

**ESSAY**

# Rereading 'The Man Who Loved Children'

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There are any number of reasons you shouldn't read "The Man Who Loved Children" this summer. It's a novel, for one thing; and haven't we all secretly sort of come to an agreement, in the last year or two or three, that novels belonged to the age of newspapers and are going the way of newspapers, only faster? As an old English professor friend of mine likes to say, novels are a curious moral case, in that we feel guilty about not reading more of them but also guilty about doing something as frivolous as reading them; and wouldn't we all be better off with one less thing in the world to feel guilty about?

To read "The Man Who Loved Children" would be an especially frivolous use of your time, since, even by novelistic standards, it's about nothing of world-historical consequence. It's about a family, and a very extreme and singular family at that, and the few parts of it that aren't about this family are the least compelling parts. The novel is also rather long, sometimes repetitious and undeniably slow in the middle. It requires you, moreover, to learn to read the family's private language, a language created and imposed by the eponymous

father, and though the learning curve is nowhere near as steep as with Joyce or Faulkner, you're still basically being asked to learn a language good for absolutely nothing but enjoying this one particular book.

Even the word “enjoying”: is that the right word? Although its prose ranges from good to fabulously good — is lyrical in the true sense, every observation and description bursting with feeling, meaning, subjectivity — and although its plotting is unobtrusively masterly, the book operates at a pitch of psychological violence that makes “Revolutionary Road” look like “Everybody Loves Raymond.” And, worse yet, can never stop laughing at that violence! Who needs to read this kind of thing? Isn't the nuclear family, at least the psychologically violent side of it, the thing we're all trying to escape from — the infernal reactor into which, when outright escape is not an option, we've learned to stick our new gadgetry and entertainments and after-school activities like graphite rods, to cool the reaction down? “The Man Who Loved Children” is so retrograde as to accept what we would call “abuse” as a natural feature of the familial landscape, and a potentially comic feature at that, and to posit a gulf between adults and children far wider than their differing consumer tastes. The book intrudes on our better-regulated world like a bad dream from the grandparental past. Its idea of a happy ending is like no other novel's, and probably not at all like yours.

And then there's your e-mail: shouldn't you be dealing with your e-mail?

It will be 70 years this October since Christina Stead published her masterpiece to lackluster reviews and negligible sales. Mary McCarthy wrote an especially caustic notice for *The New Republic*, finding fault with the novel's anachronisms and imperfect grasp of American life. Stead had in fact arrived in the United States less than four years earlier, with her companion, William Blake, an American Marxist and writer and businessman who was trying to obtain a divorce from his wife. Stead had grown up in Australia and fled the country

decisively in 1928, at the age of 25. She and Blake had lived in London, Paris, Spain and Belgium while she was writing her first four books; her fourth, "House of All Nations," was a gargantuan, impenetrable novel about international banking. Soon after she arrived in New York, Stead undertook to clarify her feelings about her unbelievable Australian childhood by way of fiction. She wrote "The Man Who Loved Children" on East 22nd Street, near Gramercy Park, in less than 18 months. According to her biographer, Hazel Rowley, Stead set the novel in Washington, D.C., at the insistence of her publisher, Simon & Schuster, which didn't think American readers would care about Australians.

Anyone trying to revive interest in the novel at this late date will labor under the shadow of the poet Randall Jarrell's long and dazzling introduction to its 1965 re-issue. Not only can nobody praise the book more roundly and minutely than Jarrell already did, but if an appeal as powerful as his couldn't turn the world on to the book, back in the day when our country still took literature halfway seriously, it seems highly unlikely that anybody else can now. Indeed, one very good reason to read the novel is that you can then read Jarrell's introduction and be reminded of what outstanding literary criticism used to look like: passionate, personal, fair-minded, thorough and intended for ordinary readers. If you still care about fiction, it might make you nostalgic.

