

# AJAY CLOSE

*What We Did in the Dark*

'Highly  
recommended.'  
Carol Birch

'Profound and moving.'  
James Robertson



## **Praise for What We Did in the Dark**

'A profound and moving exploration of a disastrous marriage from which the woman rescues herself... in an age when the odds against her doing so were immense. Catherine's heroic determination to make her own future is what drives the narrative forward. The writing is visually rich and packed with detail, and the story is beautifully told. I couldn't stop reading it.'

James Robertson

'Ajay Close is a terrific writer, her prose is tight and lucid and sometimes quite beautiful. This story of the doomed relationship between the Scottish writer Catherine Carswell and her first husband, talented but severely mentally ill painter Herbert Jackson, takes us from the headiness of whirlwind romance to the first inklings of unease and... into full-blown nightmare. Close displays real skill and insight in making something both moving and compelling out of such challenging material. Highly recommended.'

Carol Birch

'A passionate, brutal tale - full of tender moments and barbaric acts. The emotional landscape is vivid and refreshingly candid, with some brilliant portraits of selfishness, and the vignettes - so sharp-eyed and merciless - are a real treat.

Sue Peebles

'A brilliant and compelling new book from Ajay Close. A story of passionate love turning into a damaging marriage

as Catherine Carswell fights first to understand what is happening to her and then to free herself and her child and make a new life for them both. Ajay Close has written a story about the life of a woman in the early 20th century which speaks across time to all women everywhere.'

Sue Wilkinson

## **The Daughter of Lady Macbeth**

'Sensual, wise and raw, *The Daughter of Lady Macbeth* gets to the heart of what it means to be a mother, or wish you were.'

Rosemary Goring

'Through her engaging writing, Close manages to get under the skin of her characters and the reader becomes caught up in their story. Their pain springs off the page, as each woman confronts the demons from her youth. A gripping read about redemption, love, and self-discovery.'

*The Lady*

'As befitting something which references one of Shakespeare's darkest female characters, *The Daughter of Lady Macbeth* has a shocking, violent and mysterious opening. Both timelines will keep you guessing.'

*Stylist Magazine*

'*The Daughter of Lady Macbeth* is an honest and often relentless exploration of relationships, identities and the friction between them.'

*Scottish Review*

'Close is exploring important matters; nature and artifice, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, loyalty and betrayal. Her prose, as usual, is beautifully polished but this is her most emotional novel to date and is partly inspired by her own experiences. As a picture of a marriage crumbling under pressure it is melancholy and all too genuine.'

*Book Oxygen*

'...has a raw, desperate quality which strikes at the very heart of human frailty.'

*Undiscovered Scotland*

### **A Petrol Scented Spring**

'A fascinating insight into one of the most compelling stories in the history of the women's suffrage movement.'

*The Times*

'I was riveted and gripped by it.'

Murray Lachlan Young on *A Good Read*, Radio 4

'Close writes with breathless wit, dizzying passion, a quick sympathy for her two heroines, and an unflinching eye.'

*Kirkus Reviews*

'A captivating and nuanced read... Close writes witty and humorous dialogue that has the duck, dive and jab of a boxing match between characters.'

*Scottish Review of Books*

‘Uncompromising in its honesty and compelling in its narration... Ajay Close has hit on a real-life story that may prove to be one of the gems of the year.’

*The Herald*

‘A thought-provoking and revealing read... Close’s sophisticated writing is never less than engrossing.’

*The Scotsman*

‘Close’s dialogue is superb, as is her insight into the complex mix of human imagination and emotion. A truly gripping novel.’

*Scottish Review*

Born in Sheffield, **Ajay Close** worked as a newspaper journalist, winning several awards, before becoming a full-time author and playwright. Her first novel, *Official and Doubtful*, was longlisted for the Orange Prize. Her fourth, *A Petrol Scented Spring*, was longlisted for the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction. Her play, *The Keekin Gless*, was staged at Perth Theatre. *The Sma Room Séance* toured east Scotland and was performed at the Edinburgh Fringe.

Also by Ajay Close

*The Daughter of Lady Macbeth*

*A Petrol Scented Spring*

*Trust*

*Forspoken*

*Official and Doubtful*

# What We Did In The Dark

Ajay Close



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*For Jim*

I made what may be called a rash and foolish marriage to a man I scarcely knew. In reality - the reality that is oneself in so far as this at any moment can be termed real - it was a desperately rational act.

*Lying Awake, Catherine Carswell*

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## ***1939***

I had the dream again last night. Not Italy this time, but London. I was a stranger, barged by the sightless crowd, with the greasy pavement under my shoes and my nostrils red-raw in a young woman's face blanched with cold.

