



**Anna Cottrell, *London Writing of the 1930s* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017), ISBN 9781474425650, 216 pages, £19.99**

Reviewed by

Ken Worpole

*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 15 Number 1 (Spring 2018)

Red lipstick, shingled blondes and sticky velvet seats are recurring obsessions in too many novels set in London between the wars. The lipstick was a sign of a fallen woman, the sticky velvet seats were to be found in the cinemas – those palaces of dreams – where during afternoon screenings lonely men and women escaped from their cold-water flats and lodging rooms into a world of glamour and high romance. Anna Cottrell’s literary survey brings a refreshing new eye to what has become a rather jaded field of study. She does this with a theoretical underpinning – Lukacs, Breton, Moretti, Walkowitz – deftly handled, producing a study which is both original and enjoyable to read.

Gender stereotypes and interrogations are to the fore, quite properly, as too much fiction of the period traded in stock situations and stock characters. Cottrell brings women’s lives and experiences front stage, citing the work of several women novelists unknown to me such as Norah Hoult and Betty Miller, whose work begins to redress some of the fictional imbalances. A strong sense of place and *mise-en-scène* gives the book particular contemporary relevance, as ‘place’ has become the locus of so much contemporary social theory. Chapters are structured around distinct settings such as ‘up West’, Soho, tea-shops, pubs, cinemas and lodging houses, all producing particular ‘structures of feeling’ – to use the words of Raymond Williams – some stereotypical, others subversive.

The endless allusions to boredom, ennui, lassitude, cheap thrills and cheap emotions, suggest how much of the literary weather of the 1930s was created by T. S.

Eliot's ubiquitous poem, *The Waste Land*, first published in 1922, and whose influence can now be seen as stifling and crushing on so many writers who came after, keen to mine the same seam of sexual disquiet and existential despair. Though it is often difficult to avoid an endless recounting of plot summaries and brief character sketches in surveys such as these, Cottrell handles this task with confidence, and *London Writing of the 1930s* with its particular emphasis on the work of a wide range of women writers, alongside the more canonized men, is a valuable addition to the genre.

### **To Cite this Article**

Worpole, Ken, 'Anna Cottrell, *London Writing of the 1930s*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 15, Number 1 (Spring 2018): 56–57. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/spring2018/worpole.pdf>.