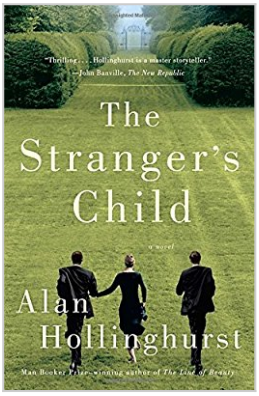

The Stranger's Child (Vintage International)

By Alan Hollinghurst

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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.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Remarkable. . . . Daring. . . . Fresh and vital.”
—Thomas Mallon, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Hollinghurst is a master storyteller. . . . For the daring of its setting out, and for the consistent flash and fire of the writing, *The Stranger’s Child* is to be cherished.”
—John Banville, *The New Republic*

“At once classically literary and delightfully, subversively modern. . . . It’s a thrilling, enchanting work of art.”
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“Brilliant. . . . Hollinghurst [has] a truly Jamesian fineness of perception. . . . [He is] one of the best novelists at work today.”
—*The Wall Street Journal*

“A sly and ravishing masterpiece.”
—*Cleveland Plain Dealer*

“Magnificent. . . . Hollinghurst explores how a living, breathing existence can become a biographical subject riddled with omissions and distortions. . . . His immersion in each period is fluid and free of false notes, collectively fusing into a single symphonic epic. . . . A beautifully written, brilliantly observed and masterfully orchestrated novel.”
—*The Seattle Times*

“Hollinghurst writes with the relaxed elegance and unobtrusive charm of a Cary Grant. Part social history, part social comedy and wholly absorbing, *The Stranger’s Child* does everything a novel should do and makes it look easy.”
—*The Washington Post*

“Vibrant. . . . Sparkling. . . . Witty and ultimately very moving. . . . There are echoes of E. M. Forster, Evelyn Waugh, Elizabeth Bowen and others, but *The Stranger’s Child* is a Great English Novel in its own right, and a tantalizing read.”
—*Newsday*

“Masterful. . . . Psychologically penetrating. . . . Hollinghurst is a superior novelist of manners, and the brilliance of *The Stranger’s Child* is in how it reveals the ways bad blood and secrets muck with history.”
—*Minneapolis Star Tribune*

“Beautifully written, ambitious in its scope and structure, confident in its execution, *The Stranger’s Child* is a masterclass in the art of the novel.”
—*The Times Literary Supplement*

“Hollinghurst writes like Henry James, but without the obfuscation; his gorgeous sentences home in on the

delicate nuances of human relationships but don't sacrifice the larger social canvas along the way."
—*Chicago Tribune*

"Erudite, stylish, very amusing. . . . A novelist with a historian's engrossment in the past and a critic's sensitivity to taste and judgment, Hollinghurst is an aficionado of the English literary heritage [and] in *The Stranger's Child*, that bookish fascination envelops every aspect of the novel."
—*Bookforum*

"Hollinghurst imaginatively insists that our literary tradition would be unrecognizably depleted without the submerged current of homosexuality. . . . *The Stranger's Child* itself is the culmination of not only Hollinghurst's ambition but that secret literary tradition to which it is addressed."
—Geoff Dyer, *New York Magazine*

"Charming. . . . Perfect. . . . Hollinghurst writes so carefully and subversively, often with one eyebrow raised in sardonic amusement as he satirizes the excesses of his mostly high-born protagonists."
—*Financial Times*

About the Author

Alan Hollinghurst is the author of the novels *The Swimming-Pool Library*, *The Folding Star*, *The Spell* and *The Line of Beauty*, which won the Man Booker Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. He has received the Somerset Maugham Award, the E. M. Forster Award of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction. He lives in London.

I

She'd been lying in the hammock reading poetry for over an hour. It wasn't easy: she was thinking all the while about George coming back with Cecil, and she kept sliding down, in small half-willing surrenders, till she was in a heap, with the book held tiringly above her face. Now the light was going, and the words began to hide among themselves on the page. She wanted to get a look at Cecil, to drink him in for a minute before he saw her, and was introduced, and asked her what she was reading. But he must have missed his train, or at least his connection: she saw him pacing the long platform at Harrow and Wealdstone, and rather regretting he'd come. Five minutes later, as the sunset sky turned pink above the rockery, it began to seem possible that something worse had happened. With sudden grave excitement she pictured the arrival of a telegram, and the news being passed round; imagined weeping pretty wildly; then saw herself describing the occasion to someone, many years later, though still without quite deciding what the news had been.

