

Eavesdropping on the rich

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Caroline Knowles, *Serious Money: Walking Plutocratic London*, Allen Lane 2022

In *Serious Money*, Caroline Knowles presents a guided tour of the spaces and lifestyles of London's super-rich. Written in an engaging and accessible manner that draws the reader into spaces and conversations otherwise out of bounds, Knowles subtly exposes the paradoxes inherent within the life and politics of the super-rich in London. She asks simple questions: Who are plutocrats? How do they think about themselves, other people, London? Where does their money come from? How do they spend it? How do they live with their money, and how does money live with them?

She answers these questions across the various chapters that unfold as stories of how serious money is lived and how it shapes urban life in a global city. The book is organised in sections that correspond to her walking routes across plutocratic London. Chapters within each section work to complete her exposé on the work, play and politics of the super-rich. The puzzle is pieced together from perspectives gathered from investors, bankers, accountants, art dealers, handlers, wealth management firms, legal professionals and service staff. The stories collected reveal how the super-rich and their families lead individualistic, capsular and gendered lives across multiple homes. Stay-at-home mothers who give up careers to manage family life like to be involved in charity work. The rich who choose to live in London describe 'diversity' as a positive selling point of a neighbourhood. Proximity to the poor ensures a ready supply of service labour, but also insures against

Soundings

neighbourhoods being seasonally emptied out. If awareness or care towards the communities within which they live is present, it is limited and often self-serving.

London is just one of the many homes for those with serious money. Knowles explains how the wealthy consolidate their status by lives lived and networks formed between London, the countryside and exclusive boarding schools. This 'living in triangles' prepares them to take their place as the next generation of plutocrats who will consolidate and expand their wealth and influence for the benefit of the future generation. London is more than a passive backdrop in this story. It is a base, a route to power, as well as a theatre where power is performed.

Students and academics working in subdisciplines of urban sociology and elite studies will find this a useful resource not only in its subject matter, but also as a masterclass in methodology and in writing. The book isn't conspicuously academic or prescriptive in its analysis. Knowles situates her narrative within sociological scholarship on economic sociology, cultural politics, privilege, gentrification and urban inequalities, but academic concepts are subtly woven into incredibly thick descriptions of people and place. Her participants, introduced at the beginning as a 'cast of characters', are animated by their pseudonyms. Similarly, maps introducing each section couple with vivid descriptions of place to help the reader visualise her journey. Primary interviews with the super-rich, their partners, handlers and service providers, take centre stage, while newspaper articles and legal case references provide substantial evidence to supplement information. Where access is hard to source (as it often is when studying the elite), Knowles applies inventive and effective methods. She completes her findings using personal observation, trespassing, eavesdropping, and live text exchanges with participants inside exclusive spaces to which she's been denied entry. While the list of participants is extensive, I was left curious about the lives of some of the characters that didn't make it into the book's story. Middle-eastern plutocrats holidaying in London are understood through the lens of their white service staff. The narrative is stereotypical, but, given who is constructing it, I'm left wondering how far it is accurate. I'm also interested to know how the African doormen and East Asian nannies whom Caroline observes from a distance relate to the story? Are they migrants or residents? Beneficiaries or victims?

The book is subtitled 'Walking Plutocratic London' for good reason. Knowles actively uses walking as a method of inquiry and analysis, and for structuring her

Reviews

writing. Her use of walking as methodology is hugely successful. In using walking to make sense of plutocratic London, she takes the reader along with her in her exploration of ordinary streets. Her observations make visible the subtle and hidden inequalities within everyday London. We understand what she means when she describes the proximity of carefully manicured gardens to expensive retail in empty, childless streets. We appreciate the symmetric building exteriors in quiet Belgravia, curiosity peaked as we catch glimpses of opulent interiors and well-dressed patrons. We feel uneasy with her when she trespasses into a golf club. We know the fear of being shooed away by a private security guard, and the frustration of taking a photo (of a superyacht), while only catching our own reflection in the mirror. We know these feelings and understand what they communicate.

As we read about her difficulties in accessing some of these spaces, and follow her in finding workarounds in researching an opaque class of people and their spaces, it becomes enjoyable and strangely satisfying to know what happens in exclusive people's private lives behind the fences, walls, doors, bedrooms, clubs, offices, gardens - lives and spaces that are both within sight and yet out of bounds. Her narrative guides us gently into her line of inquiry. Her choice of participants starts to make sense, as do her questions to the super-rich or their managers about motives and ethics around business and philanthropy. Questions we all find ourselves asking to seem to be thought out loud by her, written in a way that brings them to the reader to reflect on. Knowles uses her own 'musings' work as an analytical method. As a result, her analysis is compelling, but not prescriptive. Information and evidence are presented in an open-ended manner, with the reader left free to make their own meaning of the lives and landscapes of London's super rich.

I personally took this invitation earnestly. I followed Knowles on a recognisable journey across places in London to think deeply about plutocratic London. The journey was familiar, but also surprisingly revealing. Arriving from Pakistan and having lived in London for over ten years - first as a student, and later as a resident academic whose partner works in a global financial institution in the city - my own sense of pride in living in plutocratic London started to make sense. What could define success better for a couple coming from the colony to the metropole than to work in leading institutions in sectors that define and shape global power? What could I learn of plutocratic places and people when I come across them in glimpses caught from super-rich friends living in or visiting London? I was quickly put back

Soundings

in place. I realised I was always a subject and never a participant of plutocratic London. Some puzzling interactions with these friends around little-known nuances concerning plutocratic housing, art galleries, social clubs, offshore accounts, management firms and domestic staff suddenly made sense. Reading the book revealed to me how, despite our professional successes or 'friendships', we know little of the world of serious money. We simply serve its interests.