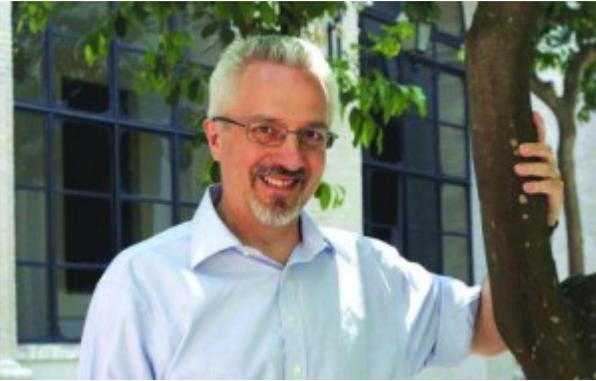


'Stranger's Child' Estranges Interest

Boredom, identical in effect, is the offspring of a million causes. I can happily watch the moon rise over the beach, changing colors as it climbs higher into the sky, while another person would consider walking into the water and never walking out again a much more pleasant alternative activity. I thought about this as I plodded through Alan Hollinghurst's new novel *The Stranger's Child*, a beautifully written book that at times bored me to distraction, yet managed to hold my interest in the vain hope that something, anything interesting might happen.



The story traces the fortunes of two British families, the upper-class Valances and the middle-class-but-aspiring-to-higher-ground Sawles, from just before World War I through the late 1990s. Cecil Valance, the flamboyant elder son and heir to the Valance fortune, is a dandified omni-sexual poet who will die in the war and whose poem 'Two Acres' takes its name from the modest estate of the Sawle family. Cecil writes the poem for sixteen-year-old Daphne Sawle in the summer of 1913, and following his passing this verse will be immortalized, anthologized, memorized by generations of schoolchildren, and provide the rickety axle upon which the wheel of the novel turns. The rather torrid affair Cecil carries on with George Sawle, a friend of his from college, remains secret for the better part of the twentieth century, and this is probably a good thing, because he may or may not be the father of George Sawle's younger sister Daphne's first child, Corinna.

If the bulk of the text was devoted to how Cecil's secret has affected his legacy and the way his contribution to English letters, particularly war poetry, has been received, it might be a more focused and interesting book. But Hollinghurst chooses instead to direct his attention to the evolution of the stigma attached to same-sex relationships in England, and to the slow decay of both the gilded world Cecil and the Sawles came from and the physical and material dissolution of the people who occupied it.

During Cecil's life, and for a long time afterwards, it was a crime to engage in homosexuality in England, a crime for which Oscar Wilde was only the most famous perpetrator to be imprisoned. Hollinghurst spends a lot of time making sure that the reader understands that Cecil's sexuality, as well as the tendencies of those who become intrigued by him, are only a minor part of the overall story of this minor poet who died before he could have flowered into something more substantial than the obscure footnote to literary history he became.

And therein lies the great drawback of the story. Hollinghurst has done too good a job of rendering his main character and any drama that might have obtained in unearthing the full truth about him obscure. Time tends to make utterly invisible today's dramas and catastrophes, and in telling the story of Cecil Valance and the people he influenced, Hollinghurst hammers this point mercilessly. It is impossible not

to feel empathy for the individual characters, particularly Daphne Sawle, who marries Cecil's odious brother Dudley before moving on to two subsequent and, hopefully, more fulfilling matches. Daphne, a sprightly, alcoholic bon vivant whose downward trajectory in life is as sad as her own irrepressible spirit is inspiring, is the most human of all the people here, and Hollinghurst's cartography of her journey from lively adolescent to elderly woman is touching and superbly rendered.

The rest of the cast are for the most part reprehensibly predatory, regardless of their distance from Cecil and Daphne. Consumed to various degrees as they are by advancing either their careers or their personal obsessions via an explication, public or private, of Cecil's story, they use whatever tenuous connection they have to the pre-war world and its denizens only to advance their own agendas.

Another kind of explication is happening, subtly, via this line of narrative: the sewage pit of celebrity stalking. There is something vaguely parasitic about almost everyone here, as they blunder on through the books they write about Cecil and the interviews they conduct as they try to invest themselves with some significance by digging up as much dirt as they can about a poet who was killed in war they never saw and the woman he may or may not have fathered a child with.

But Hollinghurst will not give in to the temptation that must have presented itself multiple times throughout the composition of this book; he will not let the novel devolve into a literary detective story. There will be no stunning revelations, no surprise endings, no fantastic reveals that turn the lives of the families here upside down, only the constant reemphasis of the grim truth everyone with a brain that has passed through adolescence already knows; nothing we hold dear and nothing we think is important and nothing we would sacrifice almost everything for really matters that much in the long view.

There's an old Charlie Brown cartoon whose punch line reads "Five hundred years from now, who's going to know the difference?" *The Stranger's Child* is nearly four hundred fifty pages of the same message. Exquisitely written and promising, but finally tedious and disappointing.