I turned from my reflection in the tinselled windows, along a narrow mews where the warm smell of horse vied with the stink of petrol, to emerge in a square. Brass plaques reflected a bruised yellow dusk. To my left, gated greenery, a blackbird on a railing, trees turned to velvet shadows against the dimming sky.

The office was comfortable, in an old-fashioned sort of way, with creamy gaslight and treacle panelling. A girl with a scar on her upper lip wetted a cloth with methylated spirits and dabbed at the hammers of her typewriter. She glanced at me, and quickly away. I knew then I had done something shameful, but the old man was kind, exclaiming at my icy handshake, seating me by the glowing coals. When I brought the teacup to my lips, it smelled faintly of meths.

There was a tap at the door.

My heart lurched in terror and, more terribly, with a sort of gladness.

I knew you at once, although your hair was white and your boxer's body stooped and frail. You had shaved off your moustache, but your eyes were the same.

At last I found my voice to say, 'But you're dead.'  
And you said, 'Am I?'



# PART I

Youth again, though so delightful to the unthinking eye, is the season of green sickness, of ill-assurance, of desperate melancholies, of the agonies of misprised love and irremediable mistakes.

*Lying Awake*, Catherine Carswell

## **1904**

It was early September, but the Berkshire afternoon was as warm as Glasgow in June. From the train I saw crows picking over yellow stubble, orchards of reddening apples, barns of russet brick, a pulsing of white scuts as rabbits fled up the grassy embankment. A farmhand set down his scythe and drank from a jug and, just as if the curtains had drawn back from a stage, I knew the long years of dreaming were behind me. Life, my real life, was about to begin.

I had had this thought before, more than once.

‘Miss Macfarlane?’

The boy swung my carpet bag into the trap, placing a hand either side of my waist to lift me up after it.

‘Do you do that for all the ladies?’

‘No, Miss.’

I laughed, and spent the rest of the journey avoiding his glance.

The summer ‘cottage’ was a substantial house, the crooked squares between its ancient timbers sealed by buttercream, a thatched roof like an ill-fitting wig. (I made a note to remember that simile at dinner.) A thrush sang from the yew hedge, nasturtium trumpets flamed, lavender spikes trembled under the ministrations of bees.

‘Cathie!’

'Professor Raleigh.' Too late, I remembered I had to call him Walter now.

He seemed to have grown even taller in the months since we had last met: taller, and more confoundingly debonair. He advanced, trousers flapping around his long legs, arms opening in welcome. That faint tremor in his hands, a congenital weakness turned to witty effect. Seeing the glint in his green eyes, that drooping moustache, I thought, *If I ever met your twin, I would marry him like a shot.*

'We're just sitting down to tea, if you don't mind being kept in suspense about where you'll be sleeping. Don't worry about washing off the smuts - they're very becoming.'

For a moment I was stuck for words, then I recalled the trick of it.

'There was a man in my compartment eating pickled sardines. I spent a good deal of the journey with my head outside the window.'

'Ah yes, the sardine-eater. Have you met his continental cousin, the breather of garlic sausage?'

We smiled at one another, and I said it, although I had promised myself I would not.

'Why are you leaving Glasgow?'

'You might as well ask a fowl why it would leave the lidded pot. Eight lectures a week, a hundred-and-fifty a year. At present I'm merely parboiled. Another two terms and I should have been soup.' His voice dropped to a more intimate register. 'And you will visit us in Oxford. Unless you disgrace yourself this week.'

He motioned me down the path, advancing a long arm as if to curve it around my waist, one of those phantom gestures of his. How I loved his ungainly grace.

(Unconfessable thought. Like our bodies, our remarks must never quite touch.)

The cottage was cool and dark after the vivid garden, with a smell of beeswax on old wood, the floor listing slightly under my feet, the echoing tick of a longcase clock. He stooped to pass through the doorway at the end of the hall. In the greenish light filtered through the leaded glass, I saw a small party was in progress. Two men got to their feet. The women turned towards me.

Transfixed by Lucie Raleigh, I did not listen to the introductions.

I had pictured her as Guinevere to the professor's Lancelot: a languid, willowy queen. In reality she was compact and energetic with a pleasing, squarish face. Slightly inturned upper teeth grazed a plump lower lip. She seemed surprisingly youthful for a woman in her late thirties.

'Miss Macfarlane was Walter's most brilliant student in Glasgow,' she announced to the company. Then, to me, 'The children will be back very soon. They're all frightfully excited about learning the piano.'

I sat down.

