



The Stranger's Child

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From the Man Booker Prize-winning author of *The Line of Beauty*: a magnificent, century-spanning saga about a love triangle that spawns a myth, and a family mystery, across generations.

In the late summer of 1913, George Sawle brings his Cambridge schoolmate—a handsome, aristocratic young poet named Cecil Valance—to his family's modest home outside London for the weekend. George is enthralled by Cecil, and soon his sixteen-year-old sister, Daphne, is equally besotted by him and the stories he tells about Corley Court, the country estate he is heir to. But what Cecil writes in Daphne's autograph album will change their and their families' lives forever: a poem that, after Cecil is killed in the Great War and his reputation burnished, will become a touchstone for a generation, a work recited by every schoolchild in England. Over time, a tragic love story is spun, even as other secrets lie buried—until, decades later, an ambitious biographer threatens to unearth them.

Rich with Hollinghurst's signature gifts—haunting sensuality, delicious wit and exquisite lyricism—*The Stranger's Child* is a tour de force: a masterly novel about the lingering power of desire, how the heart creates its own history, and how legends are made.

This eBook edition includes a Reading Group Guide.

The Stranger's Child Details

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From Reader Review The Stranger's Child for online ebook

Shovelmonkey1 says

This book rescued me. For that I am eternally grateful. It rescued me from lapsing into a boredom induced coma while sitting in a hilux in a field in the middle of the Cheshire countryside. What was I doing sitting in a field in such an environmentally unfriendly vehicle? (Hey don't diss the hilux, that car is my baby)

I was sitting in a field waiting for a bunch of builders to turn up and dig some holes.... but they were at least two hours late every day. Now just because this book rescued me does not mean I'll be overcome and provide an effusive five star review. A solid three stars for a very solid book.

Unfortunately this book was solid in the way that chunky knit cardies, sensible shoes and school-dinner puddings are solid; a sort of presentable filling English solidness which persisted beyond the end of the Edwardian era and was then well and truly squished by the end of WWII. There are elements of glamour at the beginning (pre WWI) when the novel's beating, erotically charged heart Cecil Valance, makes an appearance, but once he's off the scene the rest of the people just aren't quite as interesting. Cecil had a vibrancy and vivacity that were very much his own, much like dear Sebastian in Brideshead. And there it is - the inevitable but probably unavoidable comparison with Waugh and as the story develops, with Ian McEwan also. Most other reviewers have referenced these 20th century writers as well so I'm not telling you anything new really, just a gentle reminder.

The story chases a meandering path through five generations of a family and pretty much traces the decline of the lower branches of the Edwardian aristocracy through two wars and up to the present day. Wealth is divided, family homes sold off and turned into schools, former diamond armoured matriarchs with scandalous youths behind them holed up in states of semi-reclusive dilapidation in small cottages in the Home Counties. You can smell the moth balls and spilled gin leaping off the page at you. And because it is Hollinghurst there is one gay character per generation of provides a voice for the group.

Well written with some lovely details but personally I'd rather have read an entire book based in Cecil Valance's exploits.

K.D. Absolutely says

Reading *The Stranger's Child* is like visiting a multi-leveled beautiful museum with each level dedicated to showcase a certain period in a nation's history.

Oh I still remember the delight and mixed feelings that I had when I visited the Auckland Museum in 2002. The ground floor houses the Maori and early settlers' artifacts, plants and faunas exclusively found in New Zealand. The second floor houses the WWI (where the NZ government sent delegations to Europe) and the different battles around that time. The third floor houses the WWII history including the unforgettable corner on the Holocaust. I almost cried listening, with concentration camp artifacts surrounding me, to the taped testimonies of Holocaust survivors. NZ was not directly part of Hitler's invasion but NZ, just like its neighboring sister Australia, shares a lot of culture with Europe. There were even people who flee Nazi soldiers by taking a boat to New Zealand.

That was the first time I've been to a big preeminent museum so it was a memorable visit and I was even almost alone in that huge building for the whole day!!!

The reason why I likened this book, my second by Hollinghurst, *The Stranger's Child* to this museum is the fact that the plot runs through a three generations at different particular years in their lives. It starts in the 1920's and ends in the 2008. The switch from one part to another could be jarring, at least for me. Starting each part is like reading a new book with half of the characters new and the previous ones are older. Jarring because you tend to guess what happened in between and why is it focused on that year. Then you read on and get settled. But Hollinghurst ends that year and you have to go to the next distant year and you have to repeat the same experience.

However, the unseen thread, i.e., the theme, that unifies the whole book, is revealed in the end and it tied down the whole structure quite niftily. It's just that I wanted more. I wanted the story to have another year, say 2010's. I got attuned to Hollinghurst's tempo and trick and I wanted more.

