



## The Walworth Beauty

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**The Walworth Beauty** Michèle Roberts

**From the Booker-shortlisted author comes a sensuous, evocative novel exploring the lives of women in Victorian London, for fans of Sarah Waters, Emma Donoghue, and Kate Atkinson.**

2011: When Madeleine loses her job as a lecturer, she decides to leave her riverside flat in cobbled Stew Lane, where history never feels far away, and move to Apricot Place. Yet here too, in this quiet Walworth cul-de-sac, she senses the past encroaching: a shifting in the atmosphere, a current of unseen life.

1851: and Joseph Benson has been employed by Henry Mayhew to help research his articles on the working classes. A family man with mouths to feed, Joseph is tasked with coaxing testimony from prostitutes. Roaming the Southwark streets, he is tempted by brothels' promises of pleasure – and as he struggles with his assignment, he seeks answers in Apricot Place, where the enigmatic Mrs Dulcimer runs a boarding house.

As these entwined stories unfold, alive with the sensations of London past and present, the two eras brush against each other – a breath at Madeleine's neck, a voice in her head – the murmurs of ghosts echoing through time. Rendered in immediate, intoxicating prose, *The Walworth Beauty* is a haunting tale of desire and exploitation, isolation and loss, and the faltering search for human connection; this is Michèle Roberts at her masterful best.

## The Walworth Beauty Details

Date : Published November 14th 2017 by Bloomsbury Publishing (first published April 20th 2017)

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Author : Michèle Roberts

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## From Reader Review The Walworth Beauty for online ebook

### Leigh Library says

Leigh Library Open Book Club meets on the third Saturday of every month.

The Set book for 22nd of July meeting was, The Walworth Beauty by Michelle Roberts. The Book promoted a lively debate and strong feelings, among the group. Here below are the group's revues about this title.

“ To Begin with the style of the dialogue requires getting used to. It became natural by the time I was half way through. But it does become difficult if more than two characters are speaking.

I Liked the part when Madeline was taken to see the play at Bart's great Hall. The Audience became part of the story. How her Red dress picked her out of the mass. It was an interesting concept but whether it would hold general interest is debateable.

Joseph's life is a curious one, it was difficult to feel sympathy for what happened to him. Joseph was employed as a researcher by a Newspaper, a job he didn't care for too much. The story drifted from location to location and the character's never met till the last page, it was all a bit frustrating towards the end. Even though they came together at last, they still didn't quite recognise each other. Was it all a dream? The ending didn't offer any closure or depth to the story.

The Juxtaposition of these differing lives in differing times didn't quite gel for me. I can read them as two separate lives, It didn't give any insight into their differing experience, (One in the 19th, one in the 21st Century.) The only link was the coincidence of the address of where they lived.

Having said this I enjoyed the vivid descriptions of Victorian and 21st Century London, but unfortunately The stories to me, didn't entwine as much as the publishers advertised. “

Michelle Roberts

“The broken sentences did not make it easy Reading”

Margaret Williams

“I loved the beautiful evocative language. There were some well-drawn characters and an intriguing story concerning Joseph Benson, Well plotted and well told. I loved the glorious character of Mrs Dulcimer the Walworth Beauty.”

Patricia Neil

“I enjoyed the Poetic Language. However, there didn't seem to be any workable plot for this story. The lack of speech marks, made it very difficult to know, if somebody was holding a conversation, or they were thinking. I didn't Read the novel to the end, because even though I skipped a third of the book, It seemed I was reading about the same Situation.”

Pamela Buxton

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### Jane says

Became very tedious and the story never seemed to progress

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### **Ian Lambert says**

Here's a record - I gave up at page 177 despairing that this book ever becoming interesting or fluent. Roberts has an annoying trick of laying down an action and then revisiting everything that leads up to it in disjointed non-linear ways which include asides of what everyone is thinking about the present and the past - which would be OK if she rewarded her readers. She doesn't. Doubtless there is a reason for this irritating discourse but I couldn't be bothered sticking around to find out what it was.

