

*Mansfield: A Novel* by C.K. Stead (Harvill)

22 August 2004

Fiction based on the lives of writers have become a genre unto itself. After the success of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy and Michael Cunningham's *The Hours*, there have recently been two novels about Henry James, Emma Tennant's *Felony* and Colm Tóibín's *The Master*, with a third, David Lodge's *Author, Author*, to follow next month. Katherine Mansfield, the New Zealand writer who died in 1923 at the age of thirty-four, offers an absorbing subject: unconventional, sexually adventurous, strikingly attractive, witty, malicious, passionately dedicated to her art. She was part of the London literary scene when Bloomsbury was at its height; she was published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, and shared, with her husband-to-be, John Middleton Murry, a little community with D.H. Lawrence and his wife Frieda; she flirted with Bertrand Russell and travelled across France in the midst of the First World War. Lawrence used her as the model for his character Gudrun in his great novel *Women in Love*. Virginia Woolf, in the privacy of her journal, called Mansfield's exquisite short stories "the only writing I have ever been jealous of."

In itself, then, the life has quite enough interest. Stead's achievement is to transmute these facts into a believable novel, and Mansfield into a character as fully imagined and concretely realised as any in fiction. All too often a relentlessly researched novel becomes a thinly fictionalised biography, the characters dutifully mouthing the facts unearthed by their author. Stead, by contrast, enters into the minds of his characters, and creates an illusion of spontaneous action untrammelled by pre-existing facts.

Mansfield's life is not the life of a martyr or a saint. She was self-willed, ambitious, promiscuous, and often cruel; her sense of entitlement bordered on arrogance, her honesty on brutality.

She married her first husband to provide respectability for the child she was carrying that was not his, then walked out on him.

Leaving her lover, Jack Middleton Murry, for the Frenchman Francis Carco, her letter to Jack adds insult to injury: "I'm going away to be with Carco. I know this will hurt you, but not very much really." Returning, she informs him that "She would be at Victoria in the morning. She would be grateful if he would please meet her there. But he should not assume she was returning to him. That was something yet to be decided."

Meeting her adored younger brother, she takes him to a tea shop: "She ordered a pot of tea, and cakes which she knew he would like, and would pay for." This small detail captures her love of her brother, but also her imperious air and the acceptance of someone else's generosity as her due.

The younger brother in question, Leslie, was the great love of Mansfield's life, and his death in the First World War its great loss. Stead deals delicately and unsentimentally with her grief, which for a while threatens to incapacitate her for other human relations and for her work. Selfish in her grief as in all other relations, she nevertheless gradually grows to accept her affection for Murry as a stabilising factor, and learns to recognise her own frantic grasp at the opportunities life offers her as a fear which she shies away from examining: "Of course she was afraid. At times the fear came right into her life, took up

residence, disrupted her days and her nights and refused to go away; at others, it withdrew, out of sight.”

Ultimately, Stead manages to engage our interest and even our sympathy and admiration for someone who might easily have seemed purely a monster of selfishness. His account of Mansfield’s many entanglements is sober and unblinkered but entirely unjudgemental; he relishes, like Mansfield herself, the many creative and unconventional people she mixes with. .

Figures familiar from other contexts come vividly to life as Stead describes them from Mansfield’s point of view. Here is D.H. Lawrence: “His silent stare was uncharming, almost impolite, but neutral and strong, as if its point was not to make an impression but to gain one.”

With Virginia Woolf Mansfield has a mutually appreciative but cautious relationship: “She was cat-like, a particularly well-bred, long-faced feline, with nice fur and perfect cat-manners, capable of purring and rubbing up against one, but with sharp unscrupulous claws.” And the society hostess Lady Ottoline Morrel, over-bearing, exotic, effusive, is characterised through her voice alone: “Her voice was unduly loud, absurdly rich, extravagantly aristocratic, somewhere between a croon and a boom.”

The novel fascinatingly opens perspectives on the First World War from the point of view of the relatively privileged classes, the artists and pacifists assembled around Lady Ottoline. Opposition to the war is taken for granted in these circles, and Stead does not dwell on its horrors, but he does, through the poet Fred Goodyear, bring home its sad futility. Looking at some German prisoners, Fred “felt no animosity and detected none only the strangeness that, lacking any very clear reason, the two sides were engaged in trying to destroy one another.”

Fred, another of Mansfield’s lovers, is killed in action, and the war that at one stage she was inclined to see as extraneous to her slowly asserts its grim presence even in her life. Stead, who also edited Mansfield’s letters and journals, covers only a few years of her life, and ends his story at the point when she is writing furiously and prolifically, having found the voice and the technique that were to establish her as one of the great short story writers of the twentieth century. This is also when she first faces the signs of the tuberculosis that was to kill her, and resolves to leave her mark: “If I have to go ... I’ll go quietly but not quickly, and I will leave my fingerprints on things.”

Stead has in this novel left another, unforgettable, set of finger prints.