I read some reviews though and I agree that while reading this book, if you have read some of the good British fictions, you will see some similarities about some parts of this book to what have already been written. I had a feeling at some points in my reading that Hollinghurst was craving for another Booker award so he concocted this book by incorporating what worked before in other Booker-winning works/English masterpieces:

One of the best English novels **Brideshead Revisited** by Evelyn Waugh - for the two gay men and one innocent girl spending one summer's day in an English estate;

1989 Booker Winner **Remains of the Day** by Kazuo Ishiguro - for the book's main message (my interpretation).

1990 Booker Winner **Possession** by A. S. Byatt - the poet as a character that unifies -as a backdraft - the whole story that runs through at least two generations;

2001 Booker Shortlisted **Atonement** by Ian McEwan - for the secret that was kept and revealed later;

2009 Booker Shortlisted **The Children's Book** by A. S. Byatt - the English family or families that grow from being young or children to adults to grandparents.

I am not a novelist, in fact I haven't really tried writing yet. However, I admired Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* and I gave it a 4-star rating here on Goodreads. But this book, *The Stranger's Child* for me seems to be written by him with another Booker as a target. I am not saying that it is not a good objective but it somehow compromised the whole *appeal* of the book. It's like an artist making a masterpiece statue getting the eyes of Venus, the smile of Mona Lisa, the lips of Angelina Jolie, the behind of Jennifer Lopez, the legs of Britney Spears and the bosom of Paris Hilton.

But the book has a huge scope, multiple layers, several story lines that can stand as separate books or short stories, many memorable characters and the writing is flawless. In the end, Hollinghurst delivered again.

It's just too big to fail. Too imposing not to notice. Too beautiful not to like.

Eric says

In a perverse delectation of delay I waited until the US release of *The Stranger's Child*. In spells of impatience I would Google the UK reviews, and read them in a skimming, self-protective way, veering from spoilers, and keeping mostly to the opening and closing paragraphs of generalized acclaim. From review to review the memes were *Brideshead Revisited* (there's an estate), *Atonement* (there's a naïve young girl), and the extent of the novel's ambition. I can say nothing about the alleged Waugh or McEwan parallels—but this novel is mightily ambitious. Hollinghurst hasn't worked on this scale before. Even to the last pages he's adding panels, drafting new figures and applying new glazes to the familiar colors of seemingly finished ones. The valid dissent—made best by Daniel Mendelsohn in the latest *New York Review of Books*—that the novel is decorous and undersexed and faintly reactionary—that Hollinghurst's antiquarianism is now detached from, and no longer strictly in service of, his subversion—shouldn't distract us from the technical expansion he has made, the enormous canvas he has filled.

Hollinghurst's first two novels, *The Swimming-Pool Library* (1988) and *The Folding Star* (1994), are contemporary benchmarks of the lyrical first-person—lush, atmospheric, and superbly modulated. The voice of Edward Manners in particular, narrator of *The Folding Star*, has a resonance, a reach, a verbal roominess that at times feels Humbert-like (his sexual obsession also Humbert-like). In *The Spell* (1997) Hollinghurst tried the lofty third person and an interwoven ensemble. I think I like *The Spell* more than most people—the style has a very bracing epigrammatic nip—but I *did* have some trouble distinguishing the four puppet-like principals, as they hopped in and out of each other's beds. The novel seems a crude prototype of the masterfully organized *The Line of Beauty*, the members of that novel's numerous cast (except Catherine) ample and finished and shown in the “full richness of their relation” (a Jamesian phrase I'm just making up as I type). I remember thinking: where does he go next? Well, he goes bigger. He doubles the number of characters, surveys England and its literary/sexual manners from 1913 to 2008, and mounts to a loftiness of narration just below that of the historian, while retaining all the domestic intimacy of a novelist of manners.

Hollinghurst reconciles the novelist and the historian, where their respective narrative styles of disclosure and insinuation conflict, in an episodic, even fragmentary structure, telling us how Things Change by showing us two families, and their lovers and servants and stalking biographers, as they live—heedlessly and free of portent—at widely spaced points in the twentieth century. These perches of alighting are the Georgian twilight of 1913, when gardens still spoke Tennyson; the voguish cynicism of 1926, grand rooms in Victorian piles “boxed in” the save on heating and hung with quasi-Cubist portraits, and whiskey and laughter in their mouths, and “archly suspicious” Stracheyesque superciliousness on their faces; a sleepy rural town in 1967, a landscape perhaps autobiographically dear to Hollinghurst, one of yearning and loneliness and cherished film stills of shirtless male stars; 1980, rain, machinations, rummaging in old memories; and 2008, where the dark strong room that once hid the gay love letters of 1913 is searched by the fitful light of an iPhone screen. I saw (heard?) Hollinghurst read last week. When asked from the audience about his historical research for the book, he replied that he kept research to a minimum—he wanted no frames or overtures, no cheesy inartistic portent, and simply wished to “plunge” the reader into the new strange place not knowing what year it was, or if they knew the people suddenly talking, and if not what relation these new people might have to the characters they *did* already know. The wars are fought, the headlines screech, the empire crumbles, the revelations shock...but off-stage. It is pertinent that Hollinghurst has translated Racine; he keeps the classical unities.