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### **Elizabeth Best says**

I received a proof copy as part of a Goodreads Giveaway competition. So hopefully the lack of quotation marks will be added - it took me until half way through to get used to it. Her writing style is also hard to get used to. Her sentences do not flow, some are often several words that don't grammatically make a sentence: "Bare boards" is one example of a complete sentence. She would keep jumping back and forth between flashbacks and present time. It was hard to keep up with whether Joseph was having a bath or walking down some street meeting prostitutes.

Spoilers ahead:

Apart from that, the story itself was poor. Joseph's story was not that interesting - he was moping too much after his dead wife and all the sex they had, racked up a lot of debt, kept turning up at someone's house even when he wasn't wanted and lost his job. He wasn't a nice person at all! There was little plot and it all just seemed an excuse to talk about prostitutes and sex. Madeline's story was even worse. None of the characters felt real, and none of her chapters added anything to the story. She basically was worried that she had a stalker and felt the ghosts of the past which wasn't explained at all and it never felt finished - she basically met Joseph but he just disappeared. It was just so unexplained. The ending felt rushed and unfinished. Did Joseph run after his family at all? Did Madeline stop feeling like there was a presence with her? What about Mrs Dulcimer, Doll and Annie?

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### **Nicole Beaudry says**

A perfectly lovely, disorienting read. I actually really enjoyed it, just...not enough.

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### **Sandra says**

'Perhaps ghosts represent the possibility of stories. Something unfinished that needs recounting.'

This book flips from South London 1851 where we meet Joseph a researcher for Mayhew who has been assigned to collect data on prostitution.

We then move forward to 2011 where Madeleine is at a crossroads, she has been made redundant as a lecturer and decides to move to South London.

The story is set specifically in Apricot Place in a residence that impacts on both characters and timelines.

Michele Roberts prose enabled me to visualise what 19th century London would of been like; it's smells, textures and obstacles.

I also liked the development of Joseph's character his ghosts and flaws. However the ending just left too much unfinished.

I did find Madeleine a effective contrast initially but felt that opportunities were missed to make this part more interesting. What stories did she write? What characters did she research, none of this was fully revealed only implied. She just seemed to be going for walks, drinking wine and having half engaged conversations. I believe she was suppose to parallel Mrs. Dulcimer as the modern Walworth Beauty which didn't really translate to the end but was also weakly constructed.

There was so much I enjoyed in the first half of this book but the ending didn't work for me at all. Ghosts and feminine inequality were also strong themes that didn't really lead to an effective end.

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### **booksofallkinds says**

I wasn't sure what to expect from **THE WALWORTH BEAUTY** by Michèle Roberts and was pleasantly surprised at this deep and meaningful tale of love and life moving from the past to present. In 1851 Joseph's eyes are harshly opened to the reality of life for a woman as he gathers research for Henry Mayhew, while in 2011 Madeleine throws herself back into the past as she becomes engrossed in Mayhew's findings.

Through Roberts excellent writing skills that ebb and flow at the perfect moment, the reader becomes a part of the tale effortlessly as you want to soak in everything this story has to offer. **THE WALWORTH BEAUTY** by Michèle Roberts is an enigmatic and often unsettling story that is about women at its heart - their wants, their needs, their desires, hopes & dreams, and their harsh realities, which transcend time and place to capture the attention of us all. A captivating and thought-provoking read.

\*I voluntarily reviewed this book from Netgalley.com

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### **Kali Napier says**

A dual timeline narrative, set in London 1851 and 2011, this tells of one of Thomas Mayhew's researchers, Joseph, who is tasked with investigating the living conditions of Southwark's prostitutes, and Madeleine, who walks and cooks and eats after losing her job as an English lecturer. This is a plodding book, in both a reading and walking sense, and there is much made of authors' tendencies to roam the streets of London — see Virginia Woolf. This book feels more like metafiction than a satisfying historical novel, as Roberts alludes to feeling the ghosts of authors behind the stories that are written. There are so many beautiful passages in this novel, but unfortunately, the stories about prostitutes and women's limited choices, circle around each other without really any point.

