

Introduction

By the time Christina Stead came to *For Love Alone*, her sixth novel, she was clear about what she wanted to do. It was wartime as she wrote, a tough time for the book industry, but she was adamant that she wouldn't bend to the anxieties of publishers. She was not going to write like Steinbeck, who was held up to her as a model with the success of *The Moon is Down*, "that brainless pamphlet of monosyllables." Six years before it'd been *Gone with the Wind*. "This is the kind of nonsense I have to stand every time a book is a best seller," she complained in 1942 to her friend Stanley Burnshaw. No, she was going to stay true to "the passion, energy and struggle" of the creative act, and she wasn't going to remove its traces. "Nothing has more success in the end," she wrote back to Australia the same year, "than an intelligent ferocity."¹

With her previous novel, *The Man Who Loved Children*, which came out in 1941, she'd let the publisher persuade her to change the location of that masterpiece of childhood and family life. To please an American audience, the Sydney she knew became the outskirts of Washington DC, which she had to research. And still the reviews were niggardly. Hardly surprising, then, that when she returned to the memory-well of her Australian youth in *For Love Alone*, she was adamant. This time Sydney would prevail, and fortunately for us it did, as essential as a character—and what greater novel of Sydney

has there been? The harbour city's steamy, fecund heat and its night skies, "the other part of the Milky Way, with its great stars and nebulae", perfectly match the clumsy, awkward longings of a girl saturated with desires that are as much for a destiny as for the love the title proclaims.

The Man Who Loved Children ended with the murderous eye of Louie, aged 14; *For Love Alone* opens with 19-year-old Teresa Hawkins, angular and glowering, on the hot summer day of her cousin Malfi's wedding. And there, on the first pages, are the themes of the novel. We meet Teresa with her sister Kitty in the house at Watson's Bay on the southern shore of Sydney's harbour. Their widowed father, much like the father in *The Man Who Loved Children*, teases them and jokes, and as in that previous novel, his eldest daughter is filled with loathing as he stands in the doorway dressed only in "a white towel rolled into a loincloth", lamenting that a man such as he—a man who appreciates beauty in women, a man much loved by women—should not have beautiful daughters. As if to prove it, or to punish him, Teresa dresses for the wedding in a lavender creation "that ruined her lovely nut-brown skin". With its flowing hem and "medieval sleeves, narrow at the shoulder and eighteen inches wide at the wrist", it teeters on the brink of excess, a grand gesture, a refusal to compromise, that risks tipping over into the banal and the ludicrous, saved only by the ferocity and intelligence of its wearer.

The wedding, too, exudes this double edge of exuberance, reaching for more than it is. The bride Malfi's slipper catches on the struts of her chair; the heel breaks off and cannot be mended; there's anger simmering within this bride, whose bouquet falls apart as she throws it. Teresa moves forward to catch it, filled with yearning for a love of her own, and steps back, appalled at "the awful eagerness of the others", at the older women watching their naked hopes, and the inadequacy of the men still waiting to take their pick.

"Don't think too badly of me," Malfi says to the sullen Teresa.

That evening, after the wedding, the sunset is glorious, aunts talk of the young couple lying together for the first time in the heat; the air is thick with thwarted longing, the people on the tram smell like foxes, and the girls with their glossy hair talk of *hope chests* and fight down the dread of being *left on the shelf*. This is Teresa's reality. Malfi's groom and the other overgrown boys "gone into long trousers" have no substance; they barely leave a mark on her—or on the reader. There is more reality to the deckhand on the ferry who has his hand on Gladys' back—coarse, whole-hearted Gladys who tosses her head, enjoying herself. "He has no right," her sister, Kitty, says, and in reply Teresa says:

"He has a right."

"A married man?"

"If he loves her."

"But he's married."

"If he loves her," said Teresa.

Kitty looked at her in astonishment. "Love?"

"It's love," said Teresa.

"What do you know about it?"

"I know."

She doesn't, of course; love is rarely as we think it is, especially when we are 19.

And so we are plunged into Teresa's dilemma, determined never to endure the humiliation of not being married, terrified she'll never know the taste of love, yet refusing to contemplate a "schoolfellow" grown into long trousers and a life in a house in the new suburbs stretching along the railway lines. She wants Love, nothing less. So we walk with her on the cliff-top paths above the house on the harbour with its salt smells and night skies, frustrated in her job as a badly paid school teacher assigned the "feeble minded" children, pinning hope and the future onto an unpleasant young man—her tutor at an evening class—who combines the lure of love with a glimpse of a world where ideas and books are as erotic as his withheld kisses. We are with her as she wears out her shoe leather to save for

the fare to follow him to London, not allowing herself to love a another man, one who would be kind, lest she fail in this great task. And so she walks herself to exhaustion, believing it to be for love alone when in fact it's for Jonathan Crow, the tutor—one of the great misogynists of 20th century fiction—and a third-class berth on a ship to England, where altogether different passions await her.

