

PRAISE FOR

THIS

DEVASTATING

FEVER

‘Both timely and timeless, a sophisticated work of fiction that addresses the anxieties of the present moment as well as the most profound questions of history, art, love and loss. A magnificent novel.’

Emily Bitto author of *The Strays* and *Wild Abandon*

‘It takes a phenomenal control of craft, and a keenly honed intelligence, to do what Cunningham has done with this novel: to interrogate politics and art and culture, to take on love and sex and suffering and loyalty, while all the while ensuring that the reader remains buoyant and captivated by narratives that leap across space and time . . . I loved this book. I *absolutely* loved it.’

Christos Tsiolkas, author of *The Slap* and *7½*

‘*This Devastating Fever* is thrillingly audacious fiction. Sophie Cunningham’s entwined subjects are profound—Leonard Woolf and colonialism, the crises of the present day, the challenges of creative work—and she writes commandingly and inventively about them all. The result is an extraordinary novel.’

Michelle de Kretser, author of *Questions of Travel* and *Scary Monsters*

‘A book of big ideas that reads as a page turner. I was thrilled to keep returning to the page.’

Kate Mildenhall, author of *Skylarking* and *The Mother Fault*

‘Deeply humane, full of humour, and delightfully gossipy about the sex lives of the Bloomsbury Group, *This Devastating Fever* is innovative in format, chatty in tone and will seduce readers with its simple, direct voice.’

Books+Publishing

‘*This Devastating Fever* is remarkable: a thrillingly original, deeply emotional exploration of the complex echoes of history set in the shadow of the looming catastrophe of the future. Sinuous, strange, utterly compelling, it is like no other book you’ll read this year.’

James Bradley, author of *Ghost Species* and *The Resurrectionist*

‘Brilliant and unlike anything I’ve ever read before. It draws on archived letters and diary entries and the edges of what is real and what is imagined are delightfully blurred. It’s sharply layered, clever and darkly, dryly hilarious.’

Eliza Henry-Jones, author of *Salt and Skin* and *In the Quiet*

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DEVASTATING
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SOPHIE CUNNINGHAM

ultim^o
press



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I very rarely think either of my past or my future, but the moment that one contemplates writing an autobiography . . . one is forced to regard oneself as an entity carried along for a brief period in the stream of time, emerging at a particular moment from darkness and nothingness and shortly to disappear at a particular moment into nothingness and darkness.

LEONARD WOOLF, 1960

Apart from Knox, and later Leonard Woolf in his novel, A Village in the Jungle, very few foreigners knew where they were.

MICHAEL ONDAATJE, 1982

What a life he has led, and how he has led it!

EM FORSTER, 1970

I

FICTION AND NON-FICTION

1936

When Leonard stood up he was taller than expected. After more than twenty years of marriage you would have thought Virginia would have the measure of her husband, but she did not. Leonard leaned towards her. Virginia held his face in hers and admired its deep lines. She found it rather marvellous that the two of them seemed to have grown tighter like this. Not just in spirit but appearance.

‘We must prepare for Vanessa’s,’ she said.

‘Your headache?’

‘Of no account. She misses Julian. Besides, there are to be dress-ups.’

Leonard looked hangdog. He didn’t mind how ridiculous they would seem once in costume; he had dressed up as all manner of creatures over the years: Prince Albert, March Hares, Mad Hatters. It was his wife’s health that concerned him.

‘We are going to the party,’ Virginia continued, ‘and I have worked out exactly what we are to wear.’

Leonard raised an eyebrow.

‘I’ve had Louie set aside some boxes. That is all it will take.’

He waited.

‘Bookshelves!’ Virginia clapped her hands together. ‘Each of us a bookshelf. One labelled Fiction, the other Non-fiction.’

‘Which of us will be which?’

‘Seriously, Leo. Do you even have to ask?’

2020

Alice Fox had not expected to spend the twenty-first century writing about Leonard Woolf. When she’d stood on Morell Bridge watching fireworks explode from the top of Melbourne’s taller buildings at midnight on the first day of the year 2000 she’d had only two thoughts. One was: the fireworks are better in Sydney. The other was: is Y2K going to be a thing?

Y2K was not a thing. But, as it turned out, there were other things. Environmental collapse. Hen’s collapse. The return of fascism. Wars. Plague.

In the early days of writing her novel, Alice’s agent, Sarah, would occasionally take her to lunch and ask what was taking so long. Alice had explained once, twice, many times that she had hoped to write a novel about September 11, and been inspired by Leonard’s response to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Then the shot was fired in Sarajevo which destroyed the civilization and the way of life which I had known in the first 34 years of my life.

LEONARD WOOLF, 1964

Alice had experienced a similar foreboding on September 11 as she watched the towers come down. Her pursuit of echoes, of resonance, had gone on from there.

