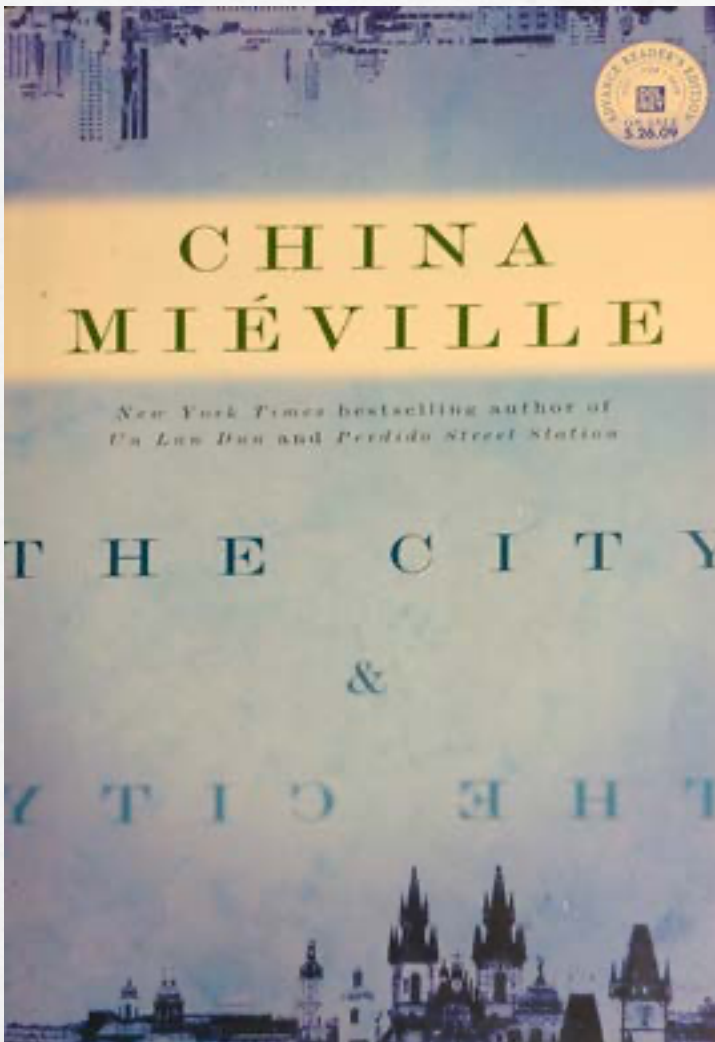


ACADEMIC

Book Summary



The City and The City

(2009) by China Miéville fuses crime noir with Weird fiction to interrogate the artificiality of borders. Inspector Tyador Borlú's murder inquiry moves across Beszel and Ul Qoma, twin cities occupying the same terrain but separated by rigid laws and the learned practice of "unseeing." The ever-present threat of Breach ensures that the populations remain estranged, their coexistence defined by absence and taboo contact. Yet the novel's climax—the unificationist riot—momentarily disrupts this fragile order. As citizens breach en masse, the two cities blur into an exuberant carnival of disorder, gesturing toward a possible alternative civic life. Although quickly contained, this episode dramatizes the tension between imposed separation and the human desire for contact, highlighting the Weird's destabilizing capacity to reimagine the structures that govern perception and community.

Become Ungovernable: Carnival and Riot in *The City and The City*

By Hannah Mimiec

This article explores the unificationist riot in China Miéville's *The City & The City* as a moment of carnivalesque rupture, temporarily collapsing the imposed division between twin cities Beszel and Ul Qoma. Drawing upon Mikhail Bakhtin and Elias Canetti, it reads the riot as not merely political distraction, but as a moment of ecstatic transgression that unravels the legal and perceptual regimes sustaining the cities' separation. Through the lens of the Weird, the riot becomes a portal to a third city—one outside the laws of Breach—where shared language, contact, and disorder are possible. This article argues that although the riot is ultimately unsuccessful, the temporary transformation gestures toward a radical potential to consider alternative forms of social order, identity, and law.