So...*The Stranger's Child* is ambitious. But does he pull it off? I think so. And it comforts me to think that the boring parts are just rough models for the Proustian mega-novel he'll drop on us in 2020. Hollinghurst also said after the grueling labor of *The Line of Beauty*, he started to write short stories, but the four or five he managed soon began to "twitch together" into this novel. It's really up to each reader to decide which episode is the most accomplished, and which the weak link. James Wood, in *The New Yorker*, raves about the third, the 1967, which bored me, even as I appreciated its thematic centrality. 1967 introduced new characters who never became quite as compelling as the Valances and the Sawles, the original two families. My own preference for the 1913 and 1926 sections in conjunction (together they take up a little less than half of the novel) perhaps points to my suspicion that, like *The Spell*, *The Stranger's Child* is a transitional work. Those ante- and immediately post-bellum episodes blew my mind, with their subtlety and sad wit, and each character's lifelike blend of alteration and continuity—and recall that *The Line of Beauty* really only manages a single time shift, 1983 to 1986, and that among a smallish stable of characters. Where does he go next?

Justina says

The two stars here rates my enjoyment level of this book rather than my valuation of the writing, which I'd give a four, and Hollinghurst's perceptive understandings of human foible and social identity. I'd give those a six. I perfectly understand the prize nominations and love of his work expressed widely on this site, but at the same time I was underwhelmed by the novel as a whole.

As a resume of a certain kind of middle class British repression centred on the theme of male homosexuality, gradually evolving from coded stuttering to coded flamboyance, it's a perfectly good portrait. The lesser portraits of all the characters that make it up are rounded, differentiated...it's all there. Taken as a whole the multiple views across the timespan are a beautifully put together thing, very satisfying in that respect.

And still I was bored senseless most of the time. Since this is true of me and many literary novels I put it down to a difference of taste and interest between myself and this genre of book. When I remove my personal reaction and look at it through the Artistic Value Goggles, it's very good. And I love his moments of insight, the breadth and depth of his vision, the metaphors, the complexity and even his sentences. Just...zzzz

Kim says

It's taken me a long time to get around to reading a Hollinghurst novel and I wish I'd done so sooner. His writing is a revelation: great characterisation, a wonderful evocation of time and place and beautiful, beautiful prose. One of the things I particularly love about this novel - which is in five sections, each set in a different year from 1913 to 2008 - is the way in which Hollinghurst plunges the reader into each part of the narrative. I also love seeing the central character, Daphne Sawle, at a number of stages in her life, from childhood to extreme old age. It's a bit like seeing a person's entire life, speeded up by time lapse photography. Overall, while the novel has its flaws, it's an interesting story, extremely well told. And it will

probably make me approach literary biographies differently in future. Hollinghurst really brings home how the sources used by biographers are only as reliable as their memory and their self-interest allow them to be. This was an extremely engaging novel to read and I very much enjoyed sharing it with my friend Jemidar.

Biogeek says

It kills me to give two stars to a book that took me the better part of a week to read, that has all the trappings of a book I would enjoy, and that will probably go on to win a mantel of literary awards. But, at the end of the 564 pages, I feel let down by weak story telling carefully hidden by lyrical writing, beautiful settings and a probing look at changes in British society over the last century.

Fans of the book have alluded to the author's ability to present readers with the subtlety of human emotion and reaction. I was bored very early by his constant descriptions of how every line was uttered, or actually meant something else. Every piece of dialog seems to be followed by an explanatory line. "'You have, you have,' said Daphne, feeling at once how the joy of discovery was shadowed by the sense of being left behind." Sometimes the dialog could have stood up by itself without the expository crutches. Like one of his minor characters, Hollinghurst seems to be enjoying a game of 'adverbs'.

I did enjoy the structure of the book, with the characters of Daphne and Cecil remaining central to the novel, but approached through the eyes of different characters during different parts of the 20th century. Hollinghurst takes a bit of a jab at the growing genre of literary mysteries-a-la-Dan Brown, leading us to believe that the true story is somewhere in the hidden letters of Cecil.