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### **Sandra Danby says**

From the first page, I knew this was going to be one of those reads rich in historical scents and sensations, a

story to lose yourself in. ‘The Walworth Beauty’ by Michèle Roberts is set in the London district of Walworth, just south of the River Thames and part of the Borough of Southwark. It tells the story of Joseph Benson in 1851 and Madeleine in 2011, 160 years apart but experiencing so many similar things.

Madeleine loses her job as a lecturer of English literature, as a result she moves to a garden flat in Apricot Place, Walworth. She is delicately attuned to the history of London, walking its streets and seeing Virginia Woolf walking ahead of her, Hilda Doolittle passing her by, and, in a basement kitchen in Lamb’s Conduit Street, a mistress instructing her new housemaid. Just how closely Madeleine is connected to the past becomes clearer in the second half of the story as she explores Walworth, researching its local history and meeting her new neighbours.

Joseph and his family live in a rented house in Lamb’s Conduit Street. He works for sociologist Henry Mayhew, researching the working conditions and social backgrounds of prostitutes in Walworth. Joshua is a contradictory character, perhaps a man of his time with contemporary attitudes and assumptions about women. Still mourning his idolised first wife Nathalie, he is outwardly respectable but has money problems. He is a spendthrift and betrays Cara his second wife [and Nathalie’s older sister] by visiting prostitutes, viewing it as a necessity so Cara will not conceive again, rather than unfaithfulness. His research takes him to a house in Apricot Place where he meets landlady Mrs Dulcimer, an exotic brown-skinned woman who Joshua mistakes for a madam but who in fact helps struggling young women to establish themselves with jobs and homes.

The theme of classification runs throughout this novel, the formal type of labelling as in Mayhew’s study and the Dewey Decimal labelling system for libraries, but also the informal way of labelling people, pre-judging, jumping to conclusions. Mayhew classifies prostitutes as criminals and it is with this view that Joseph conducts his first research. In meeting Mrs Dulcimer, however, he learns the true stories of struggle and abandonment in the lives of many of the women he labels so easily as whores. He is an unreliable judge of women’s characters, however, even those closest to him.

We see similar classifications in Madeleine’s story in modern-day Walworth. There are themes of grief, longing for what is out of reach, women’s position in society and men’s attitudes towards women and sexuality. Judgements based on class and sex. The two storylines are connected in places by hints of ghosts or presences, which I found a little unsatisfactory. This is a novel about the different parts of society, some isolated, some overlapping like a Venn diagram, and as true today as in Victorian London.

I enjoyed unpicking the connections between 1851 and 2011, handled so delicately that it would be easy to pass them by. Such as Mrs Dulcimer’s missing earring, surrendered as an identifying token at the Foundling Hospital when she handed in her baby, is seen by Madeleine in a display at the Foundling Museum. There are countless examples like this of mirrored details and parallel experiences, connecting Joseph and Mrs Dulcimer with Madeleine.

‘The Walworth Beauty’ is one of the most enjoyable books I have read this year and is worth re-reading to absorb the beautiful detail written by a novelist entwined with her story and subject.

Read more of my book reviews at <http://www.sandradanby.com/book-reviews/>

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## **Andrew says**

Another over-rated new book!

Two stories set about 150 years apart but supposedly related - but really very tenuous and just another selling point. Joseph’s story by far the more interesting, though quite crude in places; Madeleine’s really very muddled and boring. Then there’s the pretentiousness of writing speech with no speech marks just to add to confusion (or illiteracy!). And both just peter out into nothingness.

