The Man Who Loved Children by Christina Stead U3A 29 July 2019 (from Julanne)

We hope on 29 July to have as guest Della Rowley, sister of the esteemed biographer of Stead, Hazel Rowley, who also wrote ELEANOR and FRANKLIN, our choice for 23 September.

So there will be no separate Reviews, as ideas from several have been included in these LONG Questions!

Please try to read the celebrated reviews by Jonathon Franzen (NYTimes 2010) and Randall Jarrell (1965) who both argue that this work is a masterpiece. Some editions include one or both reviews.

1. Which of the following points of view do you sympathize with?

a) the reader who said s/he bought this book and found it too hard to read - the writing almost dysfunctional, not just the family. It’s sprawling, exhausting. Engrossing but loathsome.

or

b) it’s a masterpiece, comparable to Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina", Franzen's "The Corrections", Yates’ "Revolutionary Road", Dostoyevsky’s “Crime and Punishment” and Chekhov. Profound and imaginative.

2. Sam displays many signs of eccentricity bordering on egomania and, perhaps, madness. Do you think Sam is crazy? Are there times when you agree with his propositions, such as on environmental matters when he was Fisherman Sam with his friend Saul “who only in fishing found peace from his termagant wife” (4 pages into Ch 9 Part 2)? What of Sam's education theories (Ch 8 Part 4)? Some valid Rousseau?

3. How did Henny’s family and education prepare her for life? Are you sympathetic towards her? Is the conception of the sixth child understandable? When she did not laugh at the words “storm in a teacup” as steam rose from her tea, does she draw recognition from many readers of our own lives? Are the Pollits really struggling or does Henny mismanage the money?

4. The novel has many flaws - mostly that it is overlong and repetitive. What sections or characters could be artistically omitted? Or is Stead’s use of repetition, as well as changes of styles and genre to suit the changing content, one of her powerful literary devices? What sounds echo throughout the novel? Let us SHARE ALOUD a favourite very short passage or phrase which demonstrates Stead’s style.

5. Is Stead’s mastery of a new language for the family believable? Amusing? Annoying childish argot? Do the children understand Sam’s ravings or do they simply play along? How does their father's behaviour help and/or hinder the development of the children? Are they lucky to have the stimulation of the word games and outdoor fun? Did the over-use of brackets to explain words annoy you (mizz/miserable Ch 6 Part 1, 3rd page; nims/hymns Ch 4 Part 1) though useful for Malayan?

6. In Louie (Stead’s own persona) do we understand at a deep and traumatic level what it is to be an "ugly duckling" and an outsider? Are her actual quotes and compositions needed to prove her talent (even though in 1940 - and certainly in 2019 - they are NOT as familiar as to the budding student author in 1919)? Were her own GREAT EXPECTATIONS expressed and dashed when Sam grabbed Miss Aiden’s attention (near end of Ch 9, Part 3)?
7. Did you find that when you felt you could no longer bear a tirade of abuse or raving, the author’s own control would interrupt with another character’s ‘SHUT UP’ or ‘I CAN’T STAND YOUR GASSING’-- to bring relief?

8. Is it reasonable that TMWLC, written in 1940, ignores world issues like the chaos and refugee madness in Europe and the June 14 fall of free France (when Hubert Wilkins in THE LAST EXPLORER was daringly escaping to Britain)? Is it equally universal in tracking the emotional nightmare that some families become and that we all recognise in parts?

9. Do you think ‘internations within internations ‘(Ch 8 Part 1) foreshadow the UN? What references to socialism do you note? (Stead’s husband was a committed socialist). Written in 1940 before Pearl Harbour, with Sam working in a Roosevelt Conservation Dept(Ch 8 Part 1), does hindsight allow us a fresh judgment on the references to many social and political issues of war, religion and race? (Sam, Ch 9 Part 4 – spending on warships instead of mail services; and Clare (near end of Ch 8 Part 3 ) promoting to Louie the book PROGRESS and POVERTY.

10. What futures do you predict for each of the children, Ernie, Evie, twins Saul and Little Sam, Tommy and Charles-Franklin? Who (apart from Louie) is most clearly depicted? Are their lives more playground than battlefield? Are physical beatings more damaging than psychological hurts?

11. Would TMWLC have been more popular in Australia if Stead’s publishers had not forced her to set it in the USA? What Australian places would YOU choose as parallels for Tahoga Place and Spa House?

12. If the novel sagged in the middle, do you agree that the structure of the finale is brilliantly built up by events and atmosphere? How satisfying is the conclusion?

13. If you could ask one question of the author, what would it be?