Mike Keirsbilck says

Last week I read Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child*. And boy, what an ordeal this has been. The whole novel just didn't appeal to me. It started out as some sort of *Wuthering Heights* spin-off, but with a gay twist to it. One of the lovers heroically dies in war, and becomes a well-known poet. The rest of the story is more or less a quest of remembering the dead poet. Throughout the twentieth century people start to take an interest in the poet, and even a biography is being set up. The relationships between the characters start to echo the relationships between the nineteenth century characters at the beginning of the novel. And lo and behold... It even results in a new gay relationship. A relationship that was forecasted by the relation between the poet and his lover. So, with some good will, you might read the novel as an alternative, gay, history of England. And although that might have its merits, it just didn't appeal to me. Firstly, I do like coming-of-age stories, but I don't like plain moral or sentimental drama. To me, that particular genre has gotten old after *Pamela*, or *Virtue Rewarded*. Perhaps it's because as a man, I lack the finesse to grasp the subtle stabs at the human condition, but to me it's just boring.

So, I usually keep away from novels like that. But Hollinghurst's novel came critically acclaimed and applauded for its wit and stirring narrative. So I caved, though I should've known better.

The narrative is simply grinding to a halt after the first chapter. The first chapter didn't quite appeal to me as well, but I did have the feeling it was going somewhere. Yet, it just came to a halt after the first chapter and the poet's death. So nothing stirring there. In fact, I couldn't find one aspect of suspense in the entire novel. Really disappointing. And wit and funny? I haven't chuckled once throughout the entire novel. It just completely missed its mark, as far as I'm concerned.

The only redeeming feature is Hollinghurst's prose. He does know how to write. His sentences are well-

balanced and properly paced. On the syntax-level, this book is very well written. That's the only reason I found the stamina to push through and read the novel. Otherwise I'd given up after chapter 2. But it has been an eye-opener. I really ought to steer away from novels like this, no matter how critically acclaimed they come. These novels are just not my cup of tea.

William2.1 says

Hollinghurst is fifty and he's still writing about boys and their capacity for stratospheric ejaculation.
Snoresville.

Paul Bryant says

GOODREADS REVIEWER TO SUE BOOKER PRIZEWINNING AUTHOR

- Associated Press, 23 May 2012

"I am *appalled*," says Goodreads reviewer Paul Bryant, speaking at his pleasant Nottingham home earlier today. "Friends had told me of this but I had brushed it aside as a matter below my concern. But then I stumbled upon an article in the Guardian and after reading that the bottom just fell out of my world. I will have to sue Alan Hollinghurst for damages now."

The article in question, entitled "The Booker can Drive People Mad" by Rachel Cooke, appeared in the 20th May edition. In it, Paul learned of a character in Mr Hollinghurst's latest novel which is clearly based on himself, even to the extent of *having his own name*. Mr Bryant pointed out the following passages :

The Stranger's Child, a capacious and wonderful book that begins in one suburban garden in 1913 and ends in another in 2008, has many themes. It is about love, and the passing of time; it is, too, about ambition, taste and disappointment. But more than anything, it is about the unknowability of human beings, and the misunderstandings, even the danger, associated with trying to plug the gaps in our perceptions.

Its nastiest and perhaps most memorable character is Paul Bryant, an enterprising hack reviewer and the would-be biographer of Cecil Valance, the Rupert Brooke-ish figure whose short life and long but ever-shifting literary reputation crouches at the heart of The Stranger's Child.

Bryant makes a living poking around in people's lives – and I have the impression that his creator disapproves. When he goes to stay with Daphne Sawle, for whom, when she was a girl, Cecil Valance wrote a famous poem, she likens him to a "little wire-haired ratter"; she knows, even before he has lobbed his first question, that all he is interested in, basically, is "smut".

I place my own tape recorder down on the small table beside us. I half expect it to explode, like a grenade. So, does he loathe Paul?

"Well, I wanted to depict him changing," he says, carefully. "And one knows how sweet young people can turn into monsters and bores." They curdle. "Yes, exactly. They curdle."

He wasn't always going to be a novelist, though. Poetry was his first love. An only child, he grew up in Stroud, Gloucestershire, where his father was a bank manager (he poured this time into The Stranger's Child: Paul Bryant begins his working life in a bank in a small, country town, where he reads Angus Wilson in his lunch hour, and gets turned on by the angle of his stool at the cash desk).

The real Paul Bryant, visibly distressed, beat his kitchen table and said "I wish to make it very plain, I have never been turned on by the angle of my stool... the very idea... is repulsive."

He acknowledges that this will be a David and Goliath contest, and that Mr Hollinghurst will have powerful resources to defend his novel in court. "I have to do this - it is my very character which is at stake here. I do not wish my children's children to believe that I was ever *a little wire-haired ratter*. And to call me in print *a hack reviewer*. Well! I just don't understand why he has done this. What have I ever done to Alan Hollinghurst? But he will have to pay now, and dearly."

Mr Hollinghurst was unavailable for comment.

