

## The Other Birmingham

Catherine O'Flynn

Birmingham has changed. Everyone knows that. One Bull Ring has gone and another has come. Longbridge has gone and Selfridges has come. The face of Birmingham used to be Benny from Crossroads, now it's a personal shopper.

I didn't hate the old Birmingham and I don't love the new one. The stereotypes and slogans associated with both have never spoken of the city I know. The thing that has always interested and inspired me about Birmingham isn't whatever happens to be the current phase of development but rather the overlooked fragments of former phases, the forgotten corners, the utopian visions abandoned. In a city that reinvents itself as often as Birmingham does, the potential to find these loose ends is rich.

There's a car chase in Philip Martin's 1970's tv series 'Gangsters'. The cars hurtle down silent streets surrounded on all sides by an apparent post-apocalyptic wasteland. The only remaining structures in the barren landscape are a few ramshackle shops. This is Nechells, Birmingham. One of those shops is my Dad's sweet shop, where I grew up. The empty spaces seemed to be there all through my childhood. Just as the gaps left by slum clearance were finally replaced with council estates, the factories all started to empty and close down. I loved this liminal landscape, this thin sliver of uncertainty between the industrial and post industrial eras. The deserted plateaus of demolished factories and the redundant cooling towers had a sense of melancholy that I found intoxicating as a child. I liked the modern estates as well, their forlorn man made hillocks, the sound of the wind blowing through the climbing frames and the secret alleyways and cut throughs between the maisonettes. I wrote about these places in *What Was Lost*, the title as much a reference to this landscape as anything else.

I grew up with a strange love of this combination of utopian modernity and the fragments of an industrial past. I loved the follies of former grand schemes in the city, the artists impressions that never made it off the page, and those that did. The baffling subway that required a compass, the abandoned mechanised car park, the garden in the centre of a roundabout. Birmingham was always dreaming and re-imagining itself and there was a certain charm in the flawed nature of many of these visions.

For some the cultural identity of Birmingham has always been invisible. There seems to be no common thread that links large scale institutions like the CBSO or the Royal Ballet to Birmingham's disparate musical exports such as Black Sabbath or UB40. At a superficial level the city appears to lack a unifying aesthetic that other cities such as Bristol or Manchester possess.

But just as behind the gloss of Birmingham's large scale developments is the city I really recognise, so too, under the surface of Birmingham's cultural profile are the many artists creating works that seem connected both to the city and to each other. It's hard to pinpoint the single aesthetic element that links them all, but I think it's something to do with the ability to find beauty in forgotten or overlooked places – both in the city and beyond, now and in the past.

This tendency resurfaces again and again in the work of Birmingham artists and collectives. The melancholy utopian visions that are reflected in the music of Broadcast and Pram alongside a nostalgia for past modernity shared also by the Modified Toy Orchestra. The hidden stories and inspiration found in the unloved concrete clusters of the estates by Soweto Kinch. The passion for the beauty and poetry of the city and its industrial heritage in the work of Stan's Cafe. The haunting empty spaces of Richard Billingham's Black Country landscapes. And the wry celebration of the city's hidden charms that permeates the websites *Birmingham: It's Not Shit* and *Joyfeed's Euphoria* project. The list goes on.

Birmingham continues to accrete new layers. New artists impressions of faceless people traversing gleaming plazas continue to appear on the front pages of the local papers. As each new façade emerges, an old one is hidden and forgotten. In time these faded visions inspire different artists to create different impressions that reflect not the new Birmingham, or the old Birmingham, but the imagined one.

Catherine O'Flynn

2008

Catherine O'Flynn was born in Birmingham in 1970, where she grew up in and around her parents' sweet shop. She has worked as a teacher, a web editor, a mystery customer and a postwoman – and her first novel *What Was Lost*, which won the Costa First Novel Award in 2007, draws on her experience of working in record stores. After a few years spent in Barcelona, she now lives in Birmingham.