Professor Raleigh hung back from the circle of chairs, folding himself into the window seat.

'We were just planning tomorrow's outing.' Lucie's charming inflection rendered me peculiarly helpless, as if the words she wound around us were very soft, very strong wool. 'Mary wants to see some hideous exhibition in Swindon, but perhaps you'd prefer an interesting ruin.'

'That's rather hard on your husband.' A droll, drawn-out, provocative voice, its owner looking almost exactly as I had

imagined Lucie. 'Walter's more of a column - or possibly an obelisk.'

'A jolly obelisk,' said my whiskery neighbour, who was German.

'Covered in terribly amusing hieroglyphics.' This from a Fauntleroyish young man with a flop of brown hair.

'Quite indecipherable to the rest of us.' The queenly woman again.

'To you,' Lucie purred. 'But not, I'm sure, to his most brilliant student.'

I had to speak or be written off as a dullard.

'After you've been bamboozled by Professor Bradley's lectures, Professor Raleigh is clarity itself.'

'Really?' Lucie said. 'He doesn't rattle off a few random facts, then spend the best part of the hour reading out his favourite speeches from the Bard?'

In truth, this was exactly what he did. I glanced towards the window, but the professor's face was obscured against the light. 'He reads better than any actor.'

'He does, doesn't he?' his wife agreed. 'We were wondering if we should do some Shakespeare while you're here. That is, if you'd find it amusing. We're all such show-offs, one forgets it's not to everyone's taste.'

I said I would love to read a play.

'Not *read*,' said Fauntleroy, '*perform*. Costumes, scenery, props - sword fights, too, saints preserve us.'

'But not one of the tragedies,' Lucie intervened. 'By our age you've had enough of those, and the history plays have so few decent parts for women. Besides, it's only the comedies Walter takes seriously.'

Picturing myself as Viola, in doublet and hose, I suggested *Twelfth Night*.

'We thought *Much Ado*,' Lucie said smoothly. 'It's so refreshing to watch a pair of lovers of a certain vintage. Not so ancient as Anthony and Cleopatra - that's just sordid - but old enough to have learned there's more to love than ecstasy and death.'

'Stair rods?' her husband offered. 'Marmalade? Life insurance? Bridge?'

Ignoring him, Lucie continued, 'Though I wonder if Beatrice wouldn't have been better off marrying Don Pedro.'

'Oh *no!*'

My fellow guests smiled and I saw that I had been cast in the role of *ingénue*. I did not like this any more than I had liked Lucie making it clear I was there to mind the children. I had no wish to spend this week being patronised as the help.

I stood up.

'What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true?  
Stand I condemned for pride and scorn so much?  
Contempt, farewell! And maiden pride, adieu!  
No glory lives behind the back of such.  
And Benedick, love on - I will requite thee,  
Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand:  
If thou does love, my kindness shall incite thee  
To bind our loves up in a holy band.  
For others say thou dost deserve, and I  
Believe it, better than reportingly.'

There was a small astonished silence. My face grew warm.

‘Well,’ said Whiskers, ‘I can see why you’re top of the class.’

The professor patted his pockets in a syncopated rhythm.

‘They’re in your raincoat,’ Lucie murmured. Turning back to me, she said, ‘We’re having steak and kidney for dinner. I do hope you’re not a vegetarian? You don’t have that look – you know what I mean: as if they’re bald even though they’ve got hair. But if you are one, you must say. I’m sure Cook can rustle up a coddled egg.’

I assured her I was quite omnivorous.

‘How extremely accommodating of you.’

At midnight in the sewing room on the three-quarter-length divan (knees tucked up to keep my feet under the covers), I reviewed my new acquaintances. Before coming to Glasgow, Professor Raleigh – *Walter* – had held the literature chair at Liverpool University. Whiskers (Professor Kuno Meyer) taught Teutonic languages there. The foppish boy, Lytton, had been another brilliant student of Walter’s and held the extra claim of being his sister’s nephew by marriage. I would have been deadly jealous, but I had no jealousy to spare: it was all directed at the honourable Mary Chaloner Dowdall. According to Whiskers (who sat beside me at dinner), she was a famous Bohemian who had once ridden through Liverpool in a Romany wagon, bare-legged, wearing a short, striped petticoat and spangled headkerchief. She was not so very much older than me, four years at most, but the gulf between us was plain for all to see. The queenly Mary had *finish*. Along with her lovely, intelligent face; her long, slender, gypsyish limbs; that air of being aloof one minute and, the next, intent as a hunting cat. I would have been horribly in love with her, had I been

a man. Luckily she had a husband, a barrister detained in the north by a very important case.

