



The Best Literary Facts about London

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Posted by interestingliterature

What's the most interesting trivia about writers in London?

We've recently been enjoying the wonderful book, *Literary London*, by Eloise Millar and Sam Jordison. It's that rare thing: a book that includes something interesting on every page. There are many good books available about London's literary heritage and its connections with famous authors, but *Literary London* is the best yet: it's a raft of great trivia about the capital and the writers who have eaten, drunk, lived, and died there. If you enjoy books about London or books of literary trivia, we recommend getting hold of a copy, pronto.

Below we've listed some of our favourite literary facts about London which we learned from Millar and Jordison's wonderful book. This really is just the tip of the iceberg: you'll have to get hold of the book to discover the many more treasures it contains. For instance, we haven't included here any details about real-life spy locations around the capital (haunted by, among others, Ian Fleming and John Le Carré). The chapters of *Literary London* are short, engagingly written, and very informative – the writers pack a lot of useful information into the book's 224 pages. They are thematic but also follow a rough chronological progression charting London's development over the centuries. And it contains such gems as these:

When William Hazlitt died, his landlady was so keen to re-let his rooms, she hid his body under the bed while showing new tenants around.

John Taylor (1578-1653), the self-styled 'Water Poet' (he was a Thames boatman), wrote verses in praise of cannabis: in 'The Praise of Hemp-Seed', he wrote 'The Profits arising from Hemp-seed are / Cloathing, Food, Fishing, Shipping, / Pleasure, Profit, Justice, Whipping.'

In October 1605, less than a month before the Gunpowder Plot, the poet and playwright Ben Jonson was present at a dinner attended by most of the conspirators.

In 1959, three years after he became famous with his play *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne wrote a musical about gossip columnists called *The World of Paul Slickey*. Reviews were overwhelmingly negative, and after the first night Osborne was chased down Charing Cross Road by 'a mob of furious theatregoers'.

The writer and occultist Aleister Crowley is thought to have invented the 'Kubla Khan No 2' cocktail, containing gin, vermouth, and laudanum.

In London in the 1930s, Ian Fleming set up a dining club whose mission was to discover the perfect meal.

A young P. G. Wodehouse was fired from the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank for stealing company paper to write his short stories on.

In 1813, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who often mislaid his shirts, was presumed dead when a corpse wearing his clothes was found in Hyde Park.

In 1938, a book-burning took place in London's East End: the Guardian reported that a group of Muslims had publicly burned Wells's *A Short History of the World* because of disparaging remarks Wells had made in the book about their religion. They tried to get the book banned, marching the streets shouting 'Down with ignorant Wells'.

The nickname *Bluestocking*, to denote the literary society that met at Elizabeth Montagu's house in London in the eighteenth century, is derived from the botanist Benjamin Stillingfleet, who turned up to one of their get-togethers absent-mindedly wearing blue stockings.

This is just a small selection of the numerous fascinating things we learned from *Literary London*. If you want to discover some more of the best literary facts about the city of London, this is the book for you.