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Dark tales and mean streets

THEY DRIVE BY NIGHT James Curtis/
WIDE BOYS NEVER WORK Robert
Curtis *London Books, both £11.99*

By Paul Willetts

Literary journalists often mourn the passing of 'the gentleman publisher', swept aside by the jackbooted advance of corporate publishing. He was a tweedy, public school-educated stereotype with offices in an elegant London square, a taste for vintage claret and extended lunch-hours, as well as a laudable habit of prizing literary excellence above sales figures. In defiance of the current dominance of multi-national publishers who buy up the highly-priced shelf and table-space at the front of Waterstone's and other large bookshops, the boom in online book-buying has enabled several small publishers to enjoy considerable critical and commercial success.

Of these, the most conspicuous is Persephone, specialists in hitherto neglected 20th-century women's writing, notably the best-selling *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, a Hollywood film version of which was released during the summer.

London Books ([www.london-](http://www.london-books.co.uk)

[books.co.uk](http://www.london-books.co.uk)) is the latest pint-sized publisher to acquire a devoted following. Just over a year ago, the company – co-founded by the novelist John King, best-known for *The Football Factory* – launched its 'London Classics' imprint. As the name implies, the capital provides a thread that connects the neglected, long out-of-print titles in the series.

Each book is produced in a sleek, pocket-sized hardback format, complete with a specially commissioned preface.

This month marks the release of James Curtis's *They Drive By Night* and Robert Westerby's memorably titled *Wide Boys Never Work*, the fifth and sixth additions to what promises to be a very collectible imprint. While the former comes with a typically droll and idiosyncratic preface by Jonathan Meades, the latter benefits from a stylish introduction by cult writer Iain Sinclair, author of *London Orbital* and the forthcoming *Hackney, That Rose-Red Empire*.

Like all but one of the previous books in the series, these latest London Classics are products of the 1930s vogue for what were dubbed 'proletarian novels'. It's an earnest, rather misleading label indicative of

turgid Soviet-era accounts of the sweat-soaked nobility of factory workers.

Instead, these now obscure novels portray the bleak lives of bookies, prostitutes and other chancers, offering an authentic English counterpart to the hardboiled American crime fiction of the period, fiction that exudes the doom-laden atmosphere of film noir.

Hard though it may be to believe, James Curtis and Robert Westerby were once fashionable writers with thriving careers. Curtis began with a flurry of novels, immediately optioned by the British movie industry, yet he ended up impoverished and forgotten. Westerby, on the other hand, abandoned domestic literary success in favour of a comfortable living as a screenwriter in California, working on wholesome Disney productions.

Thanks to a similarly titled Farley Grainger movie and an under-rated 1938 film adaptation starring Emlyn Williams, *They Drive By Night* possesses an aura of superficial familiarity. In essence Curtis's novel is a sparely written, tightly constructed story about an ex-convict on the run from the police, fleeing through what Jonathan

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Meades describes as a world of 'coal gas and swill, soot and smuts, bleach and carbolic, drains and lard, Woodbines and belching tea-urns'.

Robert Westerby's companion volume occupies a milieu just as blighted and shabby. His protagonist, Jim Bankley, is another outsider, this time a 'wide boy', harbinger of the 1940s spiv, what Iain Sinclair calls 'a non-working, working-class bum'. Impressed by a visiting bookie and his shifty sidekicks, Bankley abandons his dreary job and squalid home in a northern industrial town, then accompanies the bookie to London, lured by the prospect of sex and easy money.

Reading *They Drive By Night* and *Wide Boys Never Work* feels akin to watching classic British movies of the period: *Brighton Rock* or *It*

Always Rains on Sunday, the type of movies where the sun seldom seems to penetrate the sooty fug, where the black and white cinematography lends the dismal locations a lustrous quality. The novels of Curtis and Westerby share the same sense of claustrophobia and foreboding. They even share many of the same settings: dog tracks, smoky pubs, all-night caffs, and down-at-heel drinking clubs where pencil-moustached, Brycreemed predators circle their prey. When these books were first published, this was a world that most people would have recognised. Now it's every bit as exotic as the London evoked by Dickens.

And there's certainly something Dickensian about the blend of distaste and relish with which Curtis and Westerby evoke England's pre-war underworld.

Paul Willetts will be discussing crime writing with Tom Rob Smith, author of the Booker Prize-longlisted novel *Child 44*, at the Halesworth Literary Festival on October 18 at 2pm (box office: 01986 874264).

