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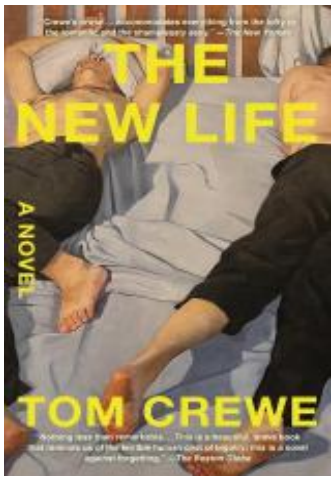
The New Life

by Tom Crewe



About the Book

A brilliant and captivating debut, in the tradition of Alan Hollinghurst and Colm Tóibín, about two marriages, two forbidden love affairs, and the passionate search for social and sexual freedom in late-19th-century London.

In this powerful, visceral novel about love, sex and the struggle for a better world, two men collaborate on a book in defense of homosexuality, then a crime --- risking their old lives in the process.

In the summer of 1894, John Addington and Henry Ellis begin writing a book arguing that what they call ?inversion,? or homosexuality, is a natural, harmless variation of human sexuality. Though they have never met, John and Henry both live in London with their wives, Catherine and Edith, and in each marriage there is a third party: John has a lover, a working class man named Frank, and Edith spends almost as much time with her friend, Angelica, as she does with Henry. John and Catherine have three grown daughters and a long, settled marriage, over the course of which Catherine has tried to accept her husband?s sexuality and her own role in life. Henry and Edith?s marriage is intended to be a revolution in itself, an intellectual partnership that dismantles the traditional understanding of what matrimony means.

Shortly before the book is to be published, Oscar Wilde is arrested. John and Henry must decide whether to go on, risking social ostracism and imprisonment, or to give up the project for their own safety and the safety of the people they love. Is this the right moment to advance their cause? Is publishing bravery or foolishness? And what price is too high to pay for a new way of living?

A richly detailed, insightful and dramatic debut novel, THE NEW LIFE is an unforgettable portrait of two men, a city and a generation discovering the nature and limits of personal freedom as the 20th century comes into view.

Discussion Guide

1. On page 85, the reader learns of Henry?s ?peculiarity? and the shame he?s felt about it for his entire life. This ?peculiarity? allows him to sympathize with ?inverts? and their oppression. Discuss how narrow the definition for ?normal? really is. How many people fall outside of that category? How have the confines for normal broadened or narrowed since Henry and John?s day?

2. A recurring fear of both John and Henry is that John?s ?inversion? will be discovered, discrediting their book. Why is it that we don?t trust the subjects of debate to have a credible perspective? What are some examples of conversations where the people most affected by the decision are left out of the process?

3. At the beginning of chapter 11, John recalls the events leading up to his marriage to Catherine, the dread he felt, his inability to focus, his casual cruelty because he did not love her. He recalls rushing into the marriage even though he knew it was wrong. Discuss a time you were torn between instinct and reason when making a decision. How often were your instincts right?

4. On page 126, in the midst of a heated conversation about sexual freedom and contraceptives, Angelica says, ?If sex is considered a pleasure, why would you not make it safe from consequences in every kind of case?? What role does moral posturing play in maintaining the status quo? How does it contribute to restricting bodily autonomy?

5. In the same conversation, and later on page 152, the meaning and limits of liberty are raised again. Angelica claims that ?liberty can be abused.? How is ?liberty? being defined here? Does that definition allow for individual self-determination? How is ?liberty? constrained when someone other than the individual gets to decide when they are ?abusing? it? How do responsibility and liberation compete with or complement each other?

6. In a letter to Henry on page 141, John defends the omission of female inverts from their book due to the lack of legal penalty. However, lesbianism was socially taboo, and women who attempted to marry one another with one presenting as a man were charged with fraud. Considering that Edith and Angelica were by no means free to be together despite it not being explicitly illegal, how does this illustrate the limits of legality as a means of liberation?

7. Consider the ripple-effects of the prohibitive laws against ?inversion.? John?s wife, Catherine, is deeply wounded by the limits placed on his choices --- and by his resulting actions --- and is not free herself to seek other companionship. Discuss the ways in which this reflects Franny Lou Hamer?s quote ?Nobody?s free until everybody?s free.?

8. Consider the line ?We must live in the future we hope to make.? What does this mean to you? How do you or how would you incorporate this into your own life? What future do you hope to make?

9. On page 245, John says, ?I said to Ellis today that there are blameless lives, that Wilde had dragged us all down with him. It isn?t true. I don?t think any of us are blameless --- we haven?t been allowed to be.? Explore the concept of innocence as a requirement for justice or equality. Why is it that John feels that in order to be protected, he and other inverts need to be completely ?blameless?? How does the concept of ?innocence? play into who is granted justice?

10. Jack confronts Henry after discovering that he is continuing with the plan to publish the book, afraid of what it will mean for him. On page 256 he says, ?Does it ever occur to you that the New Life might be easier for some people to live than for others?... The gap is wider if you are in defiance of the law, than if you simply choose to live apart from your wife.? Discuss other instances in the book where it is clear that the ?New Life? only offers liberation for some. How

could the ?New Life? become accessible to all?

Author Bio

Tom Crewe was born in Middlesbrough in 1989. He has a PhD in 19th-century British history from the University of Cambridge. Since 2015, he has been an editor at the *London Review of Books*, to which he has contributed more than 30 essays on politics, art, history and fiction. THE NEW LIFE is his first novel.

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