

THURSDAY'S BOOK

No Lease on Life by Lynne Tillman (Secker & Warburg, £9.99)

Why did Lynne Tillman cross the road? After Freud, we know to take jokes as seriously as dreams when analysing consciousness. Jokes punctuate Tillman's new novel, as they do with much theoretical writing after Freud. Tillman has written three previous novels, and collections of short fiction, while her notably exact criticism about art, films and writing was recently collected in *The Broad Picture*.

Tillman excavates superficially simple, joke-like questions, in order to tease out their attitudes and assumptions. This could become very laboured, and in her early work she didn't quite pull it off. Her new book asks the question of how we should articulate the experience of living in one of the world's major cities at the end of the 20th century. The idiosyncratic way in which she responds in this exquisite short novel represents a culmination of all that she has been doing until now. This is her finest work.

No Lease on Life tells of 24 hours in

the life of Elizabeth, a proofreader and resident of New York's East Village. She is tormented by the noise and imbecilic intrusions of the city, primarily by the way it ruins her sleep and soils her day. She wants to do something about it. The book tells of some of the things she does and some of the things she fantasises about doing – such as killing the infernal morons who disrupt her life from the street below.

Tillman is a writer of rare intelligence who knows that in writing a story, "the form of its telling will be part of its meaning". She wants to challenge complacency, to "unconventionalise", in the ultimate hope that we can "think beyond our limits". Such intentions, particularly those produced by critical theory, are notoriously difficult to translate into compelling fiction. But in conjuring the dense psychological life of a city, especially the fragilities of people who want something more, Tillman has achieved that profoundly difficult thing.

No Lease on Life embodies those urban battlegrounds where everything is always at stake; where space, privacy, and reflection have to be fought for, their possibility fiercely insisted upon amid chaotic, overwhelming reality. The novel charts Elizabeth's fight against landlords, incompetent "supers", flashers, complacent cops and neighbours. Despite some good jokes, it makes for grim reading as a whole and very grim reading in parts. But there are several degrees of optimism here, too, in her determined survival "in spite of everything" and in strategic victories which restore some dignity and purpose.

To encounter a writer of Tillman's acute intelligence writing as well as this is a cause for real celebration. Anyone crossing the road just to get to the other side should stop and engage with her angular approach to life and language, both in her essays and in this essential novel about the millennial city.

Guy Mannes-Abbott