

BOOK REVIEWS

Laura Shapiro: *What She Ate. Six Remarkable Women & the Food That Tells Their Stories*: 4th Estate, 2018: 307 pp., hardback, £14.99.

A new book from Laura Shapiro is always welcome. She is eminently readable; she accords her subject the respect it deserves, and the hard work of fossicking among archives, libraries and other sources too. And she has an eye for topics, the present title no exception. Her six women are Dorothy Wordsworth, Rosa Lewis, Eleanor Roosevelt, Eva Braun, Barbara Pym, and Helen Gurley Brown. In most of these accounts there's a touch of pathos, if not tragedy, in the connections of the main characters and the kitchen. She tells of the decline of Rosa Lewis of the Cavendish Hotel from the premier private cook of pre-First World War London to the cartoon, bibulous Cockney of the Second; Helen Gurley Brown, who I had always thought of as the woman who could do everything, is portrayed as an orthorexic, borderline anorexic with a very worrying attitude to food, prose style and normal life; Eva Braun was another woman with issues – she must remain slim, but never loath to down some more champagne; and Eleanor Roosevelt seems to have wrapped her unhappy marriage in shrouds of bad food. The most cheerful chapter is devoted to Barbara Pym: showing that there was yet hope for good British cooking. I found each of these revealing, if only in their emphasis on the trouble with food. The most sensational, for me, were the Americans – Roosevelt and Gurley Brown – but the tale of Dorothy Wordsworth's decline into a guzzling madwoman was impressive too. And instructive as well as amusing is the author's account of her own irrational approach to the kitchen once she had married: from normal to manic via one easy ceremony. Because the intent of the book is to link food to an individual's life story, there are moments when the reader may detect a whiff of special pleading. After all, the subjects themselves would not have had the first idea what she was talking about, and the connection she seeks is difficult for anyone to unpick. But the effort is worth it. Bravo. A Prospect Book supporter, however, would be surprised that there is no mention of *À la Pym: The Barbara Pym Cookery Book*, written and compiled by her sister Hilary and Honor Wyatt (an earlier version of which had been published in America in 1988).

David W. Gutzke and Michael John Law: *The Roadhouse Comes to Britain. Drinking, Driving and Dancing, 1925–1955*: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017: 181 pp., hardback, £91.80.

It may be a consolation that you can buy this for £85 on Amazon, or £73 direct from the publisher online. The way we are being held to ransom by academic publishers is regrettable. No private individual could contemplate