Marc says

This book starts as a nice, late 19th century society novel, very conventionally told and playing in the upper British class. But appearances are deceiving, because Hollinghurst has made a pretty ingenious piece of work with alternating time periods, different storytelling perspectives and several layers of meaning.

There are quite a few connecting elements between the 5 time frames that the author provides us with (starting in 1913, ending in 2008). The aristocratic Daphne Sawle in the first place: in the beginning she's still a jumpy teenager of 16, and towards the end a lucid, but very reserved lady of more than 80; around her circulate her brother George, her (ex) husband Dudley and some of her children. And then there is the impressive Cecil Valance, the "young god - slash - poet not-without-merit", who died in the First World War, but returns in every period of time, in the form of a marble tomb, always the object of speculation about who he really was. And finally, gay love is also a recurring storyline; in the first time frames it still is surrounded by taboo and secrecy, later of course much less; the nice thing is that Hollinghurst uses the gay theme as an ordinary story element and not provocative as with other authors.

In my opinion, the central focus of this novel is the debilitating effect of time, more specifically its harshness and inexorableness (at the beginning of every new time frame all sorts of dramatic things appear to have happened in the years before). But it is especially disconcerting to see how the protagonists themselves deal with that past: they manipulate it, consciously and unconsciously, distort the most essential data or withhold them, or simply forget them, so that it is impossible for others (later) to discover the 'real' past. To my opinion that is the strongest layer of meaning of this novel: all protagonists are "stranger's children", namely estranged from their own past; you have to take this literally, because it is striking how all relationships in this novel (between lovers, spouses, brothers and sisters, but also between parents and children) in time become distant, cynical or even hostile. And Hollinghurst also illustrates it figuratively in the decay of the great country houses where the novel started.

So, it's really interesting what Hollinghurst presents in this novel. But there are also a few drawbacks: the constant introduction of new characters in every time frame works quite alienating; the novel starts in a smashing and fascinating way, but gradually the tempo slows down, and certainly towards the end the focus is on highly detailed, very 'loaden' conversations (where you have to keep an eye on what is being manipulated, and what is unspoken), and that is a pretty demanding read; and finally, the end itself was a bit of a letdown for me, like an emptying balloon. But anyway: my first encounter with Hollinghurst certainly tastes like more.

Jaidee says

4.5 stars !.....both delicious and grand....this book has enough material for a literary trilogy...a wonderful literary romp through time....this book has it all- poetry, architecture, bisexual trysts, intrigue, clever dialogue and a story that is both playful and profound....one of my favorite novels of all time is A.S. Byatt's Possession and this book reads very much like that one but only with a more queer bent....

Michele Weiner says

This review may contain more information about the plot than you want to know.

The Times Literary Supplement called Alan Hollinghurst's *The Stranger's Child* "a master class in the art of the novel." The Independent said "It is a rare thing to read a novel buoyed up by the certainty that it will stand among the year's best, but rarer still to become confident of its value in decades to come." What? There must be some mistake. Maybe I'm not British enough to get the point.

This is the story of Cecil Valance, an aristocratic, handsome, energetic, self-absorbed gay poet. It opens in 1913 as Cecil visits his "friend," George Sawle and his family at their upper middle-class home. There he also meets the alcoholic widow Sawle, older brother Hubert and younger sister Daphne as well as a handsome young servant. Cecil is the love object of both George, with whom he is having an affair, and the naive but spirited Daphne, who has no idea that George and Cecil are an item. A neighbor, Harry Hewitt, joins the family for a dinner party. He is identified as a suitor of the widow Sawle, but Cecil can see that he is in love with Hubert, who is straight as an arrow. Hubert accepts the lavish gifts Harry offers, but rejects his affections. Daphne asks Cecil, who has already published some poems, to write in her autograph book. He writes a poem about their home, called *Two Acres*, which becomes famous. Daphne believes it to be about her, but George knows otherwise.

The scene changes to 1926 without any preparation, and the reader spends the next few pages figuring out what has happened and who's who. Finally it emerges that Daphne has married Cecil's younger brother, Dudley, who has been mentally as well as physically scarred by the war. Cecil has become an icon, though his poetry isn't all that good. His mother causes a tomb to be built in the family chapel with a life-sized carving of Cecil and consults mediums in an effort to communicate with him. Dudley is jealous, and becomes an awful man, ignoring his two children and giving his wife a very difficult time. They waste a lot of time drinking and partying and cheating on one another in the time of despair and disillusionment that is the '20's.. The children suffer.