‘Interesting,’ Sarah had responded, once, twice, many times. ‘But not, in and of itself, a novel.’

Alice would return to first principles: at the beginning of their relationship she and her not-yet wife, Edith, drove to Seymour to buy their second Burmese kitten. The first had been lonely, so they’d returned to purchase the only sibling from the litter that hadn’t sold. Apparently his square, oversized head and crackly meow made him less appealing, though his square head was, as far as Alice and Edith were concerned, exactly what made him magnificent. They named him Wilson. Wilson, and his sister, Iris, became quite the distraction.

Once she had two cats, Alice would try to identify the correct position to put their baskets on her desk, next to the photo of her baby self being held aloft by her father, sometime in 1964. Black and white. Her little embroidered dress. Bloomers. She was gazing into her father’s eyes. He was gazing into hers. They were both laughing at the joy of being there, together, loving each other, making the world anew.

It was hard to fit all this—computer, sentimental items, books, cats—onto her desk. Perhaps she needed a bigger one. She might have to get into the car and drive to Ikea, which would mean getting caught behind a tram. She might buy a Linnmon/Oddvald combination then realise she needed another Billy for her books. These would have to be put together.

Sarah—who was, like Alice, a white Australian woman, well north of middle age by 2020, and, as a consequence, used to non-sequiturs—would try to rein in these meanderings.

‘Are you telling me you can’t finish your novel because you have cats?’

‘That is one reason, yes.’

‘I’m going to send you a book to read,’ Sarah said. ‘It’s by Geoff Dyer and is about how he tried to write about DH Lawrence but couldn’t.’

*All over the world people are taking notes as a way of postponing,
putting off and standing in for.*

GEOFF DYER, 1997

Over the course of two decades and many awkward exchanges, the lunches became less regular, though the excuses Alice came up with continued apace: climate change anxiety. The need to make an income. Dengue fever. The writing of books that were not the novel. Caring for Hen.

Caring for Hen had led to a crisis regarding the nature of narrative itself and when Sarah asked why, Alice tried to explain that dementia was a form of discontinuous narrative. Tried to explain how she’d felt simultaneously fascinated and devastated as she watched new forms of logic assert themselves in her friend’s brain: words detached, language floated apart, yet some relationship, some tension, some bond, continued to organise the sounds the woman Alice loved into Hen-shaped molecules of meaning.

Another pressing issue, not particular to Alice alone, was that it stopped being possible to make a living writing novels. This meant, that sometime in the twenteens, Alice started teaching people How to Write a Novel™. She enjoyed the work but wished she was able to model How to Write a Novel™ for her students by ACTUALLY WRITING A NOVEL. But, as she explained to them, her novel was a shapeshifter, a series of mirages. Drafts took shape. Shimmered. Disappeared.

Alice took to sending plaintive emails to Sarah, in an attempt to reignite her interest. For example, did Sarah understand that in Sri Lanka, Leonard Woolf was a rock star, albeit a rock star of the colonial era? Did she understand that Leonard's famous wife was of no account there? Sarah responded equitably. Said she was concerned that while Alice was writing about a man who may (or, to be honest, may not) have been the equivalent of rock star in Sri Lanka back in the day, he was certainly not one anywhere else. Alice countered that his series of autobiographies had been bestsellers in the 1960s. Sarah, who had been an adult in the sixties, was very aware of just how long ago, and irrelevant, the sixties would seem to most of the book-buying public. However: she was also keen to support clients based in Melbourne. A hundred days of lockdown (and counting) had sent everyone in Melbourne mad. One of the reasons Sarah was a good agent was that she coped better than most with proliferating technologies—Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Slack, FaceTime—all of which allowed people to see a face that was ageing exponentially, as the pandemic, work stress and drinking far too much alone at home took its toll.

Alice, though younger, was coping less well. She was also keen to take advantage of her agent's sympathy. They organised to meet over Zoom.

It was early in the morning. Alice, who was holding a coffee, appeared to be standing on the Marin County side of the Golden Gate Bridge, with her back to San Francisco Bay and the city skyline. Sarah appeared to hover in space with a decrepit Jack Russell terrier on her lap, somewhere over North America. After an ice-breaking chat about the fact they needed to better customise their backgrounds, they got down to business.

Alice had prepared a list of titles for Sarah so that she could present the draft that would be finished any day now to a range of publishers. She read the list out loud. '1. *The Precipice*. 2. *Once in a Hundred Years*. 3. *This Devastating Fever*. 4. *Waiting for Leonard*. I want to go with three. It's a phrase Leonard used about himself to describe lust and the problems of repression. It strikes me as even better now because of the whole COVID thing.'

Sarah was underwhelmed.