In the sitting-room the lamps were being lit, and through the open window she could hear her mother talking to Mrs. Kalbeck, who had come to tea, and who tended to stay, having no one to get back for. The glow across the path made the garden suddenly lonelier. Daphne slipped out of the hammock, put on her shoes, and forgot about her books. She started towards the house, but something in the time of day held her, with its hint of a mystery she had so far overlooked: it drew her down the lawn, past the rockery, where the pond that reflected the trees in silhouette had grown as deep as the white sky. It was the long still moment when the hedges and borders turned dusky and vague, but anything she looked at closely, a rose, a begonia, a glossy laurel leaf, seemed to give itself back to the day with a secret throb of colour.

She heard a faint familiar sound, the knock of the broken gate against the post at the bottom of the garden;

and then an unfamiliar voice, with an edge to it, and then George's laugh. He must have brought Cecil the other way, through the Priory and the woods. Daphne ran up the narrow half-hidden steps in the rockery and from the top she could just make them out in the spinney below. She couldn't really hear what they were saying, but she was disconcerted by Cecil's voice; it seemed so quickly and decisively to take control of their garden and their house and the whole of the coming weekend. It was an excitable voice that seemed to say it didn't care who heard it, but in its tone there was also something mocking and superior. She looked back at the house, the dark mass of the roof and the chimney-stacks against the sky, the lamp-lit windows under low eaves, and thought about Monday, and the life they would pick up again very readily after Cecil had gone.

Under the trees the dusk was deeper, and their little wood seemed interestingly larger. The boys were dawdling, for all Cecil's note of impatience. Their pale clothes, the rim of George's boater, caught the failing light as they moved slowly between the birch-trunks, but their faces were hard to make out. George had stopped and was poking at something with his foot, Cecil, taller, standing close beside him, as if to share his view of it. She went cautiously towards them, and it took her a moment to realize that they were quite unaware of her; she stood still, smiling awkwardly, let out an anxious gasp, and then, mystified and excited, began to explore her position. She knew that Cecil was a guest and too grown-up to play a trick on, though George was surely in her power. But having the power, she couldn't think what to do with it. Now Cecil had his hand on George's shoulder, as if consoling him, though he was laughing too, more quietly than before; the curves of their two hats nudged and overlapped. She thought there was something nice in Cecil's laugh, after all, a little whinny of good fun, even if, as so often, she was not included in the joke. Then Cecil raised his head and saw her and said, "Oh, hello!" as if they'd already met several times and enjoyed it.

George was confused for a second, peered at her as he quickly buttoned his jacket, and said, "Cecil missed his train," rather sharply. "Well, clearly," said Daphne, who chose a certain dryness of tone against the constant queasy likelihood of being teased.

"And then of course I had to see Middlesex," said Cecil, coming forward and shaking her hand. "We seem to have tramped over much of the county."

"He brought you the country way," said Daphne. "There's the country way, and the suburban way, which doesn't create such a fine impression. You just go straight up Stanmore Hill."

George wheezed with embarrassment, and also a kind of relief. "There, Cess, you've met my sister."

Cecil's hand, hot and hard, was still gripping hers, in a frank, convivial way. It was a large hand, and somehow unfeeling; a hand more used to gripping oars and ropes than the slender fingers of sixteen-yearold girls. She took in his smell, of sweat and grass, the sourness of his breath. When she started to pull her fingers out, he squeezed again, for a second or two, before releasing her. She didn't like the sensation, but in the minute that followed she found that her hand held the memory of his hand, and half-wanted to reach out through the shadows and touch it again.

"I was reading poetry," she said, "but I'm afraid it grew too dark to see."

"Ah!" said Cecil, with his quick high laugh, that was almost a snigger; but she sensed he was looking at her kindly. In the late dusk they had to peer closely to be sure of each other's expressions; it made them seem particularly interested in each other. "Which poet?"

