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Writing to the end

MADOC CAIRNS

All Sorts of Lives: Katherine Mansfield and the Art of Risking Everything

CLAIRE HARMAN
(CHATTO & WINDUS, 304 PP, £18.99)

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ALL WRITING lives end in ellipsis. It's in the nature of the craft to be compulsive, inescapable: more an appetite than a vocation, less a career than a hunger. Katherine Mansfield (pictured) was a case in point. Her death, aged 34, came fewer than six years after her diagnosis with tuberculosis in 1917. Her last breath – fighting an enormous internal haemorrhage – brought to a close a relentlessly protean, and influential, body of work. Her surviving contemporaries mourned. Their descendents forgot.

A century on from Mansfield's death, Claire Harman follows Claire Tomalin and Antony Alpers in attempting to repair the damage. Mansfield was “a modernist who hadn't survived to be acknowledged as one: who had left the stage before the performance had even begun”. Hers was a truncated life, fated to incompleteness; novels unfinished, friendships run dry.

Born to a prosperous family of rich New Zealanders, she migrated, aged 20, to London, in 1908, and never returned. With her she

took her ambition, her talent and a sense of exclusion she could never quite shake. The young Mansfield, self-consciously avant-garde, had dated tastes: a devotee of Oscar Wilde in the era of his eclipse. Studiedly bohemian, she harboured deep misgivings over her background (“provincial”) and her bisexuality (“unclean”). A cultivated androgynous on the page, off it, she lived through an age where women's political equality – let alone their cultural potential – lingered on the threshold of recognition.

Fenced in by geography, biology, law, Mansfield's mind spoke in polyphony. “True to oneself! Which self? What with complexes and suppressions and reactions and vibrations and reflections – there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel without a proprietor who has all his work cut out.” Harman works out Mansfield's life through these other selves, the short stories that brought the author from unhappy obscurity to brief, bright fame.

Early works on the evanescent allure of childhood give way to proto-existential writing on domesticity, romance, gender. Harman traces how life written and life lived interlaced for Mansfield, who managed her work alongside turbulent relationships – at one point, she was married to one man, living with another and pregnant by a third. Crossing from

England to France and back again, she established herself amid the “little magazines” of the pre-First World War counter-culture.

She found admirers among the literati; D.H. Lawrence, a confidant of Katherine and her husband, wrote her into one of his books. Rivals too. Virginia Woolf had never been jealous of another writer before Mansfield arrived, and she never forgave her for it. Mansfield wrote in a loose, modernistic style with a fervour touching on the mystic: “My work excites me so much. I almost feel insane at night and I have been at it with hardly a break all day.”

Unknown to Mansfield, it was a candle burning at both ends. In December 1917, she was diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis. She was already reeling from the death of her beloved younger brother two years before, and the diagnosis drove her to an even quicker tempo, in art and life. She wrote poetry and plays; planned novels; dabbled in cinema. “Do other artists feel as I do,” she had once wondered, “the driving necessity – the crying need?”

That need made her last years productive – and perhaps, Harman suggests, foreshortened. Consumed by her need to create, she refused standard rest cures and – “frail as a butterfly” – kept writing even as the end neared. It was an early, tragic death. But not, as Harman's lucent biography shows us, an unsurprising one. Ellipsis awaits everyone, eventually.



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