Reduced to a plot line, this could be one of the many novels of feminine melodrama that have long been forgotten, were it not for the intelligent ferocity of Christina Stead. "I'm a psychological writer," she said in an interview many years later, "and my drama is the drama of the person." It is through her command of the inner drama that she has created in Teresa Hawkins a character whom, once known—like Henry James's Isobel Archer before her, and Doris Lessing's Martha Quest after—is never forgotten. The pleasure of reading *For Love Alone*, the reason, should one need a reason, is to be plunged into the "chaotic sense of flux" that Angela Carter said made reading Stead "somehow unlike reading fiction", more like "the mess of life itself".²

Christina Stead is not a writer for the fainthearted, and that may have been part of the problem when the novel was first published in the United States in 1944 and then in England a year later. Printed on cheap war-time paper, it appeared in the US with a jacket illustration of "a bare-breasted girl leaning out of her window on a starry night" which, as her biographer Hazel Rowley points out, served only to lose readers who'd have appreciated her, and reinforce "the impression that this was a popular romance." Once again, reviews were grudging, at worst complaining of "500 pages of lust and abnormality". In London the next year, the *Times Literary Supplement* called Teresa Hawkins "a most tedious young woman." It was not until it was published in Australia in 1966—twenty-two years after its first appearance—that *For Love Alone* at last began to win the notice it deserved. "A remarkable book," Patrick White called it. "I feel elated to think it is there".³

In 2011, eighty years after she sat down to write this remarkable novel, surely we are able at last to appreciate, even relish, the “wild and fierce and fearless” quality that “tempted” Douglas Stewart “to use the word genius” in his 1966 review for the *Bulletin*. A contemporary audience is unlikely to be shocked by the frank portrayal of a young woman driven to the extremities of sexual longing and frustration. But for all our exposure to the wilder reaches of sexual experience, are we any better prepared for a book that proclaims itself to be “for love alone”, and yet subverts the very notion of a pursuit that still engages the minds and hearts of young women set on a wedding day—more stylishly managed, maybe, but no less swathed in compromise and ambivalence than those of Teresa Hawkins’ long ago cousins? Is it any less confronting in 2011 than it was in 1944 to read such a ferocious meditation on the terrors that stalk us when “alone” in the world, without the salve of love, tied to another as a bulwark against an unknown future? Or to enter the self-obeisance of a girl as intelligent as Teresa Hawkins before a man as cold and misshapen as Jonathan Crow?

Christina Stead had been away from Australia for fourteen years when she wrote *For Love Alone*, which is held to be one of the more autobiographical—or more obviously autobiographical—of her novels. One change of circumstance that she made—of her own volition—was have Teresa “sail the seas” almost a decade after her own departure in 1928. Hazel Rowley ascribes this change to the internal needs of the second, shorter half of the novel, where Teresa, in London at last, finds love—as Stead herself did—and finds also that love is no easy destination. In the coupled state, Teresa is no less prey to the cross-currents of anxiety as the fear of an unknown future, a future lonely and alone, is mirrored by the dread of a future all too well known, and the loss of the freedom, that once gaped around her, to love as she will. “It was no good struggling for mere tranquillity and the death of the heart.” Christina Stead is indeed a psychological writer.

And yet, as so often with her, this is not entirely true—or only true. The shift in the temporal situation of *For Love Alone*, which matters not a jot in the first half of the novel—one does not read it for a social history of Depression Sydney—becomes essential in the second. When, serendipitously, Teresa finds love in the charismatic Marxist James Quick—as Stead herself did with William Blake, who would become her life-long companion—she found it in a man who was already married, with a child. The finding of love, in all its hesitations and confusions, is set against the charged politics of the late 1930s in Europe. When Teresa discovers that love is not singular and is powerfully drawn to Quick's friend Harry Girton, a “radical pamphleteer” who is leaving England to fight for the International Brigade in Spain, questions of freedom and risk, morality and loyalty, take on new and complex resonances. “In this rough and tumble of need, egotism and love, where was the right thing to do? She fastened her eyes on Harry. He had no child.” When Teresa does spend a night with him, just days before he leaves for the war in Spain, the sex is curiously muted, without the abandonment she'd anticipated when she'd lived with the thought of “her flesh running into his”, and without the “genius of life” she saw the next morning in the “immense dusk-white flower” beneath their window.

Having first read *For Love Alone* as a young woman in the 1970s, I love Stead for her insistence that the intellectual settings of the mind are woven into *the drama of the person*. And yet, ultimately, *For Love Alone* remains a novel of the emotions. It is a drama of the self that cannot be held to a single place, whose truths are contradictory, where lust for love and submission to love is also a quest for freedom and expression. Teresa Hawkins is an unforgettable character for she takes the full measure of the force—intellectual and sexual—to which she submits, and to which she subjects others. Cantankerous with interviewers, Stead liked to say, especially late in life, that everything she wrote was “exactly true”—a tactic dramatically opposite to that taken by most writers only too eager to cover their tracks. But she also knew it was not exactly true. She was a sophisticated writer,

highly attuned to what she put in, what she left out, and the way in which writing, if it is to be an art, takes on resonances that lift it way beyond the exactnesses of life.

Take the names of Jonathan Crow and James Quick: what are they if not symbolic? As characters both have much in common with the men she knew in life, and yet each, and her experience of loving them, or not, is transformed in the service of the novel. That the man immortalised as Jonathan Crow never forgave her is less, I suspect, due to inaccuracies in the details of his spurning of her, or even her more obvious moments of revenge—when he is portrayed with all the worst attributes of a crow—than to the portrait of a misogynist empty at heart, a man lacking the courage to face the dark recesses of his own self, and therefore incapable of loving a woman. The novel ends with Teresa, who's taken to wearing sombre black, walking on Tottenham Court Road with James Quick after Harry has left for Spain. Talking of their love and its complexities, they pass a “vile faced man ... bent-backed ... with all the apparatus of melodrama”. When Teresa realises this spectre is Jonathan Crow, their conversation, and also the novel, ends with this exchange between her and the man who proves the measure of her love:

“I can't believe I ever loved that man.”

“You never did.”

After a while, Teresa sighed bitterly. “It's dreadful to think that it will go on being repeated for ever, he—and me! What's there to stop it?”

- 1 See Hazel Rowley, *Christina Stead: A Biography*, William Heinemann, Australia, 1993, pp. 302 and 316
- 2 For these quotations see Rowley, *op.cit.*, p 316
- 3 For the reception of *For Love Alone*, see Rowley, pp. 314–5