The next day, Walter sat beside me at lunch.

He was no more attentive to me than to any other guest, but I was near enough to breathe in his faint smell of Morgan's pomade mixed with shirt starch and cigarettes. The nape of my neck prickled at his proximity. Our feet touched. I murmured an apology. He smiled at his plate.

'I hope the boys aren't being too much of a nuisance,' Lucie said.

'Not at all,' I replied, knowing everyone had heard Valentine slamming his fists on the piano keys, roaring, '*I hate it, hate it, hate it!*' while Hilary tried to hide his pious smirk. Little Adrian was my favourite, in his velvet smock and knickerbockers, slipping his soft hand in mine. Thankfully, there was a nurse to see to the baby.

After lunch, Walter returned to his study. One more day and his book on Hakluyt would be ready for the printers. Kuno and Lucie claimed a corner of the parlour for a game of chess. Mary retired for a nap. We had been up so late last night, and Cook's suet sat rather heavy on the stomach. Lytton borrowed an umbrella and set off for the village post office, taking the children, who were to spend the afternoon with their grandmother. Unexpectedly, I was free to do as I pleased. Lucie said she admired my pluck, going out for a walk in this filthy weather. I was to be sure to gird myself in a waterproof and sou'wester.

'Cathie!'

As if by magic, Walter appeared behind me in the lane, out of sight of the house and doubly concealed by his

voluminous oilskins. He was carrying a pudding basin.

‘For the plums. I’m going to pillage the vicar’s trees. You shall be my accomplice.’

But he took the road leading away from the church.

‘I like a woman who matches my stride. Lucie has me creeping like an undertaker while she trots alongside me on her little terrier’s legs.’ He stopped on a bridge over a railway cutting. ‘Perfect timing: here comes a ripper!’

A plume of smoke hurtled along the cutting towards us. The express was moving so fast that the engine rocked from side to side. The whistle shrieked and we were wreathed in the delicious smell of washday ironing, a metallic drag in the thundering rhythm, a bass note I felt in my bones. We turned and watched it speeding away towards London. Walter’s smile made me wonder if I had cried out in excitement.

The vicar’s orchard sat across the road from the church, behind high walls of ancient brick. Fruit lay rotting in the grass, worm-holed or swollen and burst. The tree we chose wept like a willow under its burden. So many plums, with a blueish bloom that wiped away to reveal the same shade of pink as the old brick walls. A twist, the merest touch, and they fell into the palm. Only one resisted. When I tugged it free, a drop of syrup seeped from the umbilical dimple, like serum from a wound.

Stretching to reach one of the higher clusters, I nudged a pocket of leaves and a teaspoon’s worth of rainwater ran down the inside of my sleeve. I gasped. Walter turned at the sound. The tips of his long fingers circled a fruit, gently squeezing. He plucked it and bit, spitting out the stone, bringing the residue to my mouth. My lips grazed his fingers as I took it. His eyes held mine. Woodsmoke drifted

from the vicarage chimney. Our oilcloths creaked as I pressed myself against him, lifting my rain-wet face, my juice-sweetened mouth, to his. Was that surprise, or alarm, in his eyes? He glanced over my shoulder before planting a quick, fatherly kiss on my nose.

‘We’d better chivvy along and fill Cook’s basin,’ he said.

I picked plums as if my life depended on it, as if they were all that stood between my family and starvation. As if I were stripping the tree of my shame.

We retraced our steps over grass that was turning to bog. Rain bounced on the paved road, forming a brown river in the gutter. Walter slithered on a fallen leaf. Our glances met and veered away. We parted company inside the cottage garden. I took the kitchen path, he made for the front door. For the past ten minutes neither of us had spoken.

The boot room was warm and dry, the brass hooks concealed by layers of tweed and wool, the floor cluttered with hazel sticks and perished gumboots. I pressed my face into the comforting mound of dusty-smelling coats. I was twenty-five. Father had been dead three years. My sister Fanny was in London and engaged to be married. How long before Grant found a farm, and Gordon passed his architect’s exams and was snapped up as a husband, leaving Mother on my hands? As was only fair. I had had my years of freedom. What had I gained at the Frankfurt Conservatory and Glasgow University? The knowledge that I was a mediocre pianist, and Professor Raleigh’s regard, a treasure lost with that clumsy lurch into his arms.

‘That’s right. You’ll feel better after a good cry.’

Walter had shed his oilskins.

'And I'm writing a novel,' I said.

'About what?'

I laughed. 'Just about everything that has ever happened to me.'

'Except?'

I stared at him.

