***The 1930s: A Decade of Modern British Fiction***, edited by Nick Hubble, Luke Seaber and Elinor Taylor, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2021, 320 pp., £100 (hardback), £90 (e-book), ISBN: 9781350079144

The 1930s is a literary decade like no other. More than just a temporal marker, the idea of the Thirties has become identified with a specific literary attitude, a mood. The conventional story goes like this. Animated by a sense of crisis, as the social and economic fallout from the First World War overlapped with the rise of fascism and the geopolitical tensions that would precipitate the Second, Thirties writing responded by leaving behind the autonomous aesthetic propounded by the modernist generation, to embrace forms of politically committed, *engagé* writing. Those same writers later beat an embarrassed retreat from politicised literature. This was largely a story about poets rather than novelists, men rather than women; a story which the Thirties poets started to tell themselves at the time, and which became further consolidated in literary histories from Virginia Woolf’s “The Leaning Tower” (1940) to Samuel Hynes’s *The Auden Generation* (1977). More recent scholarship, however, has tended to destabilise that narrative. Most obviously, from the 1990s, we have seen the rise of an expansionist New Modernist Studies which has tended to cannibalise everything around it. “Late Modernism” has become a pervasive periodising label, emphasising strands of Thirties writing that were less a rejection of the modernism that went before, than a new development *within* an expanding category of modernism. Meanwhile, a growing sense of geopolitical crisis in our own time has encouraged critics to reconsider the relationship between literature and politics, becoming more receptive to the kind of explicit political commitments that are still associated with Thirties writing.

*The 1930s: A Decade of Modern British Fiction* therefore enters a burgeoning field, and its eight chapters showcase the variety and vitality of the recent scholarship in this area.[[1]](#footnote-1) The book is less a compendious survey than a series of thought-provoking and focused essays on the decade’s fiction, and if it means that the coverage of the decade’s most significant texts and writers is uneven, the collection is the better for it. The recent historiography of the decade’s fiction is brilliantly analysed both in the introduction and in Nick Hubble’s “Beyond the Myth of the ‘Thirties’.” Hubble builds on recent descriptions of the “long 1930s” to foreground a proletarian literature that focuses not so much on “the authentic experience of the worker” as on “intersubjective relations between classes” (p. 23), and which he argues offers “resources of hope” for the present (p. 54).[[2]](#footnote-2) Hubble’s examples come from Ethel Mannin, Harold Heslop, Lewis Jones, and Naomi Mitchison. Mitchison cuts a mainly peripheral figure in classic accounts of Thirties writing but her star has been rising since the 1990s and she is now the only writer to get a dedicated chapter in this book: an informative account of her interactions with the eugenics movement by Natasha Periyan. If Mitchison’s prominence in this volume signifies the editors’ embrace of feminist revisionist accounts of the decade (initiated by Maroula Joannou, Jan Montefiore, and others), then Hubble’s use of Mannin, Heslop, and Jones gives a sense of how this book goes further afield in mining little-read novelists for fascinating new perspectives on the decade’s fiction.

Elinor Taylor’s chapter “Spectres of English Fascism: History, Aesthetics and Cultural Critique” provides a knowledgeable account of how writers and intellectuals imagined the possible arrival of fascism in England. Revisionist work on the 1930s is starting to develop a small canon of Anglo-fascist dystopias, including Storm Jameson’s *In the Second Year* (1936) and Rex Warner’s *The Aerodrome* (1941), which are both discussed here. Taylor’s chapter also insightfully analyses Clemence Dane’s less often studied *The Arrogant History of White Ben* (1939), “a supernatural fantasy in which an animate scarecrow becomes dictator of a near future England” (p. 59). As exploratory research draws scholars into obscure niches of modern fiction, there is a real value in being able to convey to readers the significance and interest of a novel they are unlikely to have read. Summary and description are indispensable tools, but they risk becoming dull—Taylor’s account of *White Ben* is a model of how these can be marshalled with lively interpretive intent. The big stakes of Taylor’s argument come across clearly even to a reader completely unfamiliar with the novel, but there’s also enough compelling detail to make us want to read Dane’s book.

The question of what the reader knows is more explicitly mobilised in Luke Seaber’s “Private Faces in Public Spaces: Auto-Intertextuality, Authority and 1930s Fiction.” In an analysis of two of the decade’s most celebrated writers, George Orwell and Evelyn Waugh, Seaber points out that any two readers will have overlapping, but invariably non-identical, pictures of their oeuvres, especially when the vast range of nonfictional work is taken into account. Seaber outlines a new literary-critical concept: the “pantext,” which is “all the works by a single author that the reader has read” (p. 184). Because it takes for granted that even the most dedicated scholar cannot have read every ephemeral, unpublished, or long-destroyed piece of a writer’s total output, it’s the kind of contingency that is often glossed over by the seamless professionalism and performative omniscience of academic prose. But Seaber (drawing on Gerard Genette and Umberto Eco) shows it can be highly consequential. Seaber is working refreshingly from first principles, addressing questions that are fundamental to the ways in which we discuss fiction and authorship, but that oddly lack any recognised critical literature or vocabulary. A chapter in an edited volume about the 1930s is not the place where we would necessarily expect to find new critical terms being elaborated for the first time, but Seaber’s account of the pantext will be useful to scholars working in all sorts of different areas of literary studies. There is a need to disseminate these illuminating ideas more widely and I hope Seaber will take the opportunity to do so.

The other chapters collected here include Eleanor Read’s exploration of *Women’s Weekly* in 1938-9—not really about 1930s *fiction* (per the title of this collection) but certainly providing fascinating insight into the 1930s culture of brows. Glyn Salton-Cox’s wonderfully engaging essay on queer writing of the 1930s shows with great concision both the centrality of queerness to the culture of the 1930s, and the centrality of the culture of the 1930s to modern literature. Sabujkoli Bandopadhyay, meanwhile, supplies a rich and wide-ranging account of the representation of Britishness (and Englishness) from the colonial peripheries of Australia, Canada, and India. Glyn White’s chapter on crime fiction and conservatism maps a significant area of 1930s cultural production in a politically informed manner.

Taken as a whole, *The 1930s: A Decade of Modern British Fiction* is an indispensable book for students and scholars of 1930s literary culture. The contributions are various in terms of their topics as well as in their approaches. What they do share in common, however, is an urgent commitment: whether it is Salton-Cox on queerness, or Nick Hubble on the intersubjectivity in proletarian fiction, these scholars see the writing of the long 1930s as an incomplete project of cultural and political transformation that provides invaluable resources for the present.

**References**

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Matthew Taunton

University of East Anglia, Norwich

[M.Taunton@uea.ac.uk](mailto:M.Taunton@uea.ac.uk)

1. I have assembled an extensive, annotated bibliography of scholarship on the 1930s, which may be useful for readers who are studying this period. See Taunton. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Kohlmann and Taunton, Mellor and Salton-Cox, and Hubble’s persuasive account of proletarian literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)