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### **Mandy says**

In 1851 family man Joseph is commissioned by Henry Mayhew to conduct research into the lives of prostitutes in South London for Mayhew's monumental work *London Labour and the London Poor*. In 2011 recently divorced Madeleine hopes to start a new life in Bermondsey. Two lives that are separated by more than a century begin to intersect across time – although not very convincingly in my opinion. For it to be successful such a dual-time narrative needs to have both strands firmly interwoven but unfortunately that doesn't happen here. That the action takes place in the same geographical area isn't enough to make the two stories connect. Both protagonists are perhaps loosely connected by their concern for the young women they meet, in Madeleine's case some young friends of hers, but the two concerns aren't equal in importance or relevance. I enjoyed Joseph's story, which seemed both interesting and convincing but I was simply bored by Madeleine and found the ghostly elements of the story neither interesting nor convincing. So a book of two halves? Indeed – but not equal halves and by the end I had pretty much lost interest in both the lead characters.

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### **Gill says**

'The Walworth Beauty' by Michèle Roberts

3 stars/ 6 out of 10

I have read several other books by Michèle Roberts, so was interested in reading this latest novel of hers.

In 'The Walworth Beauty' Michèle Roberts has written two interconnecting stories, one set in 2011 and the other in 1851.

As always, Roberts' language is lush and evocative.

I much preferred the 1851 sections of the novel, with their strong connection to Henry Mayhew's investigations into the makeup and living conditions of the poor of London at that time. I was drawn into these sections in a way that made me feel I was gaining some understanding of what life was like at the time.

Thank you to Bloomsbury Publishing and to NetGalley for an ARC.

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### **Anne Fenn says**

I really enjoyed this book. It's made me remember how interesting Victorian England is. The two stories intertwine quite cleverly, one character set in modern London, one in the past. The writing is richly descriptive. The plot include elements of suspense, romance and tragedy. Easy reading, very rewarding if you like books set in the past, especially details of old London.

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## **Sam Still Reading says**

I do love a story with a dual timeline, especially one that includes London and its history. When I first heard about *The Walworth Beauty*, I was really intrigued. I didn't know very much about Henry Mayhew and to read about one of his researchers sounded like a great way to learn some history combined in fiction. But what really struck me on reading this book was the strength of Michele Roberts' prose. It's dense, poetic and lyrical. It sweeps you up in the London fog and puts you right in the place of some of the action, Apricot Place.

The story is split into two parts, almost modern day London (2011) with Madeleine and in 1851 with Joseph. Madeleine is discontent with her life – she lost her job as a lecturer and now living in the heart of London's City district doesn't feel quite right. So she moves out to South London to Apricot Place. The people there are different – friendly, exotic and somehow more real life. With more time Madeleine becomes interested in the works of Henry Mayhew and the past comes back to touch her. In 1851, Joseph used to be a police clerk, until dysentery and sickness took him away. Now he's a researcher for Henry Mayhew, being paid to ask questions of the working class people of London, in particular prostitutes. It's a tempting place for Joseph and after his coat is taken at one house, he is intrigued by Mrs Dulcimer who hides a lot of secrets...

No matter what time period you're reading about, the setting is incredibly realistic. It's clear that Roberts has done her research carefully, right down to the last detail. London is lovingly rendered, both the good and the less desirable. I felt that Joseph's past was incredibly well rendered and true to the issues of the time. Another thing that struck me is the use of food – Madeleine cooks various dishes and reflects on those eaten by Mayhew's subjects. Food also plays a role in Joseph's home life – from the horrible chops to the more desirable street food.

I did find Joseph's story more interesting than Madeleine's, possibly because of the setting. It's rich with detail unfamiliar to me, while I know already what Madeleine's daily life looks like in London. Hence I didn't always find her connections to the past convincing. I found myself more comfortable in Joseph's world. But overall, I thought the prose was the standout of this story – rich and leaving me wanting more.

Thank you to Bloomsbury for the ARC of this book. My review is honest.

<http://samstillreading.wordpress.com>

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## **Paul Reid says**

I found this really dull and tedious. The characters were not very appealing. The story seemed to promise something but didn't deliver. I nearly gave up several times. It was boring and the writing style was odd and confusing. It morphed into a weird and bizarre ghost story that was just plain stupid.

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