In one leap, it is 1967, and the extended and blended Valance family is celebrating Daphne's 70th birthday. She is tottering around, a bit the worse for wear, still drinking and smoking. The reader has to work for it a while, but it finally becomes clear that Daphne has married three times. She split with Dudley, married a gay artist with whom she had a son, then when he died in WWII, she married a man named Jacobs who is not described in any detail. The manor house in which the Valance family had lived had become a boys' school. Two gay men are introduced, and one of them becomes the major actor in the remainder of the book.

It is 1977, and Paul Bryant is a writer who is researching his first book, which is a biography of Cecil Valance. He has some suspicions about Cecil and the other members of the family, and sets out to interview Dudley, Daphne, and various friends, servants and relatives. And here the book becomes a horrific waste of time as Paul stumbles around missing chance after chance to find out whether Cecil was gay and who fathered Daphne's children.

Fade to 2008, when the whole thing is wrapped up in an incomprehensible package. Gay men are out of the closet and joined in civil union. One more wild goose chase occurs, resulting in complete failure to find definitive information about Cecil. The morel of the story apparently, is that no one can truly be known by another person. if so, it was an enormously frustrating way to get there.

Cecily says

This tells a riveting and complex saga with profound insight, plenty of intrigue and dashes of wit. From the first dozen pages, even the first few sentences, I was drawn into a love affair with the writing of this book. I read large chunks more than once because the writing is breathtaking, but leisurely: I wanted to capture the craft and jot down many quotes (see the end of this for a long selection).

Having finished, I still love it, even though the quality was not quite maintained. It is a story told in five parts and spanning a century. The first two parts are superb (and have echoes of Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited" (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>) and Byatt's "The Children's Book" (<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...> the third is good, and the last two are too different to fit well with what's gone before, and the ending is unsatisfyingly abrupt. It's not so much that the later sections are bad as the fact they just didn't "fit" the rest of the book and suffer in comparison with what precedes them. It almost felt as if they were there to bang home the themes of truth, memories, aging, changing mores etc, just in case we didn't notice them in the earlier sections. It's another way in which it resembles "The Children's Book": the best aspects are stunning, but it is also very flawed

Although Hollinghurst is well known as a gay writer (both himself, and his books), and this does feature gay relationships and illustrate how attitudes have changed over the last hundred years, it felt like a family saga, rather than a gay book.

PLOT

The key character appears to be a budding poet, Cecil Valence. He enters the story in 1913 as the wealthy university friend of middle class George Sawle. All the characters in the coming hundred years and 500+ pages have some sort of connection with him, but really it is George's sister Daphne who is the pivot of the tangled stories. And they are tangled: there is a web of relationships, with lies, suppressed longings, and

secrets, so one is often unsure who fancies who and who knows what about whom.

Subsequent sections are in the mid 1920s, mid 1960s, around 1990 and the present day (2011/12). The first two sections have a strong sense of place: the Sawle's suburban home, Two Acres, and then the Valence's enormous Victorian estate, Corley Court. These sections have very strong echoes of "Brideshead", yet don't feel derivative (a skillful balancing act). In later sections, the characters and plot are rather more adrift.

I enjoyed the deliberate obfuscation of the sudden time jumps at the start of each section, e.g. not being immediately sure who labels such as "husband" and "dead brother" applied to, or who "Mrs Jacobs" was (not always the most obvious one). I just didn't enjoy the characters, style and milieu of the later parts quite as much.

CHARACTERS

The Valences and Sawles are the main characters – along with their respective homes (again, like Brideshead). A new wife "felt she wouldn't have chosen it, felt it had in a way chosen her".

The changing zeitgeist and the aging and maturing of the characters are generally very good: insightful, amusing and plausible.

The opening word ("she") refers to Daphne, a central character throughout, though not always the most important. As she says of herself in old age, "I never pretended to be a wonderful writer, but I have known some very interesting people."

The contrasts between what people say, feel, mean and are thought to mean by others are clearly but delicately marked, especially in the first section, when Daphne is juggling sibling rivalry with the first stirrings of attraction, whilst still very naïve about such things. Other characters have things to hide (relationships, drink, money problems). Daphne often "felt again she was missing something, but was carried along by the excitement of making [adult] conversation".

THEMES

CLASS

Class difference, deference, aspiration and the consequences of social mobility (up and down) are obvious themes that affect all the characters. Is "unthinking social confidence" the same as being a snob? One woman had "a slight bewildered totter among the grandeur that her daughter now had to pretend to take for granted" (so much summed up in that pithy sentence) and another "hadn't been born into [X's] world, even though she now wore its lacquered carapace". At the other end of the spectrum, a humble bank clerk feels socially awkward from knowing, via people's financial circumstances, that they may not be all that they seem.