She had Tennyson's poems, and also the Granta, with three of Cecil's own poems in it, "Corley," "Dawn at Corley" and "Corley: Dusk." She said, "Oh, Alfred, Lord Tennyson."

Cecil nodded slowly and seemed amused by searching for the kind and lively thing to say. “Do you find he still holds up?” he said.

“Oh yes,” said Daphne firmly, and then wondered if she’d understood the question. She glanced between the lines of trees, but with a sense of other shadowy perspectives, the kind of Cambridge talk that George often treated them to, where things were insisted on that couldn’t possibly be meant. It was a refinement of teasing, where you were never told why your answer was wrong. “We all love Tennyson here,” she said, “at ‘Two Acres.’ ”

Now Cecil’s eyes seemed very playful, under the broad peak of his cap. “Then I can see we shall get on,” he said. “Let’s all read out our favourite poems—if you like to read aloud.”

“Oh yes!” said Daphne, excited already, though she’d never heard Hubert read out anything except a letter in *The Times* that he agreed with. “Which is your favourite?” she said, with a moment’s worry that she wouldn’t have heard of it.

Cecil smiled at them both, savouring his power of choice, and said, “Well, you’ll find out when I read it to you.”

“I hope it’s not ‘The Lady of Shalott,’ ” said Daphne.

“Oh, I like ‘The Lady of Shalott.’ ”

“I mean, that’s my favourite,” said Daphne.

George said, “Well, come up and meet Mother,” spreading his arms to shepherd them.

“And Mrs. Kalbeck’s here too,” said Daphne, “by the way.”

“Then we’ll try and get rid of her,” said George.

“Well, you can try . . . ,” said Daphne.

“I’m already feeling sorry for Mrs. Kalbeck,” said Cecil, “whoever she may be.”

“She’s a big black beetle,” said George, “who took Mother to Germany last year, and hasn’t let go of her since.”

“She’s a German widow,” said Daphne, with a note of sad realism and a pitying shake of the head. She found Cecil had spread his arms too and, hardly thinking, she did the same; for a moment they seemed united in a lightly rebellious pact.

2

While the maid was removing the tea-things, Freda Sawle stood up and wandered between the small tables and numerous little armchairs to the open window. A few high streaks of cloud glowed pink above the rockery, and the garden itself was stilled in the first grey of the twilight. It was a time of day that played

uncomfortably on her feelings. “I suppose my child is straining her eyes out there somewhere,” she said, turning back to the warmer light of the room.

“If she has her poetry books,” said Clara Kalbeck.

“She’s been studying some of Cecil Valance’s poems. She says they are very fine, but not so good as Swinburne or Lord Tennyson.”

“Swinburne . . . ,” said Mrs. Kalbeck, with a wary chuckle.

“All the poems of Cecil’s that I’ve seen have been about his own house. Though George says he has others, of more general interest.”

“I feel I know a good deal about Cecil Valance’s house,” said Clara, with the slight asperity that gave even her nicest remarks an air of sarcasm.

Freda paced the short distance to the musical end of the room, the embrasure with the piano and the dark cabinet of the gramophone. George himself had turned rather critical of “Two Acres” since his visit to Corley Court. He said it had a way of “resolving itself into nooks.” This nook had its own little window, and was spanned by a broad oak beam.

“They’re very late,” said Freda, “though George says Cecil is hopeless about time.”

Clara looked tolerantly at the clock on the mantelpiece. “I think perhaps they are rambling around.”

“Oh, who knows what George is doing with him!” said Freda, and frowned at her own sharp tone.

“He may have lost his connection at Harrow and Wealdstone,” said Clara.

“Quite so,” said Freda; and for a moment the two names, with the pinched vowels, the throaty r, the blurred W that was almost an F, struck her as a tiny emblem of her friend’s claim on England, and Stanmore, and her. She stopped to make adjustments to the framed photographs that stood in an expectant half-circle on a small round table. Dear Frank, in a studio setting, with his hand on another small round table. Hubert in a rowing-boat and George on a pony. She pushed the two of them apart, to give Daphne more prominence. Often she was glad of Clara’s company, and her unselfconscious willingness to sit, for long hours at a time. She was no less good a friend for being a pitiful one. Freda had three children, the telephone, and an upstairs bathroom; Clara had none of these amenities, and it was hard to begrudge her when she laboured up the hill from damp little “Lorelei” in search of talk. Tonight, though, with dinner raising tensions in the kitchen, her staying-put showed a certain insensitivity.