Jarrell, who repeatedly linked Stead with Tolstoy, was clearly taking his best shot at installing her in the Western canon, and in this he clearly failed. A 1980 study of the 100 most-cited literary writers of the 20th century, based on scholarly citations from the late 1970s, found Margaret Atwood, Gertrude Stein and Anaïs Nin on the list, but not Christina Stead. This would be less puzzling if

Stead and her best novel didn't positively *cry out* for academic criticism of every stripe. Especially confounding is that "The Man Who Loved Children" has failed to become a core text in every women's studies program in the country.



Christina Stead in 1938. Simon & Schuster

At its most basic level, the novel is the story of a patriarch, Sam Pollit — Samuel Clemens Pollit — who subjugates his wife, Henny, by impregnating her six times, and who seduces and beguiles his progeny with endless torrents of private

language and crackpot household schemes and rituals that cumulatively serve to make him the sun (he is radiantly white, with yellow hair) around which the Pollit world revolves. By day, Sam is a striving, idealistic bureaucrat in F.D.R.'s Washington. By night and on weekends, he's the hyperkinetic lord of the family's run-down house in Georgetown; he's the great I-Am (Henny's words), the Great Mouthpiece (Henny again), Mr. Here-There and Everywhere (Henny); he's the Sam-the-Bold (his own name for himself) who insinuates himself into every pore of his children's beings. He lets them run naked, he spits chewed-up sandwich into their mouths (to strengthen their immune systems), he's unfazed by the news that his youngest is eating his own excrement (because it's "natural"). To his sister, a schoolteacher, he says, "It's not even right they should be forced to go to school when they have a father like me." To the children themselves he says things like "You are myself" and "When I say, 'Sun, you can shine!' doesn't it shine?"

To a wild degree, Sam makes his children accessories of and to his narcissism. There isn't a more hilarious narcissist in all of literature, and, in good narcissistic fashion, while Sam imagines himself a prophet of "world peace, world love, world understanding," he remains happily blind to the squalor and misery of his circumstances. He is a perfect instance of the Western-rationalist male boogeyman stalked by a certain kind of literary critic. Through the fine accident of being forced to set the novel in America, Stead was also able to map his imperialism and his innocent faith in his own good intentions directly onto those of the city he works in. He is literally the Great White Father, he is literally Uncle Sam. He's the kind of misogynist who adores femininity in the abstract but feels himself "dragged down to earth — no, into the slime" by an actual flesh-and-blood woman, and who believes that women are too crazy to be allowed to vote. And yet, though monstrous, he isn't a monster. It's Stead's genius to make palpable on page after page the childlike need and weakness at the core of his

overbearing masculinity, and to make the reader pity him and like him and, therefore, find him funny. The language he speaks at home, not baby talk exactly, something weirder, is an endlessly inventive cascade of alliteration, nonsensical rhymes, puns, running jokes, clashing diction levels and private references; quotation out of context can't do it justice. As his best friend says to him, admiringly, "Sam, when you talk, you know you create a world." His children are at once enthralled by his words and more sensibly grown-up than he is. When he's ecstatically describing a future form of travel, *projection by dematerialization*, in which passengers "will be shot into a tube and decomposed," his oldest son dryly declares, "No one would travel."

The immovable objects opposed to Sam's irresistible force are Henny and her stepdaughter, Louisa, the child of his dead first wife. Henny is the spoiled, amoral and now operatically suffering daughter of a wealthy Baltimore family. The hatred between husband and wife is heightened by the determination of each not to let the other leave and take the children. Their all-out war, aggravated by their deepening money troubles, is the novel's narrative engine, and here again what saves their hatred from being monstrous — makes it comic instead — is its very extremity. Neurasthenic, worn-out, devious Henny, given to "black looks" and blacker moods, is the household "hag" (her word) who pours reality-based poison into her children's eagerly open ears. Her language is as full of neurotic pain and darkness as Sam's is full of unrealistic love and optimism. As the narrator notes, "He called a spade the predecessor of modern agriculture, she called it a muck dig: they had no words between them intelligible." Or, as Henny says, "He only wants the truth, but he wants my mouth shut." And: "He talks about human equality, the rights of man, nothing but that. How about the rights of woman, I'd like to scream at him." But she doesn't scream it at him

directly, because the two of them haven't been on speaking terms for years. She instead leaves terse notes addressed to "Samuel Pollit," and both of them use the children as emissaries.

