

Gumshoe takes on an up-to-date case

Multicultural London is backdrop for old-fashioned private eye's investigation

City of Tiny Lights

By Patrick Neate

RIVERHEAD; 325 PAGES; \$14 PAPERBACK

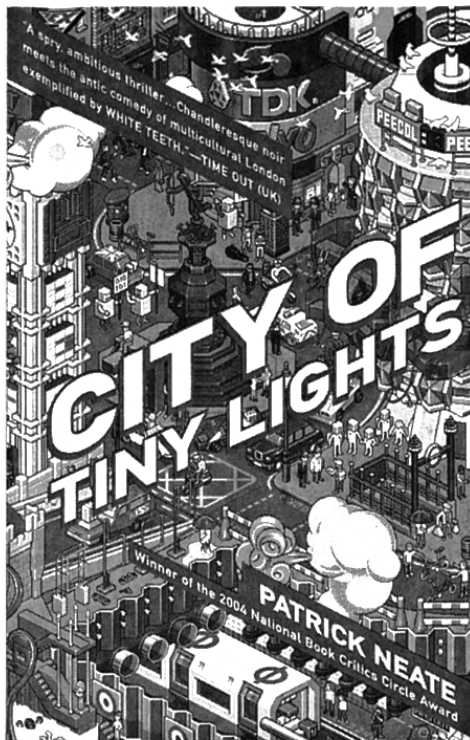
Reviewed by Carolyn Juris

A missing dame, colorful metaphors, answers that only raise more questions: By the time Tommy Akhtar confesses that he's "the latest in a long line of Marlowe wannabes," more than halfway through Patrick Neate's ambitious twist on the classic hard-boiled detective novel, the admission is superfluous. Although he growls in an unmistakably British argot — when he's drumming up new business, Tommy won't phone the local police station; he'll "bell the nearest nick" — the English-Ugandan-Indian private eye would be just as comfortable, and just as ill at ease, in Raymond Chandler's 1940s and '50s Los Angeles as he is in Neate's present-day London.

When we first meet Tommy in "City of Tiny Lights," he's lurching, hung over, out of his London flat and into the adjoining office. Sitting on the repurposed church pew in his waiting room is Melody, whom he correctly pegs as a "tom" — the detective's Brit-slang for hooker — before she even opens her mouth. She offers him big bucks to track down her flat mate, Natasha, who disappeared two nights earlier after a date with a new trick.

Fueled by his best mates Benny and the Turk (Benson & Hedges cigarettes, Wild Turkey bourbon), the PI chats up local cops, noses around a gory crime scene and shakes down some baby thugs in pursuit of the Russian hooker. (Of the young punks, Tommy quips: "I've washed my face with flannels more abrasive.") He makes short work of finding her, effectively closing the case, but with the revelation that Melody — surprise — wasn't entirely straight with him, and a new list of unknowns kicking around in his head, he finds that he just can't let it drop.

As he plunges deeper into the investigation, untangling knots that link politicians and government officials to coke dealers and terrorists, Tommy proves far more competent than his bedraggled appearance and sad-sack demeanor initially imply. He has the savvy and the muscle to back up his occasional swagger, tempered by the humility of knowing his limitations. Good-natured self-



deprecation stokes much of his humor: "The barmaid was so tired and so filthy I wasn't sure whether to order a drink or propose. We were made for each other." A chatty narrator, Tommy is great fun to follow around London — in reality, of course, your liver and lungs would complain loudly — even as his sobering backstory competes for your attention.

After the possibly preventable death of his mother, "Tommy discovered guilt and he discovered religion. Roughly in that order." (His dissociation from this period of his life prompts him to discuss it in the third person.) He slipped away to Afghanistan at the tail end of the Sovi-

et occupation, and joined the mujahedeen. Tommy first recounts his time in Central Asia in an elegant section that also tracks the contemporaneous paths of his father and brother; and again in the often-violent book's most harrowing passage, a monstrously grisly birth scene.

Clearly, Neate has more on his mind than freewheeling gumshoe escapades, but Tommy's hard-bitten, sardonic narration sometimes overpowers the political commentary and cultural criticism. This isn't necessarily a bad thing. The explanation of his journey from "young Muslim of note" to hard-drinking, chain-smoking private eye is initially glossed over with typical breeziness: "Tommy fell out with the radicals and got in with the Yanks," and prayer "didn't work for him no more." But by the end of the book, his reasons have quietly added up to an empathetic portrait of a broken, lost young man, without sounding preachy or getting in the way of the action.

Published in the United Kingdom one week before the July 7, 2005, London subway bombings, "Tiny Lights" features an eerily prescient scenario whose underpinnings are a lot more complex than what real life, or rather the media, usually presents. Without condoning the terrorists' methods, Tommy expresses sympathy with some of the views. Having come of age in Britain as an immigrant, a South Asian by way of Africa, he was pegged as an outsider long before his Afghanistan stint. He's not one to dwell on old injuries, though, and is not above working a stereotype to his advantage. If donning his "gob-smacked-of-Gujarat" persona leads him to an early breakthrough in his case, or turning on his "obsequious Paki grin" gets him past a wary cop, he doesn't mind playing to type. Or if he does, he's not letting on.

When Tommy is interrogated by the authorities, for neither the first nor the last time, and they question, among other issues, his father's motives for bringing the family to England from Uganda in 1972, he responds with a typical combination of erudition and resignation: "Maybe I could have explained Farzad's 'decision' to come to the UK with an idiot's guide to Idi Amin. Maybe I could have explained it with reference to half a millennium of European colonialism in Africa and the by-products thereof. . . . I might have said all that. Of course I said none of it." ■

Carolyn Juris is a New York writer.