“One can see George is so happy to be having his friend,” said Clara.

“I know,” said Freda, sitting down again with a sudden return of patience. “And of course I’m happy too. Before, he never seemed to have anybody.”

“Perhaps losing a father made him shy,” said Clara. “He wanted only to be with you.”

“Mm, you may be right,” said Freda, piqued by Clara’s wisdom, and touched at the same time by the thought of George’s devotion. “But he’s certainly changing now. I can see it in his walk. And he whistles a great

deal, which usually shows that a man's looking forward to something . . .Of course he loves Cambridge. He loves the life of ideas." She saw the paths across and around the courts of the colleges as ideas, with the young men following them, through archways, and up staircases. Beyond were the gardens and river-banks, the hazy dazzle of social freedom, where George and his friends stretched out on the grass, or slipped by in punts. She said cautiously, "You know he has been elected to the Conversazione Society."

"Indeed . . . ," said Clara, with a vague shake of the head.

"We're not allowed to know about it. But it's philosophy, I think. Cecil Valance got him into it. They discuss ideas. I think George said they discuss 'Does this hearth-rug exist?' That kind of thing."

"The big questions," said Clara.

Freda laughed guiltily and said, "I understand it's a great honour to be a member."

"And Cecil is older than George," said Clara.

"I believe two or three years older, and already quite an expert on some aspect of the Indian Mutiny. Apparently he hopes to be a Fellow of the college."

"He is offering to help George."

"Well, I think they're great friends!"

Clara let a moment pass. "Whatever the reason," she said, "George is blooming."

Freda smiled firmly, as she took up her friend's idea. "I know," she said. "He's coming into bloom, at last!" The image was both beautiful and vaguely unsettling. Then Daphne was sticking her head through the window and shouting,

"They're here!"—sounding furious with them for not knowing.

"Ah, good," said her mother, standing up again.

"Not a moment too soon," said Clara Kalbeck, with a dry laugh, as if her own patience had been tried by the wait.

Daphne glanced quickly over her shoulder, before saying, "He's extremely charming, you know, but he has a rather carrying voice."

"And so have you, my dear," said Freda. "Now do go and bring him in."

"I shall depart," said Clara, quietly and gravely.

"Oh, nonsense," said Freda, surrendering as she had suspected she would, and getting up and going into the hall. As it happened Hubert had just got home from work, and was standing at the front door in his bowler hat, almost throwing two brown suitcases into the house. He said,

"I brought these up with me in the van."

“Oh, they must be Cecil’s,” said Freda. “Yes, ‘C. T. V.,’ look. Do be careful . . .” Her elder son was a well-built boy, with a surprisingly ruddy moustache, but she saw in a moment, in the light of her latest conversation, that he hadn’t yet bloomed, and would surely be completely bald before he had had the chance. She said, “And a most intriguing packet has come for you. Good evening, Hubert.”

“Good evening, Mother,” said Hubert, leaning over the cases to kiss her on the cheek. It was the little dry comedy of their relations, which somehow turned on the fact that Hubert wasn’t lightly amused, perhaps didn’t even know there was anything comic about them. “Is this it?” he said, picking up a small parcel wrapped in shiny red paper. “It looks more like a lady’s thing.”

“Well, so I had hoped,” said his mother, “it’s from Mappin’s—,” as behind her, where the garden door had stood open all day, the others were arriving: waiting a minute outside, in the soft light that spread across the path, George and Cecil arm in arm, gleaming against the dusk, and Daphne just behind, wide-eyed, with a part in the drama, the person who had found them. Freda had a momentary sense of Cecil leading George, rather than George presenting his friend; and Cecil himself, crossing the threshold in his pale linen clothes, with only his hat in his hand, seemed strangely unencumbered. He might have been coming in from his own garden.

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