TRUTH and WRITING

More importantly, several characters write (poetry, biography, memoirs, criticism). Questions of "what is the truth?", "who knows what?" and the way we edit our own and other people's histories weave through the book and are pertinent to all the main characters, especially those burdened with secrets (whether their own or those of others). Memoirs are "not fiction... but a sort of poetical reconstruction". Are such edits usually unconscious, and if not, are they justifiable? They certainly make it hard for biographers, one of whom complains, "People wouldn't tell you things, and they then blamed you for not knowing them." Then he realised "The writer of a life didn't only write about the past, and that the secrets he dealt in might have all kinds of consequences in other lives, in years to come" – and this aspect is perhaps the dominant theme of

the book, creating a Russian-doll like structure of nested histories.

SECRECY

The subtle dynamics of covert relationships are carefully drawn, especially early on, managing to create a degree of ambiguity and at the same time, giving the reader the feeling of being “in the know”. Later on, there is additional dramatic tension from the characters’ own doubts about some things, and even the reader’s doubts about which characters know what: George was “amused by its [a poem] having a secret and sadly reassured by the fact it could never be told.”

HOMOSEXUALITY

I feel as if this *ought* to be a major theme, and possibly Hollinghurst would like it to be, but it never felt like a big deal to me. Yes, several characters are gay or bisexual, and some are secretive about their desires, but the desire and the secrecy seemed more pertinent than the sex of the people they were attracted to. Having sections set in different periods does illustrate how society has become more accepting, but maybe that’s just society growing up?

AGING and MATURITY

The main characters span a variety of ages, which presents a challenge that Hollinghurst rises to. In particular, the Edwardian Daphne’s teenage desires and anxieties are wonderfully done. When offered a cigar, “She really didn’t want the cigar, but she was worried by the thought of missing a chance at it. It was something none of her friends had done, she was pretty sure of that.” So she took it “with a feeling of shame and duty and regret”. Whether it was a cigar or something else, I’m sure we can all empathise with Daphne’s mixed emotions. Similarly, being in on (partial) adult knowledge isn’t always what one wants or expects, “the joy of discovery was shadowed by the sense of being left behind”. Pondering her first kiss, she “savouried the shock of it properly... With each retelling, the story... made her heart race a fraction less... and her reasonable relief at this gradual change was coloured with a tinge of indignation”.

DRINK

Several characters drink too much, though some are more aware of it than others: “the tray of bottles, some friendly, some over-familiar, one or two to be avoided”.

WRITING STYLE

The opening chapter is particularly entrancing: it captures the anticipation of the forthcoming evening, coupled with the evening light, in a series of subtly beautiful images about relationships, awkwardness, and ease, presaging all that is to come. There are wonderful images and great insight throughout. It might be thought to be overwritten, but I enjoyed the detail.

THE TITLE

Who is the eponymous “stranger’s child”? For a while that question niggled (it’s a phrase from Tennyson), and there are one or two candidates, but later I felt it didn’t really matter, and was perhaps just a metaphor for each child’s uniqueness, and, in some respects, their unknowability.

QUOTATIONS

- “Something of the time of day held her, with its hint of a mystery she had so far overlooked... It was the long still moment when the hedges and borders turned dusky and vague, but anything she looked at

closely... seemed to give itself back to the day with a secret throb of colour.”

- “The slight asperity that gave even her nicest remarks an air of sarcasm.”
- Jonah was only 15, had never acted as a valet (or even observed one) and was told to “unpack... and arrange the contents ‘convincingly’. This was the word, enormous but elusive, that Jonah had had on his mind all day... gripping him again with a subtle horror.” Later, he had “The strange feeling of being intimate with someone who was simultaneously unaware of him.”
- Even the legitimate offspring of a respectable dead father can feel it a social handicap in Edwardian times: “He felt a twinge of shame and regret at having no father, and for ever having to make do.”
- Outrageous letters were like “Pompeian obscenities, hiding just out of view behind the curtains and in the shadows of the inglenook.”
- “Records were indeed marvels, but they were only tiny helpings of the ocean of music.”
- A 16-year old “picked up her glass and drained it with a complicated feeling of sadness and satisfaction that was thoroughly endorsed by Wagner’s restless ballad.”
- For some reason, this tickled me, “... said Daphne experimentally”.
- A couple had “their little myth of origins, its artificiality part of its erotic charm”.
- “The remark [a compliment] seemed to have curved in the air, to have set out towards some more obvious and perhaps deserving target, and then swooped wonderfully home.”
- “His feelings absorbed him so completely that he seemed to float towards them, weak with excitement, across a purely symbolic landscape.”
- A woodland pond was “a loose ellipse of water”.
- He had “a very particular way of looking at her... of holding her eye at moments in their talk, so that another unspoken conversation seemed also to be going on... She felt a certain thrilled complacency at the choice he had secretly made.”
- “moaning with a lover’s pangs, as well as with a certain sulky relief at this tragic postponement.”
- “spread some butter on her toast, though really her smothered anxiety had squeezed up her appetite to nothing.”
- Of a somewhat back-handed compliment: “her involuntary German air of meaning rather more.”
- She “held back, with a thin fixed smile, in which various doubts and questions were tightly hidden.”
- A dining room “with its gaudy décor, its mirrors and gilding” was “like some funereal fairground”!
- People who had loved and feuded came together to share memories of someone who had died, “submissively clutching their contributions. A dispiriting odour of false piety and dutiful suppression seemed to rise from the table and hang like cabbage-smells in the jelly-mould domes of the ceiling”.
- Tact required a “courteous saunter around an unmentionable truth” and “a mist of delicacy had obscured the subject”.
- “The dark oak door of the chapel loomed, seemed to summon and dishearten the visitor with the same black stare... Chapel silence, with its faint penumbra of excluded sounds.”
- They “looked more like colleagues than a couple” because “their hands seemed somehow locked away from any mutual use”.
- “Bland evasiveness had slowly assumed the appearance of natural forgiveness.”
- He “turned to her with that unstable mixture of indulgence and polite bewilderment and mocking distaste that she had come to know and dread and furiously resent.”
- After one character’s boorish outburst at a children’s party “a collective effort at repair had been made”, one couple “having an ideally boring conversation about shooting to show that things were under control”!
- After dinner, there was “talk of a game. Those who were keen half smothered their interest, and those who weren’t pretended blandly that they didn’t mind.”
- “It was the most unapproachable room in the house... dark with prohibitions. His father’s anger... had withdrawn into it, like a dragon to its lair.”
- “His features seemed rather small and provisional.”
- “The front door was wide open, as though the house had surrendered itself to the sunny day.”

