

The Wasteland

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Strained from historical fact, *The Wasteland* is a fictionalized glimpse into the conflicted mind of T. S. Eliot.

Starting with his time working in a bank and traveling to the publication of “The Waste Land,” the novel reads like a stream-of-consciousness account of an eventful period in Eliot’s life. He’s referred to throughout as Tom, and his real-life, ill-fated marriage and friendships with other notable poets are interspersed with embellishments and diversions. The novel takes for fact what has long been speculated upon by historians and literary critics: that T. S. Eliot was a closeted gay man.

Focusing most on his star-crossed relationship with Jack, the novel depicts Tom’s life as a gay man as one under constant scrutiny in early twentieth-century London. As Tom thrives professionally, swept under the wing of Ezra Pound, his personal life unravels, along with his mind. The strain of hiding his feelings for Jack—even from himself—and his perpetual fear of discovery lead to dissociative episodes akin to fever dreams, often centered around characters from Tom’s poems. It becomes unclear what is real and what is a manifestation of Tom’s turmoil. He is torn in diametric directions: Tom versus Mr. Eliot.

Absent biographical information delineating fact from fiction, the novel utilizes several perspectives to lend dimension to Tom’s story. His eventual wife, Vivienne, regards him with rose-hued awe, convinced of his shy but passionate love for her; her disillusionment and subsequent struggle with mental illness is harrowing. In so much as Tom’s heart belongs to Jack, Jack is the heart of the novel: plainspoken, unreserved, and loyal to a fault. Still, there are no heroes here: every character flounders within the shifting tides of a country on the brink of war, and the wars within themselves.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (September / October 2020)

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