‘Of course they worked together; that we knew. But that those little bands of eager utopians could do this? Could untether this breakdown, could make this happen?’ - *The City and The City*

China Miéville's 2009 novel *The City & The City* merges Weird and detective fiction to tell the story of Inspector Tyador Borlú, who is tasked with investigating the murder of Mahalia Geary across Beszel and Ul Qoma. The division between these physically merged (termed ‘crosshatching’ in the novel) but legally distinct cities is upheld through the practice of citizens of one city ‘unseeing’ the other to avoid committing the crime of ‘breach’. Unseeing means to intentionally not notice the presence of the city that one is not legally situated in. For example, a person who is standing in a Beszel crosshatched street must move around the those standing in its Ul Qoman counterpart, without paying them any real attention. To notice the people in Ul Qoma would constitute ‘breach’ and invoke the appearance of Breach, the body tasked

with intervening and containing incidents of breach¹, the extent of whose powers are not truly understood by either city's police organisations.

As the story comes to its climax, the unificationists take to the streets and, for a brief moment, collapse the division between the twin cities, which up until this point has been strictly maintained under threat of intervention from Breach. In this article, I propose a reading of the unificationist riot that emphasises the joyous nature of civil unrest and breaking through the legal barriers that keep individuals separated. To do this I will draw upon the work of Elias Canetti and Mark Fisher to illustrate how the novel engages with the fear of the unknown that has become a staple of Weird fiction. I will then argue, using Mikhail Bakhtin's work on carnival,

1. Miéville differentiates breach the crime and Breach the organisation by capitalising the latter.

that the riot itself can be read as a subversion of the usual trajectory of this fear. Even though it is actually a distraction to allow politician Mikhel Buric to escape the police investigating his role in the murder, the explosion of breaching that occurs in the course of the riot briefly transforms the landscape of the two cities, opening up alternative spaces of association.

Elias Canetti's work in *Crowds and Power* provides a useful vocabulary for understanding the kind of effect that crowds, like those in the riot, can produce. 'Unseeing' means that everyday life in Beszel-Ul Qoma is in many ways characterised by the 'repugnance to being touched' that Canetti describes as a feature of everyday life. This fear of contact with the other has its roots in the fear of the unknown, which informs 'all the distances which men create round themselves' in order to maintain a feeling of control and security about ourselves and our lives (Canetti 15). This fear of the unknown, or perhaps the unknowable, is capitalised on by Weird horror in its focus on our morbid 'fascination for the outside, for that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience' (Fisher 8). Fisher's understanding of the Weird as an intrusive mode that violates the comfort of distance from the other and the unseen is particularly useful in building a picture of how the riot fits into Miéville's Weird writing.

Despite the police's horror at the wanton breaches occurring during the riot, there is an undeniable atmosphere of excitement amidst the chaos. Miéville captures the ecstatic charge of border transgression in this scene:

'It must be an intoxication to step through the borders and greet their foreign comrades across what they made suddenly one street, to make their own country even if just for seconds at night in front of a scrawled slogan and a broken window. They must know by now that the populaces were not coming with them, but they did not disappear back to their respective cities. How could they go back now? Honour, despair, or bravery kept them coming.' (Miéville 335)

Canetti describes how in a crowd, 'the more fiercely people press together, the more certain they feel that they do not fear each other' (Canetti 16). During the riot, the divisions between the cities threaten to collapse, and so do the divisions between the two populations. Since the border between Beszel and Ul Qoma is constructed almost entirely by the movement of bodies across the prescribed city lines, if the bodies of the population themselves become confused, then there is potentially no way for this division to hold up. All the individual moments of breaching that occur during the riot create portals into another city, one not recognised by the law of breach and therefore open to the possibilities of other social and legal orders. This is exemplified by the unificationist graffiti that, while awkward, is legible to both populations, suggesting the possibility of a shared language and culture that would render the continued separation of the cities untenable.

The chaos and exuberance of the riot is resonant of Bakhtin's conception of the carnival. During the carnival, 'the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended,' including hierarchies (Bakhtin 122). In the carnival, 'all distance between people is suspended, and a special carnival category goes into effect: free and familiar contact among people' (122). The resonances for *The City & The City* are obvious here, where the citizens of Beszel and Ul Qoma are kept distant from each other through the law of Breach, and only the upheaval of the riot allows them a window into the other city.

