



Inspired by ghosts from the past

Christina Stead drew on an unusual childhood in suburban Sydney for *The Man Who Loved Children*, writes JAMES LEY on the novel's 70th anniversary.

Christina Stead began writing *The Man Who Loved Children* towards the end of 1938. She was 36 and living in a dreary New York apartment with her partner Bill Blake. In the 10 years since she had left Australia, most of which were spent in London and Paris, she had published four books of fiction that ranged in style and substance from baroque fabulism to a convoluted novel about banking.

For her fifth book, she turned for inspiration to her unusual childhood in suburban Sydney. The novel, she claimed, "demanded to be written". But transforming the raw facts of her upbringing into literature proved a wrenching business. "Plunging into the past brought violent emotions to the surface," writes her biographer, Hazel Rowley. "The memories came flooding back. She slept badly. She raged. She wept." Over the next 18 months, she wrung from herself an extraordinary novel, vivid and strange, about a desperately unhappy family headed by two of the most memorable characters in Australian fiction. "I wrote it," Stead said several decades later, "to get it off my chest."

When *The Man Who Loved Children* was published in October 1940, the response was muted, though some reviewers noted its peculiar intensity. *The New Yorker's* critic, Clifton Fadiman, called it "*Little Women* rewritten by a demon". It began to receive something like its critical due only after Randall Jarrell published an influential essay in praise of the novel in 1965. Its brilliance has since been celebrated by

writers such as Patrick White, Angela Carter and Jonathan Franzen. It has assumed its rightful place as an Australian classic and one of the great novels of the 20th century. Yet it remains something of an oddity: a work whose radical originality gives it a uniquely compelling quality. It is one of those rare novels that creates a world, as comical as it is disturbing, that seems at once bizarre and utterly credible.

Not the least aspect of the novel's strangeness is its basis in autobiography. Like her alter ego Louisa Pollit, Stead was the eldest child in a large family. Her biological mother died young and she was raised by her father and stepmother. She was an awkward and unattractive girl – though not, like Louie, overweight – and her father was, like the irrepresible Sam Pollit, a naturalist with a singular and dominating personality. An autodidact and free-thinker, David Stead overflowed with idiosyncratic opinions. His relationship with his second wife, Ada Gibbins, who was highly strung and given to swooning at moments of crisis, was tempestuous. As Rowley's biography establishes, many of the odd incidents in *The Man Who Loved Children* – such as Sam chewing up food to spit into the mouths of his children – are not invented. The letters Sam sends Louie from Malaya are transcribed almost word for word from David Stead's letters. Later in life, Stead even took to referring to her father privately as "Sam".

The Man Who Loved Children is not, however, a confessional work in any straightforward sense. It takes

some large liberties with its autobiographical material. Most obviously, Stead – at her US publisher's urging – transplants events from her childhood from Sydney to Washington, DC, and Baltimore, effectively setting the novel in an imaginative space that is neither Australia nor America but a curious hybrid. It also displaces them in time, moving the action forward more than two decades to the late 1930s.

But the novel's inventiveness resides in the masterful way Stead shapes her material, in the linguistic resourcefulness she brings to her task and in the complexly evocative imagery she weaves around her characters. It perfects a heightened style that has been called "domestic gothic". Each of the novel's three main characters develops a distinct mode of expression that conveys the essence of their personality and the limitations of their world view.

Sam Pollit is, by his own estimation, a man of lofty principle and generous humanity. Sanguine and sun-haired, he calls himself "a dreamer in realities". He is associated throughout the novel with luminous and celestial imagery. A professed atheist and rationalist, he is nevertheless described in religious terms. He is the shining orb at the centre of his self-created universe, a narcissist whose frequent professions of universal benevolence fail to mask his impenetrable egotism, his insensitivity and his naivety about worldly matters. He speaks a weird parodic language,

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full of puns and wordplay, that the novel attributes to the 19th-century American humorist Artemus Ward but that certainly owes something to the late-modernist experimentation of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*. His voice is mocking, insinuating, manipulative, ripe with innuendo and, most of all, childish: "Bring up your tea, Looloo-girl: I'm sick, hot head, nedache, dot pagans in my stumjack: want my little fambly around me this morning."

His wife Henny is long-suffering and makes sure everyone knows it. She rails at her ineffectual husband's folly and cruelty. Her misanthropic outbursts are hysterical in every

sense of the word and her escalating rhetoric is brilliantly rendered. Early in the novel, a trip to town is metaphorically transformed into a grotesque procession in which she encounters "a dirty shrimp of a man with a fishy expression ... an ogress, big as a hippopotamus, with her bottom sticking out, who grinned like a shark ... a woman with a cowlike expression ... there were silly old roosters, creatures like a dying duck in a thunderstorm, filthy old pawers ... sick chickens ... men like coal-heavers and women like boiled owls".