'Do any of them describe what's in the jar?' Sarah asked, what's in the jar being one of her favourite phrases. This annoyed Alice, particularly as she was certain the phrase was 'in the tin'. Sarah, for her part, was remembering a lunch thirteen years earlier when she'd been so mean to her client that Alice had stopped writing for several years. Sarah prided herself on being a straight shooter but it's possible she crossed a line sometimes. Sarah's problem was this: what was in Alice's jar seemed to change constantly and twenty years of conversations like this one had earned Sarah 15 per cent of sweet fuck all. Liking a client only got you so far. Was she a saint? She was not. Did she have to be? She did not. If you think authors are always broke, imagine earning 15 per cent of what they earn. (Sarah did not say these words out loud. In fact, she seemed unaware that she often thought these words so loudly that she might as well have spoken them. But she tried. Oh, how she tried.)

Alice didn't pick up on the tension emanating from Sarah. This might have been a Zoom thing, but was also a phone thing. She'd failed to put on Do Not Disturb, and now the daily barrage regarding Hen was vibrating through her body. Five missed calls, and one message. The days of Hen being able to send messages herself had gone.

Please call Ageing Disgracefully soonest regarding Hen Aetós

Alice was distracted. Sarah was asking another question. ‘Where are we at on the fiction or non-fiction front?’

‘It’s both.’

‘And where do you propose that booksellers put it?’

‘In the window? On the New Release table?’

‘Which table?’

‘Fiction!’ Alice said decisively. ‘It’s fiction.’

Say it and it be true.

There were versions of the novel in which Alice, inspired by The Avalanches album *Since I Left You*, and Dadaism, tried to write the novel as a series of samples, or cut ups. She then tried for straight historical but almost died of boredom. Literary styles moved in, and out, of fashion: Realist, magical realist, grunge, metafiction, autofiction, historical, rhetorical, satirical, postcolonial, feminist, fantasy, sci-fi.

Software evolved: Microsoft, Pages, Scrivener, Aeon.

Prime ministers, presidents, they came, they went: Howard, Rudd x 2, Gillard, Abbott, Turnbull, Morrison; Bush, Obama, Trump, Blair, Brown, Cameron, May, Johnson.

Hardware evolved: MacBook, MacAir, iPad, iPhone.

The United Kingdom joined the European Union. The United Kingdom left the European Union.

Pets were born, were loved, lived, died.

Drafts unfurled over years, over decades, Alice let a thousand flowers bloom, wore out the soil, and, to continue the metaphor, added fertiliser.

Over the years Alice received a range of advice from Sarah and other readers. That advice could be summarised as ‘more focus

needed'. It was suggested she cut the footnotes and overly complicated timelines. She was advised to lose her favourite fictional character, [Redacted]. It had been painful to lose [Redacted] and by extension [Redacted]'s lover, her father and her grandmother. Alice had become attached to all of them. But no.

In.

the

(digital) bin.

One oft-recurring suggestion was that Alice cut loose Ghost Virginia, the concern being that she was a poorly executed ghost, and not central to a novel about Leonard Woolf. Sarah had gone so far as to suggest *no Virginia at all*. Alice had some sympathy for the suggestion that she remove Virginia from her novel—Virginia was one of the most written about women of the twentieth century, and she tended to take things over. However, Virginia refused to be edited out so there was not much Alice could do about that.

Other advice:

More Leonard! (This was a good idea in theory, however, Leonard lived a long life. Eighty-nine years of Leonard might be more than anyone wanted or needed.)

More Ceylon! (Alice liked this idea.)

Less Ceylon! (No. She wasn't going to kill that darling.)

More of the Bloomsbury Set in general!

Less of the Bloomsbury Set in general! (White. Entitled. Middle-to-upper-class. Irrelevant.) Alice agreed with all of this except the irrelevant bit, but then of course she would not think they were irrelevant because she too was white and middle class. She liked to think she wasn't entitled but clearly was too close to the situation to judge. She loved all of the Bloomsbury Set, and that included the

obscure ones. (Desmond and Molly MacCarthy.*) The queer ones, which was all of them—except, perhaps, Leonard—and the boring ones. (Including but not limited to Virginia’s brother Adrian Stephen† and his wife Karin Costelloe‡.) In fact, the problem was that even the boring ones were not boring to Alice.

In short, if a *Trivial Pursuit* game was developed asking questions about the lives of these people, Alice would have trounced everyone she played, every time she played them. Unfortunately for Alice, writing a novel was not the same as playing a game of *Trivial Pursuit*. It was much harder to win at writing a novel.

The most various range of opinions among her readers related to whether Alice, who was, in one iteration of the manuscript, called ‘The Author’, should and could exist. Sarah thought that she could

* Sir Charles Otto Desmond MacCarthy was born in 1877. He was a little-regarded writer and a highly-regarded literary critic. Has also been described as a literary flop: a man who failed to live up to his promise. Lady Mary MacCarthy, known as Molly, was a British writer and married to Desmond MacCarthy. In later life she suffered from severe hearing loss.