For Bakhtin, the 'carnival sense of the world possesses a mighty life-creating and transforming power, an indestructible vitality' (107). This evokes the 'transformative' nature of the Weird referenced by Anne and Jeff Vandermeer (Vandermeer and Vandermeer xv), where the power of the rioters, unificationist or otherwise, temporarily creates a real third city (in contrast to the conspiracy theory city of Orciny). This possibility is exhilarating, as Tyador observes how:

'Some figures I saw run did so with more giddiness than terror. Not unifs, too small and too aimless: teenagers throwing stones, in their most transgressive act ever, little hurled breaches breaking glass in the city they did not live or stand in.' (Miéville 332)

The words 'giddy' and 'temptation' are perhaps the best ways to describe the riot, and the possibilities or 'little anarchies' that it opens up. The opportunity to look and reach into the other city is irresistible to the teenagers in the street, evoking Tyador's earlier recollections of

playing 'breach,' where as a child, he and his friends would stare across into the other city for as long as they dared. These breaches make the other cities more *real* to each other; there is no longer the mere possibility that someone else is standing next to you in another city while standing in an area of crosshatching, and instead a confirmation that you have never been alone in that space. In the classic Weird tale this would be a source of horror through contact with the unknown (as Fisher describes), however in *The City and the City* this contact becomes a point of joy and recognition between people breaking through the legal barriers that have previously kept them separated and opening up new carnivalesque spaces of solidarity in their wake.

Of course, the unificationists are not accustomed to moving in the two cities, which makes them obvious to the avatars of Breach who are practised at moving in both cities and thus able to take them out with ease. The riot does come to an end, and Breach re-establishes the boundaries between the cities. What is left, however, is the undeniable *possibility* of the parallel crowds coming together once more and establishing for themselves new, joyful, carnivalesque cities that reject the strict separations and fears of their predecessors. It is in this sense that *The City and The City* provides an alternative response to the fear of the unknown and the Weird, one that asks us not to flinch away from the unknown and the other but to draw close to it and step outside of the everyday into new spaces of freedom and association.

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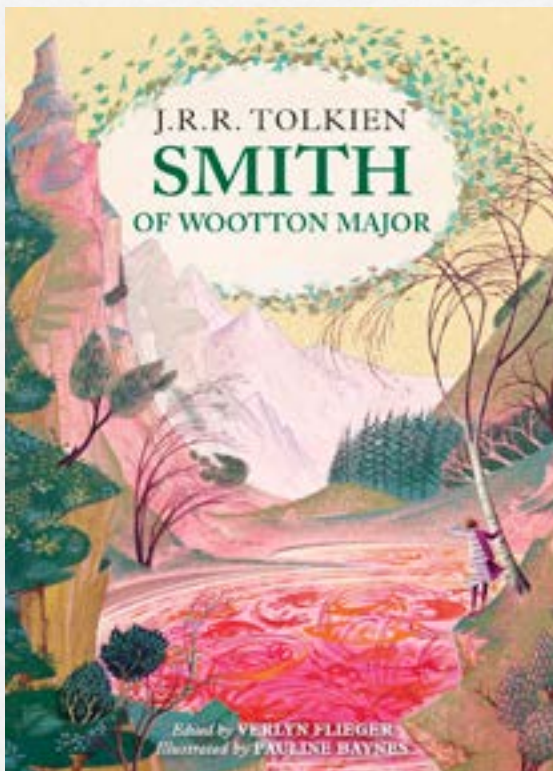
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About Hannah Mimiec

Hannah Mimiec is a part-time lecturer in law and part-time PhD student at the University of Dundee, currently researching narratives of policing in Weird fiction. They hold an LLB and an MLitt from the University of Glasgow, where they were part of the 2022/23 Fantasy MLitt cohort. When not thinking about tentacles, they are usually thinking about knitting.



Book Summary



Smith of Wootton Major

(1967) is a late fairy tale by J.R.R. Tolkien. It tells of a small village where, every twenty-four years, a great Feast of Good Children is held. During one such feast, a fay-star—secretly baked into a cake by the humble apprentice Alf—is swallowed by a boy named Smith. When the star sets itself on his forehead, it grants him access to the realm of Faery. As Smith grows, he becomes a skilled blacksmith whose journeys into Faery leave him with glimpses of strange landscapes, enchanted beings, and even an encounter with the Faery Queen. Eventually, he must return the star, relinquishing its gift. The tale closes in quiet humility, emphasizing grace, stewardship, and the fleeting nature of wonder.