

The Stranger's Child by Alan Hollinghurst (Picador)
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Alan Hollinghurst is credited with bringing the gay novel out of the closet and into respectability. Indeed, his previous novel, *The Line of Beauty*, won the coveted Man Booker Award, thereby signalling to the world at large that Literature can accommodate even the unbridled cavortings of the minority.

The Stranger's Child, Hollinghurst's fifth novel, is somewhat milder than its predecessors. Though a good half of its main characters are bisexual or gay, which is higher than the national average even for England, the cavortings now take place tastefully off-page.

Hollinghurst ambitiously takes on most of the twentieth century, two world wars and all, as experienced through two families and their ramifications. The first family is the only slightly upper middle-class Sawles, their self-consciously named family seat, 'Two Acres', proclaiming both the extent of their pride and the limits of their reach – compared with the several thousand acres of Corley Court, the seat of the other family, the aristocratic (but only just) Valances.

The two families become inextricably involved through the (extricable) involvement, at Cambridge, of their two scions, George Sawle and Cecil Valance. The year is 1913, and Cecil visits George at 'Two Acres'. A prolific though under-talented poet ('a first-rate example of the second-rate poet who enters into common consciousness more deeply than many greater masters,' one character comments acerbically), Cecil marks the occasion by writing a poem called 'Two Acres', which passes into school anthologies and the collective national unconscious in time (the model for this would seem to be Rupert Brooke's famous poem about Grantchester), despite the fact that it is unclear whether the poem was addressed to George or to his sixteen-year old sister Daphne.

History and literary convention alike dictate that a novel that opens in 1913 will have lost several of its characters by its end. This is no exception – except that Hollinghurst goes the convention one better by taking its characters also through the Second World War, thereby further reducing his dramatis personae. He does, however, compensate by supplementing, in five sections spanning the century, his cast with reinforcements from later eras; though with unobtrusive skill he manages to make that first weekend, and the poem written then, bind together later eras and characters as yet unborn.

Selfish, vain and yet adored, Cecil Valance casts his baleful light over the whole novel, even though he disappears from it between the first and second sections – in, of course, the Great War.

The main link in this concatenation of memory is Daphne Sawle, whom we first meet as a bedizened sixteen-year old waiting excitedly for the arrival of the glamorous Cecil, and take leave from, three marriages later, as a doughty octogenarian warding off the prying of young Paul Bryant, the awful bank clerk turned literary biographer, who is stalking her for 'smut', as she puts it, for his biography of Cecil Valance.

The Stranger's Child is about memory and forgetting, and the strange vicissitudes of both. Daphne pronounces one of the novel's implications in her trenchant way: 'She said it was funny how some people emerged from the great backward and abyss while others were wholly forgotten.'

Daphne herself has written her memoirs, about which the critical consensus is that they are wildly unreliable. And no wonder; as she herself reflects: 'The fact was that all the interesting and decisive things in her adult life had happened when she was more or less tight: she had little recall of anything that occurred after about 6.45.'

As for Cecil: ‘Really, Cecil means nothing to me – I was potty about him for five minutes sixty years ago.’

As these samplings will show, *The Stranger’s Child* is firmly anti-romantic. One of its themes, in fact, is the inevitable decline of starry-eyed randiness into the light of common day. George reflects, only thirteen years after his rapturous fling with Cecil: ‘the plain truth was that months went past without his thinking of him. .. It would have been strange, in some middle-aged drawing-room, to have stood on the hearthrug with Sir Cecil, in blank disavowal of their mad sodomitical past.’ And on our last view of him, George is ‘completely bald on top, the white beard long and straggly, looks a bit mad.’

Cecil, then, may have been lucky in being spared the devastations of age, and to be remembered, with whatever ambivalence, as the golden youth he once was. But if the passing of time, in Hollinghurst’s darkly mordant account, cannot but be a melancholy affair, the novel grips as vigorously at its dark close as at its sunlit beginning. The writing, of course, is as finely honed as a scalpel; and somewhere under the disillusioned mutterings of second-rate people drifts what T.S. Eliot called ‘the notion of some infinitely gentle/ Infinitely suffering thing.’