† Adrian Stephen, like most members of the Bloomsbury Set, was bisexual and had a relationship with Duncan Grant before Grant entered a long-term relationship with Adrian’s sister, Vanessa. Adrian and his wife were among the first people in Britain to engage with the theories of Sigmund Freud, then practise as Freudian psychoanalysts. Alice diligently read Adrian’s papers on the psychoanalytic meaning of impotence, made assumptions, but then failed to effectively weave these details into the narrative at hand.

‡ Karin Stephen (née Costelloe) was a psychoanalyst and psychologist. She first rose to prominence/notoriety in 1913 when she was part of a group who started a legal action to compel the Law Society to admit women to its preliminary examinations. The action failed. She wrote several books, including *Psychoanalysis & Medicine: A study of the wish to fall ill*, which Alice read, was fascinated by and found pertinent, but failed to effectively weave into the narrative at hand. Karin became deaf in later life and committed suicide in 1953. Virginia hated her. Leonard published her.

(should) stay but that the protagonist should have a life that aligned with the actual author's life. The novel could, perhaps, explore:

- Alice's bisexuality
- Alice's marriage
- Alice's work as a publisher
- Alice's childlessness
- Alice's parentless-ness
- Alice's relationships with paternalistic father figures, romantic and otherwise
- Instances in Alice's life that, according to the mores of her day, were not considered sexual abuse or assault, but, in hindsight, were a form of sexual abuse or assault.

This kind of personal revelation was Not. Going. To. Happen.

'I think an exploration of the writing process would provide the kind of conventional narrative arc readers seem to require,' Alice would offer, brightly, from time to time. 'Alongside the collapse of civilisation.'

Zoom time was almost over. Sarah decided to make one last push on this question of narrative momentum and asked Alice to consider writing about one bond that she and Leonard shared: the role of carer. 'You once described to me the weight of that feeling,' Sarah said, 'of waking every day feeling convinced that both your own fate and the fate of the person you are caring for are conjoined. That you might be able to, if you try hard enough, save them.'

'I said that?' Alice asked, regretting, as usual, her propensity for oversharing. 'Hen's not such a big deal. Just a neighbour who doesn't have anyone else.'

There was more to it than that and everyone knew it. Hen Aetós had moved in next door to the Fox family in the early seventies. She was a knockout: the short but lean body of a marathon runner (which she had been as a young woman) teamed with bright red hair that was obviously dyed but looked so good it didn't matter. She had divorced young, married even younger. Hen and Alice's parents became quite the threesome until, a few years later, Alice's mother had died (cancer), and her father had drowned (in self-pity, alcohol), leaving a note for his three children on the kitchen table: *Heading north. The house is paid off. \$400 a month should cover costs. Hen's agreed to keep an eye on you.*

That note had been followed by weekly postcards full of declarations of love, guilt and shame, sent from a range of tropical locations. The money was useful. The postcards were not. Most useful of all were the meals Hen made for them every night for the next five years until first Diana, then Alice, and finally the youngest of them, Doug, left home. As Hen put it, in a letter she sent to Alice who had been smoking hash somewhere in the Himalayas: *My last falcon has fledged!*

'Getting Parkinson's, with dementia, at only forty-eight years of age is a big deal,' Sarah said. 'How old were you when Hen was diagnosed? Thirty-six? And wasn't she messy from day one?'

'Messy is beside the point. Let me share this,' Alice said, keen to change the topic. 'Here's an outline I've written.' Then the screen went blank and silence fell over the meeting. Technology had defeated Alice and she'd somehow disabled Screen Share. She rallied, and launched into an enthusiastic pitch in which she tried to convey the fact that, as with the *I Ching*, as with the Tarot, one can find, in the writings of Leonard Woolf, in the writings of his wife, Virginia, commentary on events of the present day.

‘Perky as fuck,’ Sarah said. ‘But save it for the publishers.’

‘Think of it,’ Alice pushed on, ‘as *How Proust Can Change Your Life* but with Leonard Woolf and nihilism.’

‘Jesus, I hated that book,’ Sarah said, her background flickering and blurring ominously as her internet began to fail. ‘Apologies. This happens every morning at nine when school starts up. I’ll freeze any . . .’

‘. . . moment,’ Alice finished for her, looking down at her lap to the empty space where (sometimes) Iris and (sometimes) Wilson once sat. She hadn’t mentioned those recent deaths to Sarah, who had been uninterested in living cats let alone dead ones. Furthermore, in Alice’s experience, people thought her love for her cats was somewhat deranged. They were old, right? What was the problem? Only three people—Edith, Hen and Leonard—understood the intensity of her feelings for the animals she lived with. Her phone vibrated again. This time it was Edith, who, as if reading her mind, had sent a message from the next room.

A pandemic kitten. It’s time.