While Sam and Henny's war takes up the novel's foreground, its less and less secret arc is Sam's deteriorating relationship with his eldest child, Louie. Many good novelists produce entire good *oeuvres* without leaving us one indelible, archetypal character. Christina Stead, in one book, gives us three, of which Louie is the most endearing and miraculous. She is a big, fat, clumsy girl who believes herself to be a genius; "I'm the ugly duckling, you'll see," she shouts at her father when he's tormenting her. As Randall Jarrell noted, while many if not most writers were ugly ducklings as children, few if any have ever conveyed as honestly and completely as Stead does the pain of the experience of being one. Louie is forever covered with cuts and bruises from her bumbings, her clothes forever stained and shredded from her accidents. She's befriended only by the queerest of neighbors (for one of whom, old Mrs. Kydd, in one of the novel's hundred spectacular little scenes, she consents to drown an unwanted cat in the bathtub). Louie is constantly reviled by both parents for her slovenliness: that she isn't pretty is a terrible blow to Sam's narcissism, while, to Henny, her oblivious self-regard is an intolerable seconding of Sam's own ("She crawls, I can hardly touch her, she reeks with her slime and filth — she doesn't notice!"). Louie keeps trying to resist being drawn into her father's insane-making games, but because she's still a child, and because she loves him, and because he really is irresistible, she keeps humiliating herself by surrendering.

More and more clearly, though, Louie emerges as Sam's true nemesis. She begins by challenging him on the field of spoken language, as in the scene in which he's expatiating on the harmonious oneness of future mankind:

“ ‘My system,’ Sam continued, ‘which I invented myself, might be called *Monoman* or *Manunity!*’

“Evie [Sam’s younger, favored daughter] laughed timidly, not knowing whether it was right or not. Louisa said, ‘You mean *Monomania.*’

“Evie giggled and then lost all her color, became a stainless olive, appalled at her mistake.

“Sam said coolly, ‘You look like a gutter rat, Looloo, with that expression. *Monoman* would only be the condition of the world after we had weeded out the misfits and degenerates.’ There was a threat in the way he said it.”

Later, as she enters adolescence, Louie begins to keep a diary and fills it not with scientific observations (as Sam has suggested) but with veiled accusations of her father, elaborately enciphered. When she falls in love with one of her high school teachers, Miss Aiden, she embarks on composing what she calls the *Aiden Cycle*, consisting of poems to Miss Aiden in “every conceivable form and also every conceivable meter in the English language.” As a present for her father on his 40th birthday, she writes a one-act tragedy, “*Herpes Rom*,” in which a young woman is strangled by her father, who seems to be part snake; since Louie doesn’t know much French grammar yet, she uses a language of her own invention.





Christina Stead in 1946. Harcourt, Brace & Company

While the novel is building to various cataclysms at the plot level (Henny is finally losing her long war), its inner story consists of Sam's efforts to hold on to Louie and crush her separate language. He keeps vowing to break her spirit, claiming to have direct telepathic access to her thoughts, insisting that she'll become a scientist and support him in his altruistic mission, and calling her his "foolish, poor little Looloo." In front of the assembled children, he forces her to

decipher her diary, so that she can be laughed at. He recites poems from the Aiden Cycle and laughs at these, too, and when Miss Aiden comes to dinner with the Pollits he takes her away from Louie and talks to her nonstop. After “Herpes Rom” has been performed, ridiculously, incomprehensibly, and Louie has presented Sam with the English translation, he pronounces his judgment: “Damn my eyes if I’ve ever seen anything so stupid and silly.”

In a lesser work, this might all read like a grim, abstract feminist parable, but Stead has already devoted most of the book to making the Pollits specific and real and *funny*, and to establishing them as capable of saying and doing just about anything, and she has particularly established what a problem love is for Louie (how much, in spite of everything, she yearns for her father’s adoration), and so the abstraction becomes inescapably concrete, the warring archetypes are given sympathetic flesh: you can’t help being dragged along through Louisa’s bloody soul-struggle to become her own person, and you can’t help cheering for her triumph. As the narrator remarks, matter-of-factly, “That was family life.” And telling the story of this inner life is what novels, and only novels, are for.

