miéville’s goal, on the other hand, is hybridity, the simultaneous embrace of both worlds to create a new, stronger cultural experience. This is firmly in line with Homi Bhabha’s important re-definition of multiculturalism to reject fixed notions of self/other in favour of ‘the activity of negotiating, regulating and authorising competing, often conflicting demands for collective self-representation’ (1999, 39); like Bhabha, Miéville is acutely aware of the hybridity of contemporary culture. Thus, while both Miéville and Gaiman offer powerful and compelling renditions of cultural difference in their versions of fantastic London, ultimately it is Miéville’s which is the more genuinely subversive, and which more powerfully exploits the capacity of the symbolic for political representation.

Notes

1 While I do not have the space for a detailed examination of Foucault’s argument here, it is interesting to note that his notion of the heterotopia refers to real-world spaces – that is, the division between kinds of space within everyday life. The fantastic cities under discussion intensify this process, energising the otherworldly space with the magical, and highlighting both its dif-
ference to and its relationship with the real-world city. His example of a graveyard, in particular, is literalised in *Un Lun Dun* in Wraithtown and its inhabitants, the ‘other city’ of the dead which becomes a mirror and refraction of elements of the daily world. His comments on the rituals necessary to enter or leave a heterotopia also apply particularly strongly to the fantastic other-cities of these texts, with Deeba and Richard respectively experiencing the difficulty of entering the space (turning the wheel in a hidden, subterranean room or climbing up the library shelves) and of leaving it once inside (having credit cards, property and friends cease to recognize your existence).

References