Amusing though they are, Henny's bombastic tirades and inventive insults convey an underlying sincerity. Her language is excessive in direct proportion to her

powerlessness. It is a projection of genuine misery. In the midst of her fury and frustration, she repeatedly speaks of killing herself.

The violent conflict between Sam and Henny is, the novel makes clear, unresolvable: "He called a spade a predecessor to modern agriculture, she called it a muck dig: they had no words between them intelligible." Their toxic marriage is framed as a terminal battle of the sexes. Sam, who cheerfully makes his daughters do the washing up while he sits at the kitchen table explaining his benevolent philosophies, asserts that "women got no brains"; for Henny,

"all men are dogs". She complains bitterly that Sam "talks about human equality, the rights of man, nothing but that. How about the rights of women, I'd like to scream at him. It's fine to be a great democrat when you've a slave to rub your boots on."

But *The Man Who Loves Children* ultimately belongs to the adolescent Louie, Stead's portrait of the artist as a young woman. Her father mocks her as "loogooobrious"; Henny, recycling a choice epithet, tells her she looks like a boiled owl. Yet as the novel progresses she begins to see beyond the choking, dysfunctional world of the Pollit family. "I know something," she tells her father. "I know there are people not like us, not muddle-headed like us, better than us."

The Man Who Loved Children is, in a sense, three novels in one. It is devastatingly satirical about Sam; it is Henny's tragedy; but it is Louie's bildungsroman. She learns from her parents, even as she recoils from the misery they create. She assimilates Sam's wordplay and Henny's bombast, their tendency to project their psychological state onto the world, fusing these in her own expression of imaginative freedom. At school one day, she is inspired by her new teacher to write a spontaneous stream of comical prose that combines her parents' verbal proclivities into something distinctly her own. The path of escape, she realises, is through the imaginative world of literature. She begins to write "stuff almost without meaning, but yet which seemed to have the entire meaning of life for her".

Early in the novel, Louie dreams of a night-rider, which she dimly understands as an intimation of her destiny, and it is her respect for the power of symbols and storytelling that ultimately sets her apart from Sam. As a creature of the light, Sam is made uneasy by Louie's creative impulses, which seem to unlock the door to the murky realm of the unconscious. When he dreams of a snake, he interprets it as a simple prophecy, a confirmation that the ungrateful world is against him; but

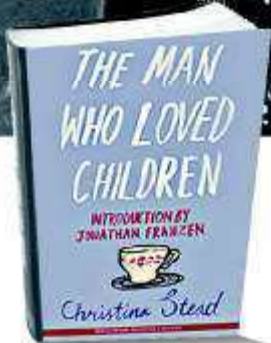
Louie knows instinctively that snakes have implications that are more profound and potentially unnerving. Her escalating battle of wills with her father climaxes in the performance of a short play she writes in honour of Sam's birthday, a mock-classical tragedy written in cod Latin, in which a father becomes a snake and strangles his daughter.

Much of the uncommon vitality of *The Man Who Loved Children* derives from the fact that it is, on one level, a bountifully inventive novel of competing idioms and heightened imagery. Yet it is also a work that displays the pitiless objectivity towards human behaviour that Angela Carter called Stead's "greatest moral quality as a novelist". As Stead observed: "I am opposed to inventing in life. Life is so strange and we know it so little, that nothing is needed in that direction: we need only study; but real invention is needed in placing, and re-arranging and re-creating."

What appears to be exaggeration is really intensification. Underlying Stead's technique, Carter points out, is an expressionist purpose: "the effect is the thing, not the language that achieves it." This is Louie's insight as well as Stead's. She tells Sam that she cannot tell anyone about their home life because "no one would believe me" but by the end of the novel she has begun to intuit a way to "express every shade of her ideas", to manipulate literal truth to convey a deeper emotional truth. She, like her creator, comes to understand that there is truth in fantasy, that a spade is a predecessor of modern agriculture and a muck dig, that the thundering hooves of the night-rider are no less meaningful for being the blood pounding in her ears.

A new edition of *The Man Who Loved Children*, with an introduction by Jonathan Franzen, will be published by Miegunyah Press next month, \$24.99.

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Raw material ... Stead said several decades afterwards that she wrote her classic novel "to get it off my chest".