Or used to be, at least. Because haven’t we left this stuff behind us? High-mindedly domineering males? Children as accessories to their parents’ narcissism? The nuclear family as a free-for-all of psychic abuse? We’re tired of the war between the sexes and the war between the generations, because these wars are so ugly, and who wants to look into the mirror of a novel and see such ugliness? How much better about ourselves we’ll feel when we stop speaking our embarrassing private family languages! The absence of literary swans seems like a small price to pay for a world in which ugly ducklings grow up to be big ugly ducks whom we can then agree to call beautiful.

And yet the culture isn't monolithic. Although "The Man Who Loved Children" is probably too difficult (difficult to stomach, difficult to allow into your heart) to gain a mass following, it's certainly less difficult than other novels common to college syllabuses, and it's the kind of book that, if it is for you, is *really* for you. I'm convinced that there are tens of thousands of people in this country who would bless the day the book was published, if only they could be exposed to it. I might never have found my way to it myself had my wife not discovered it in the public library in Somerville, Mass., in 1983, and pronounced it the truest book she'd ever read. Every time I've been away from it for some years and am thinking of reading it again, I worry that I must have been wrong about it, since the literary and academic and book-club worlds make so little of it. (For example, as I'm writing this, there are 177 Amazon customer reviews of "To the Lighthouse," 312 for "Gravity's Rainbow" and 409 for "Ulysses"; for "The Man Who Loved Children," a much more accessible book, there are 14.) I open the book with trepidation, and then I read five pages and am right back into it and realize that I wasn't wrong at all. I feel as if I've come home again.

I suspect that one reason "The Man Who Loved Children" remains exiled from the canon is that Christina Stead's ambition was to write not "like a woman" but "like a man": her allegiances are too dubious for the feminists, and she's not *enough* like a man for everybody else. The novel's precursor, "House of All Nations," more resembles a Gaddis novel, even a Pynchon novel, than it does any novel by a 20th-century woman. Stead wasn't content to make a separate peace for herself, in a room of her own. She was competitive like a son, not a daughter, and she needed to go back, in her best novel, to her life's primal scenes and beat her eloquent father at his own game. And this, too, is an embarrassment, since, however central competition may be to the free-enterprise system we live in, to cop to it personally and speak of it nakedly is very unflattering (athletic competition being the exception that proves the rule).

Stead, in the interviews she gave, was sometimes frank about how directly and completely autobiographical her novel was. Basically, Sam Pollit is her father, David Stead. Sam's ideas and voice and domestic arrangements are all David's, transposed from Australia to America. And where Sam is infatuated with an innocent girl-woman, Gillian, the daughter of a colleague, the real-life David fell for a pretty girl the same age as Christina, Thistle Harris, with whom he briefly had an affair, later lived with and eventually, after many years, married. Thistle was the beautiful acolyte and flattering mirror who Christina herself could never be for David, if only because, although she wasn't fat like Louie, she also wasn't remotely good-looking. (Rowley's biography has pictures to prove it.)

In the novel, Louie's lack of good looks is a blow to her own narcissism. Her fatness and plainness are, arguably, what rescue her from her father's delusions, impel her toward honesty and save her. But the pain that Louie experiences in not being pleasing to anybody's eyes, least of all to her father's, is surely drawn from Christina Stead's own pain. Her best novel feels finally like a daughter's offering of love and solidarity to her father — you see, I *am* like you, I've achieved a language equal to yours, *superior* to yours — which is also, of course, an offering of white-hot competitive hatred. When Louie tells her father that she's never told anybody what her home life is like, the reason she gives is that “no one would believe me!” But the grown-up Stead found a way to make readers believe her. The fully mature writer created a faithful mirror of everything her father and Sam Pollit least wanted to see; and when the novel was published, the person in Australia to whom she sent a copy wasn't David Stead but Thistle Harris. The inscription read: “To dear Thistle. A Strindberg Family Robinson. In some respects might be considered a private letter to Thistle from Christina Stead.” Whether David himself ever read the book remains unknown.