'Write about that,' he said.

'They'd never publish it.'

'All the more reason to write it.'

Ivy's friend Viola asked if he had read Arnold Bennett's latest. I got up to make more tea.

Frieda followed me through to the scullery. I feared for her horse-check skirt as it brushed against the whitewash.

'You mustn't mind Lorenzo,' she said. 'He's guessed right often enough for it to go to his head.'

Her smile had its helping of jealousy. I wanted to tell her not to worry, that of course her instincts were sound, I was powerfully drawn to the genius type, he was exactly the sort of man I had thrown myself at time and again, but I had not lived through the past decade without learning something. The only way of avoiding disaster with men like Lawrence was by keeping my hands off them.

'What a pretty dress,' she said.

It was a tea party, with all the limitations implied. There was a certain amount of persiflage for which I, as hostess, felt dreadfully responsible. Only Lawrence refused to waste his breath. After an hour or so, Ivy chivvied my guests to their feet. The Lawrences could not afford to return to Italy just yet. How splendid if we found a house for them to rent in Hampstead. We would all be neighbours.

I went to fetch my hat.

When I came down, everyone but Lawrence was waiting outside.

'I have a favour to ask,' he said.

'Of course. Anything.'

I guessed he wanted me to put a word in for him at the *Manchester Guardian*: would they take the odd column on the state of the novel? I knew he lived hand-to-mouth.

'Will you let me read your book?'

I could not bear the shame of wanting it so badly. I had to demur. 'It's not finished.'

'I'll bear that in mind.'

I remembered the way Frieda had smiled in the scullery. There would be many young women who had put their manuscripts into his hands.

'I think it's only fair to tell you,' I said, 'I'm the sort of person who is much more impressive at first meeting than subsequently.'

He found this funny, and I found I didn't mind.

'Luckily for you, I'm the sort of person who has no interest in being impressed.'

I enjoyed taking him up and down the banks and steps of our little hilltop, then back past the house to the end of Holly Mount. His eyes widened at the kestrel's view of London spread below us. I had no inkling that his insights would transform my rambling prose into a competent - indeed, a prizewinning - first novel, or that I would return the favour in a small way with *Women in Love*, but even then I sensed we would be friends.

They had to catch an omnibus back to Kensington. We walked them down to the Finchley Road, Lawrence and I forging ahead. His restless energy found sauntering a torment, and this suited my long stride. Both Frieda and Ivy

were dawdlers. By the time we reached Church Row they were far behind. We stopped to wait where the road narrowed between the parish church and the little overflow graveyard. I thought of taking him to see Constable's stone. Instead, I gestured through the railings to our right.

'My daughter's buried in there.'

He looked startled.

The mock orange I had left the previous Wednesday was drooping but still put out its evening scent. He read the inscription on the low stone around the double plot. *Eight happy years.*

'Peritonitis. Last September,' I said, before my face crumpled.

'And the father?'

I did not tell him everything, but enough. With him, it seemed a waste of time to talk about anything but my real concerns.

We took a turn around the little graveyard, a pretty spot guarded by cedars, on gently rising ground, the grey stones and green turf splashed by evening sun. The place worked its magic on us and we were quiet for a while, until a blackbird swooped shrieking across our path.

'You should write about it,' he said.

Ivy called to us from the gate. We retraced our steps.

The talk moved on to the book he was planning about Thomas Hardy, but I knew he was turning the other matter over in his thoughts.

When the omnibus came, he said again, '*Write it.*'

'And if I do, will you read it?'

Frieda boarded the bus. He grasped the rail.

'Write it for him,' he said.

## ***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS***

This is a work of fiction about real people, using imagination to patch the gaps in the factual record.

I urge anyone wanting to know more about Catherine Carswell to read her books, especially her piecemeal autobiography, *Lying Awake*, her memoir of D. H. Lawrence, *The Savage Pilgrimage*, and her first novel, *Open the Door*. I have borrowed freely from all three. Jan Pilditch's *Catherine Carswell: A Biography* and the two volume-length selections of Catherine Carswell's letters she edited were enormously helpful, as was Jan herself. I also drew on: Thomas Pakenham's *The Boer War*; David Smurthwaite's *The Boer War: 1899-1902*; Anthony Sampson's *The Scholar Gypsy*; Michael Holroyd's *Lytton Strachey*; Virginia Woolf's essay on Walter Raleigh in *The Captain's Death Bed*; and *Letters of Sir Walter Raleigh*, edited by Lucie Raleigh. The poem 'The Artist' was published in a collection of Walter Raleigh's humorous writing, *Laughter From a Cloud*.

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