

There's a fashion for making novelists the subject of novels: Colm Toibin and David Lodge with Henry James, Lodge again with H G Wells, and recently Christopher Nicholson with Thomas Hardy, while Naomi Wolf has just published a novel entitled *Mrs Hemingway* about the old lion's four marriages. Now the South African novelist Damon Galgut has turned his attention to EM Forster. It all smacks a bit of incest, and I was about to suggest that it was mildly unsatisfactory until I recalled that I wrote a novella myself about the last days of the German novelist Klaus Mann (son of the more famous Thomas), eventually published by Vagabond Voices. So who am I to chide Mr Galgut?

The attraction of the biographical novel is obvious. There is less call on the author's inventiveness. The outline of your story is given to you – more than the outline even, for, unlike men of action, the novelist is likely to have kept diaries, written memoirs or revealing letters. Others may have recorded his conversation. So there is no rarely any shortage of material.

On the other hand, few novelists lead outwardly exciting lives. For long periods, nothing much happens to them. They sit at a desk in a room and write. It is difficult to make this activity read excitingly. This is why many biographies of novelists dwell less on their writing than on their social life and love affairs etc. Few authors, it may be said, have led what was outwardly a life freer of incident than Forster. (Nevertheless PN Furbank wrote a very good two-volume *Life*).

Without being really rich, Forster was sufficiently well-off never to have to earn a living. He never knew his father, who died young, and spent most of his life with his mother, whom he loved and resented. He recognized early that he was homosexual, but was – understandably for the time and in his circumstances – afraid to act on his desires. His first satisfactory experience of sex came at the age of 37 with a handsome and charming bisexual Egyptian tram-conductor. He wrote seven novels, six published in his lifetime and a number of short stories, but his creative impulse was weak and petered out before he was 50. On the fringe of Bloomsbury, but



dull life with cunning intelligence

does not abate, even when Forster is at his most ineffectual and irritating. That said, though the Indian passages are good, evidence that Galgut has thoroughly digested his research, those set in England are better, and the chapters in Alexandria where Forster met the great Greek poet Cavafy, as well as his tram-conductor, and in these relationships, came fully to accept himself as he was, are the best of all, displaying Galgut's intelligence, talent for keen observation and empathy.

Having read and enjoyed Forster's Edwardian novels when I was young, I have long come to think him disagreeably self-righteous and a bit feeble. Thanks to Galgut, I find myself thinking better of him, and eager to return to *The Longest Journey*, which, rather than *A Passage to India*, is perhaps his best novel.

never entirely comfortable there, he was hugely admired by some – Christopher Isherwood thought he represented the best of England – and disliked by others. An honorary Fellow of King's Cambridge, he spent his last years in the college, where Simon Raven thought him a mean old thing, probably because he had declined a request for a loan, certain not to be repaid.

Galgut has dealt with this rather dull life with cunning intelligence. He is interested partly in Forster's anxious and frustrated emotional life, his gradual coming to terms with his homosexuality and its happy flowering in Egypt. But the other theme is the making of what

many judge to be Forster's best novel, *A Passage to India*; and Galgut ends at the point Forster is ready to write it. A sub-title might be "The Making of the Man and His Novel".

The novel opens with Forster on board ship sailing to India. It is to be his first visit, and he is less interested in the country than in the prospect of being re-united with a young Indian, Syed Masood, whom he once briefly tutored and with whom he is in love. Masood protests the warmest of friendships, is happy to flirt, but no more than that. The complications of Forster's developing, yet never satisfactorily developed relationship with his young friend mirrors and of course

influences his feelings about India and Britain's role there as the imperial power. Drawing on Forster's letters and journals, as well, happily, on his own insightful imagination, Galgut edges Forster slowly towards the point when he can embark on the novel long regarded as the finest fictional expression of liberal criticism of the British role in India. It is that, though arguably vitiated by Forster's inability to do justice to the men who served the Empire in the Indian Civil Service and Indian Army, an inability which to my mind renders his novel frequently tiresome, certainly offering a less complete picture of British India than Paul

WHY AN OVERHEATED HOUSING MARKET IS A DISASTER WAITING TO HAPPEN

DOUGLAS OSLER

The next big crash is easy to predict, says Danny Dorling. It is going to be caused by housing, will be worse in England than Scotland and worse in London than England, but there is no room for complacency anywhere.

As housing costs race ahead of incomes, as foreign investors pile into the property market, and as landlord greed reigns unchecked by the kind of tenants' rights common almost everywhere else in Europe, more people are forced to live in cramped conditions or move to areas where housing is cheaper but jobs scarce.

This, argues Dorling, a professor of geography at Oxford, is already causing massive social trauma, and might again cause financial trauma – after all, it was the gap between earnings and housing costs in the US that triggered the 2008 crisis.

Optimists argue that the new homes being built that we can see all around us are a sign of economic recovery. Not so, argues Dorling: Britain does not actually need more housing, particularly if incomes do not grow to match the additional cost of buying. A fairer distribution of what is already there is the answer.

Whether buying or renting, hous-



ALL THAT IS SOLID

BY DANNY DORLING
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ing takes up a disproportionate amount of our income. Sixty-one per cent of England's net worth is invested in housing equity; £5.5 trillion if Wales and Scotland are included, and this intertwining of housing stock and economic growth can easily lead to disaster.

Dorling argues that recent government schemes have favoured landlords and not increased the housing stock. Even so-called "affordable" housing in some local authorities has been transferred to private landlords, raising rents and using public money to underwrite landlords' risks. As a result, more families need housing benefit because of rising rents, so adding again to the demand on taxpayers.

Apart from adults forced to remain in their family home longer than

they would want to, the biggest losers in all this are tenants. Regulation of rented properties is so light that landlords can now get away with renting buildings that are not fit for human habitation. And if tenants are unable to afford the steep rent hikes the landlords demand, it's easier than ever to evict them.

So what should be done? First, he argues, there should be effective regulation of landlords to ensure that families who pay rents receive liveable accommodation. Taxes should be raised on multiple home ownership, along with a land tax to make it unprofitable to own more than you need. The number of council tax bands should be increased to take more income from more valuable properties. Tenants should have long-term rights to stay with their

rent fixed for each five-year period.

The practice of hoarding building land until the houses are eventually built, bringing in more money to the owners should be stopped by adopting a policy of "use it or lose it". The UK government is actually going backwards in this regard, having recently changed the law to allow properties to be empty for two years, a change from the previous six months.

Another of Dorling's key proposals is that existing rented housing stock should be refurbished. This would create nearly five million jobs, contribute £280 billion to the economy and improve tenants' living conditions. It would, however, require a government willing to challenge the influential lobby of private landowners.

Most of Dorling's analysis is linked to the housing market in England. In a number of references, Scotland appears to be a more friendly environment in which to be seeking a home. Although a quarter of all employed people in Scotland are believed to be just one monthly pay cheque away from becoming homeless, recent legislation ensures that anyone made homeless through no fault of their own will be entitled to settled accommodation. In addition, there are no fees for credit and reference checks and a range of charges levied elsewhere in the UK.

This is a carefully researched, well argued and generally convincing analysis of the problems likely to face our national economy if vested interests in the housing market remain unchallenged.