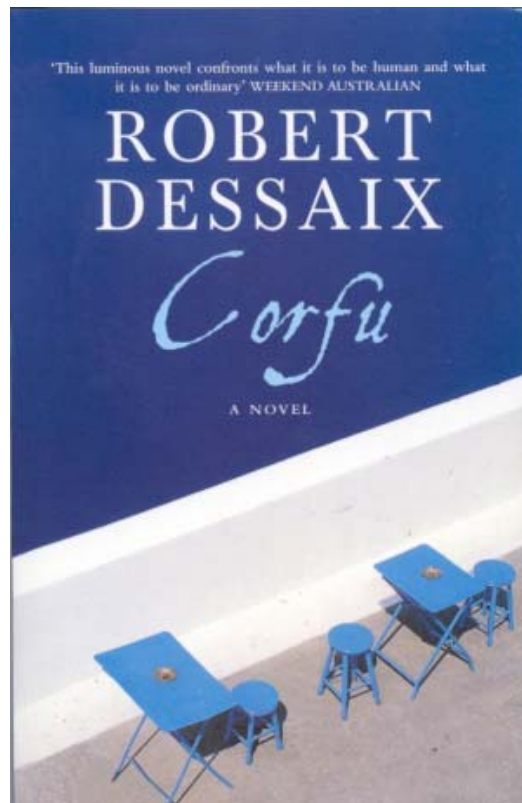


**PICADOR**  
**AUSTRALIA**

**NOTES FOR READING GROUPS**

**Robert Dessaix**  
**CORFU**



Notes by Robyn Sheahan-Bright

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## THEMATIC AND PLOT SUMMARY

*'a place where being what he is will matter. That place is home.'* (p.53)

The connections between art, love and discovering life's meaning are teased out and unravelled in this meditation on home and journeying; real life and the stuff of dreams; acting and pretending; **the ordinary and the extraordinary**; exile and home. The narrator is an Australian actor abroad - literally he is in Europe, but metaphorically, he is 'away from himself' and searching for a spiritual home. **He feels a deep attraction to William but is unsure of what he might be committing himself to - whether theirs is to be a love affair, a friendship, or something in between which the French call 'amitie amoureuse'**; he feels it's time to return to Adelaide, but fears the emptiness he might find there. His decision to stop off in Corfu, on the way home, becomes pivotal to his inner development, though he's unsure why he's doing it. *'I'd finally cast anchor. Life was a smooth, wax tablet again, waiting to be written on. It was deeply unsettling.'* (p.13)

This novel explores the dichotomy between home and abroad; Australia and Europe; the past and the present. Europe is full of Australians escaping from 'home', trying to find a more cultural or 'glamorous' place to live. They often end up, though, in shabby flats in Earls Court with other 'Aussies', or as members of anachronistic European expat communities, like the one encountered in this novel, on Corfu. Many of the characters who live there have been away from a variety of homes for years so that Greece represents a mythical home or place of escape for them. *'Greece, as we all know, is full of foreigners who were once on their way home from somewhere and got stranded there.'* (p.13) Part of its attraction lies in its 'culture' and supposed licentiousness. *'Corfu is still a primitive place, it has a wonderfully pagan heart.'* (p.107) Expatriate artists are particularly drawn to the place, for they are notoriously unable to separate the demands of the 'work' from those of 'life'. People like the Durrells, for example, are referred to, as 'famous literary exiles.' And of course, there are many Australians, too, who have fetched up in Greece. Rather famously there was the literary couple George Johnston and Charmian Clift; who lived there in the 1950s, an experience which left him with health problems, and her, tragically, with an inability to adapt to Australia again when they returned in the mid 1960s. *'And anyway where would we move on to? Where most of us came from no longer exists.'* (p.60)

To support this idea, Australian cities are presented, in contrast, through the eyes of disgruntled expatriates, in terms of their insularity and lack of culture. Kester Berwick found Adelaide stifling, though he tried to introduce it to avant garde theatre. William is reluctant to return to Adelaide and the narrator is sarcastic about the city, too, *'It's true there was a period in the 1970s when we all thought a new Golden Age had arrived, because the Premier wore shorts in parliament and everyone started potting and weaving and living disordered lives in mudbrick houses in the Hills, but that was quickly snuffed out. The moment my divorce came through, I was off. I blanked it out.'* (p.89) Significantly, though, he returns there after his time in Corfu, and apparently finds peace and contentment.

The idea of journeying to find home again is important in the novel's structure. Various landscapes (apart from those of London, Corfu and Adelaide) are evoked in order to explore this concept. The narrator's meditation on life and art includes a number of 'literary landscapes' as well. First, there is Homer's *The Odyssey*, a quote from which opens Part 1, with Odysseus recounting his arrival on Corfu: *'So, fighting for life, I flung myself ashore and the godsent, bracing night came on at once.'* (p.3) Later the narrator

writes that, '*Odysseus was not a great traveller or restless explorer... All Odysseus wanted to do was to go home... Not every traveller wants to go home in a literal sense - some are marooned for so long they think they are at home - but every traveller, even the kind that never leaves his armchair in front of the fire, wants to find a place where being what he is will matter. That place is home.*' (p.53)