- “At this indefinable time of day... The time, like the light, seemed somehow viscous.”
- A lodger’s room: “Nothing went with anything else. They had the air of things not wanted elsewhere in the house... the brown wool rug made by Mr Marsh himself at what must have been a low moment.”
- The PE teacher “dressed in sports kit at improbable times of day, he was adored by many of the boys, and instinctively avoided by others.”
- “In the deepening shadows between pools of candlelight, the guests... conversations stretching and breaking, in an amiable jostle... like a flickering frieze, unknowable faces all bending willingly to something perhaps none of them individually would have chosen to do.”
- “eagerness struggling with some entrenched habit of disappointment.”
- Daphne’s copious bag had “the family trait of being shapelessly bulky – too bulky, really, to count as a handbag. It admitted as much in its helpless slump.”
- “The upstairs windows seemed to ponder blankly on the reflections of clouds.”
- “The perfect but impersonal dentures that gave their own helpless eagerness to an old man’s face” – the same man with “the eagerness and charm, the smile confidently friendly but not hilarious, the note of respect with a hint of conspiracy.”
- “Her sense of humour is really no more than an irritable suspicion that someone else might find something funny.”
- A house heaving with clutter creates “a worrying sense of the temporary grown permanent” (a lesson for me).
- “The air of mildly offended blankness, which is the default expression of any congregation.”
- “X and his computer lived together in intense co-dependency, as if they shared a brain, his arcane undiscriminating memory backed up on the machine and perpetually enlarged by it.”

•Karen• says

"We can find you anything you want."

"Mm, I may well have to call on you."

"Now that all information is retrievable..."

"Quite a thought, isn't it?"

Indeed, quite a thought. A fallacy that we are prey to in our age of internet and permanent access to all that it provides. This delightful, elegant, lush tale proves how shaky that ground is. The 'hard' facts - what an image! - of a person's life. They can never be retrieved. Memories are re-written, fudged, distorted or simply lost, evidence remains hidden, photos too small and unfocussed and artificially posed to betray anything, even the sound recordings made by the hapless biographer are faded, fuzzy and futile. All that remains is speculation. Make of it what you will.

And on top of that a history of changing attitudes to homosexuality. And on top of that a story of myth-making around the Lost Generation. And an awfully good read. No; less awfully, more bloody, as Tennyson apparently said (or did he?).

Jackie says

Oh dear God.

It's like Alan Hollinghurst crawled inside my brain, extracted key elements from my What Jackie Looks For

In Fiction And In Life file, mixed them up with his own special ingredients, ran it all through a food processor, and voila!

Seriously. There have been moments in my life when I've thought of writing a Bloomsbury pastiche because I love that whole World-War-One-is-loomng-so-let's-have-tea era. But now I never will, because here it is, and it's so much more than that. This book is about interpretation and history and about how the importance of events shifts over time and the line between public and private and real and fictional and the strength and weakness of memory. And, of course, sexuality, alcohol, and deep feelings of being an outsider, because that's what Hollinghurst (and a ton of other people) loves.

I'm still working to shake this one. Hopefully I'll never really succeed.
