Tea Rooms. Mujeres obreras
Author:
Carnés, Luisa

Tea Rooms, first published in 1934, is a book about the lives of women working in a fancy café – “one of the most exclusive in Madrid” – in the first half of the 1930s, set against a backdrop of inequality, social unrest, workers’ strikes and a growing political consciousness among the working class…

The central character is Matilde, a young girl from a poor family who has just begun working in the café… The other characters include the forty-five-year-old widowed Antonia, who has suffered enough in life that she’s not inclined to sacrifice her minimal salary in order to join in with the strikes, and who advises Matilde to get married – this isn’t the time to turn down offers of a stable future, she warns her. There’s also the very young, very poor Marta, who arrives one day begging for work and not long after is sacked for slipping the odd peseta into her shoe during her shift out of desperation. Laurita, the daughter of the café owner (a man known by his staff as “the ogre”), is working in the café to learn that money doesn’t grow on trees – her mother’s idea.

Almost all of the action takes place inside the café, and one of the pleasures of this novel is the detailed behind-the-scenes understanding it gives the reader of the workings of such an establishment … We also see how the growing climate of social and political unrest affects one particular workplace: the mutterings among the staff about the coming strikes, for example, and their soul-searching about whether to join in when striking workers arrive in the doorway of the café.

As the novel progresses, questions of class and gender inequality become increasingly prominent – they are discussed more by the workers in the café, particularly Matilde, and also by the narrator in her direct addresses to the reader. At the same time, many of the events in the novel reach tragic conclusions…

The novel’s descriptions of 1930s Madrid and the café itself are vivid and strikingly multi-sensory… The impressionistic, fragmentary descriptions recall the prose of Virginia Woolf, as does the way the narrative voice moves between the minds of the different characters, vocalising the thoughts of each in turn.

Tea Rooms central themes – gender and economic equality, workplace exploitation and workers’ rights – are being discussed more and more in today’s turbulent world, and Carnés’ unique way of approaching them makes this a compelling and highly relevant novel…

… it opens a window onto a living, breathing world that continues to be of immense relevance to our lives today, and at the same time tells a highly readable and very human story.

From the reader´s report by .