General editor's introduction

In this thoughtful, well-researched and ground-breaking book, Robert James advances a revisionist interpretation of working-class taste in 1930s Britain. In doing so, he seeks to merge the often antipathetic structuralist and culturalist approaches to the subject in an analysis of both text and context, production and consumption. He examines the cultural assumptions and attitudes of the largely middle-class authorities and arbiters of taste, and compares them with the evidence of popular choice, derived from a range of important primary sources such as Mass-Observation, the Bernstein Questionnaires and the Miners' Institute ledgers. He carefully establishes the economic, social and ideological contexts by analysing the choices and motivations of the producers and consumers of popular culture and the strategies of advertising and promotion. Having established the context, he undertakes a comparative study of Portsmouth, Derby and South Wales, chosen for their geographical spread and socio-economic differences, to assess in depth and detail the nature of working-class taste. A unique feature of the book is his examination of cinema-going and reading habits side by side. These two pastimes have normally been studied separately. His conclusion, contrary to the conventional wisdom, that the working-class consumer was an active and not a passive agent and that there were regional variations in taste rather than a single uniform national working-class taste, is consistent and persuasive. He is careful however not to reject the idea that some tastes transcended region and locality and he fascinatingly establishes that the most popular author in the tuppenny libraries and the most filmed author of the decade was one and the same – Edgar Wallace. This confident, well-informed and subtly argued study makes a significant contribution to our understanding of inter-war popular culture.