

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT BEIJING

LIONEL SHRIVER RESPONDS TO HER CRITICS

by George Ding

When I, Lionel Shriver, wrote my column for *Standpoint* magazine, whingeing about Beijing's dreary air and architecture, I didn't think it would be a big deal.

Sure, I described the city as *dystopic* and dubbed it *the ugliest city I'd ever seen*, but it wasn't an insult; I was just stating an objective *a priori* fact, like "The sky is blue" or "Lionel lacks tact."

And as long as you state facts as you see them, no one has the right to be upset.

I live in London. I've been to many cities in the United States and Western Europe. Beijing is uglier than all of them. I mean, Beijing is like a modern-day Gomorrah. It's like an urban venereal disease. Beijing is the city Detroit looks to when it wants to feel better about itself. You can't argue with facts.

Still, many took offense to what I said about Beijing's pollution.

The atmosphere was so thick and brown that I could taste it, I wrote.

The facades of buildings are paled over with particulates, the creases of dilapidated window frames emphasized by grime ...

All true. In fact, I wish I had gone even further.

Beijing is like Dubai in a sandstorm, if the sandstorm was made of chunks of asbestos. I was surprised I could see my own shadow, what with all the cars, coal furnaces and manufactories belching smoke into the sulfurous pea soup.

Thank goodness London never had to deal with that.

Surprisingly, many also took offense to the indisputable notion that Beijing's buildings are ugly.

Never was any city more captivated by the rectangle, I wrote. *Clumps of residential developments rise relentlessly into the distance ... They are all drab, they are all the same, they are all hideous.*

Again, I stand by that. Seriously, what is up with these rectangular buildings? It's like the city planners all had hard-ons for rectangular prisms. I've never seen a city with

such an orthogonal fetish.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say all the cheerless, cookie-cutter buildings were mass-produced in the Soviet style during a time when the country was so poor that low construction costs trumped architectural variation. But even if that were true, I still don't get why there are so many of them. What, are there a billion people in the country or something?

Now I should admit that I didn't see this "Summer Palace" or "Bird's Nest" or the "CCTV Tower" while I was there. I also declined to visit the "hutongs," which people kept trying to take me to. I mean, why bother? When you've seen one blocky concrete tower, you've seen 'em all.

I also neglected to trek up to the Great Wall. Seriously, how "great" can it be? We have some pretty impressive walls here in Britain.

No sir, I learned all I needed to know about Beijing from the expats at my book talk. Since they knew so much about the city and its air quality read-

ings, it was not necessary to corroborate their opinions with those of actual Chinese people.

Of course, I couldn't trust the expats completely because, as I mentioned, they had *over-adapted to their dystopic town and could no longer see it*. Indeed, it took an outsider like me to scrub away the grime and reveal to them the very essence of the city.

One thing still puzzles me about Beijing, though. Why do people choose to live in that blighted metropolis?

Could it be that other parts of China are even more polluted? Could it be that Chinese and foreigners alike are seeking opportunities that don't exist in their hometowns? Could it be that some are willing to brave the pollution and endless rectangles to experience something new and exciting? I guess I'll never know.

For those who say I was being too hard on the city, did I not devote part of a sentence – *great food, great people, great time* – to the positive aspects of my trip? Talk about selective reading.

"THEY ARE ALL DRAB,
THEY ARE ALL THE SAME,
THEY ARE ALL HIDEOUS"