Part 2 opens with a quote from Sappho's *I More Than Envy Him*: '*He is God in my eyes, that man*' (p.115) which precedes a tale of a classic traveller's misadventure. Instead of being met by a Communist hairdresser named Zoe, the narrator is mistakenly collected from an airport by a scholar who is visiting Greece for a conference on Sappho. After he spends time with her, she rejects his offer to exchange names, saying there's no point in it (pp.206-7) Their meeting has been pleasant and interesting but that in itself is enough. This sort of meeting is common to travellers, and hints again at the theme of the novel, which is to welcome new experiences; to thirst for 'connections' however slight. Part 3 opens with Cavafy's *The City*: '*You won't find another city won't find another shore. This city will always pursue you.*' (p.237) This echoes another theme - that of the traveller carrying his home behind him like a heavy load. No matter how far we travel, home will always be with us. The Epilogue contains words spoken by Nausicaa to Odysseus: '*Remember me at times. Mainly to me you owe the gift of life.*' (p.335) This perhaps hints at the implication voiced by Martha later in the novel that the narrator's encounter with the expats on Corfu 'saved' his life. It opened his eyes for the first time.

Chekhov's plays are also referred to in the novel, in order to tease out the idea of the narrator's search for meaning in the ordinariness of life. In *The Cherry Orchard* the narrator plays Peter Trofimov, an '*eternal student*' (p.21) to whom Ranyevskaya says, '*It's time you became a man, at your age it's time you understood people who love people. And it's time you loved someone yourself ... time you fell in love.*' (p.23) In that play it's suggested that Chekhov '*managed to create a wholeness out of all these lost galoshes and great loves.*' (p.70) *Three Sisters* is a play '*about people bending the straight lines of their lives into triangles, trying ... to make a space in which to play with their deeper desires.*' (p.193) *Uncle Vanya* is the play which he directs on Corfu and which is performed by the people whom he has met since he arrived, on the night he finally decides to leave for home in Adelaide. The aimless conversations of the characters in Chekhov's plays appear to demonstrate that life is pointless, but upon reflection, they reveal that their very existence is the point of life; their petty exchanges matter because they do. The action in these plays is also mirrored by the exchanges between people on the island, and particularly by the expat 'parties' to which the narrator is invited: first to an Easter dinner at Greta's house, and then to a luncheon at the Big House owned by the local grand seigneur George Michaelis, described as '*lunches ... for the fag-ends of the empire*'. (p.102) The banal conversations and the embarrassing gaffes made by this community of has-beens are paradoxically rather charmingly endearing and wittily amusing to read.

This is about the eternal search for 'Real Life' which evades many people who live their lives waiting for it to begin. '*What I was waiting for in Sydney after the war for years was for something to happen - well it was never going to happen in Australia, was it? So, like everyone else, I eventually got fed up and went to where it was already happening - London.*' (p.59) As the novel shows, many people spend their lives wandering in search of this elusive reality, without understanding that real life begins with inner understanding: '*the guests all seemed to be in their middle years, that not uninteresting in-between age when you know at last what it is you want and also know you'll never have it. It shows on the face.*' (p.58) All the characters here seem to suffer from this ailment to varying degrees, or as Arthur says, '*we're all desperately tired of being ourselves, but don't quite know who else to be.*' (p.102)

The Narrator is a character who has trouble making connections, with instigating or maintaining intimacy, and with imagining life will offer him anything but disappointment. He is never named or described physically, and this contributes to the reader's apprehension of him as a man who is profoundly unremarkable, like Kester was. '*I'm hopeless at parties. I have no small talk and they always make me wonder whether I should get married again, possibly to someone in the room.*' (p.40) His attraction to William is expressed in a series of encounters which detail one of the most painful of courtships. Each makes guarded overtures, but the narrator is easily discouraged.

He is also constantly possessed by feelings of failure or inadequacy. His life seems to be a series of moments which provide no spiritual uplifting for him at all. *'The most dispiriting thing about failing to be moved by other's rituals is that it brings you face to face with your own ordinariness.'* (p.49) When watching a supposed tourist highlight like the Easter weekend procession, he finds it *'an utterly untransforming experience. You could have been in Bournemouth on a wet Bank Holiday weekend.'* (p.43) His sense of disillusionment with life's failure to measure up to the expectations of fantasy interpretations of it, reaches a crescendo when he writes, *'Nothing, again I feel nothing. Most of those around me seem enlivened by something they've glimpsed, but I don't.'* (p.46)

Each of the other characters support the themes suggested by the troubles of the narrator: **William** is a handsome stage designer whose refusal to sentimentalise masks an even more abject problem with commitment than that possessed by his would-be lover. This is obvious from the narrator's first lovestruck description of him: *'There was William, entirely William, casually dapper in that unfussy way of his, demurely cocky as he always was, peering about in the yellow light, his suitcase at his feet, waiting to be rescued.'* (p.5) William, it seems, is rather fickle and prone to act on impulse. Though he was annoyed by his friend's defection in Rome, he doesn't seem to have expected a great deal, and his reaction to their 'first night' together is again casual rather than intense. **Kester Berwick** is an over-eighty year old actor, theatre director and writer, who's fetched up on Corfu and never left. *'The man doesn't live in the real world at all. He doesn't even know it's there. He's like a ghost from the 1930s.'* (p.83) His life seems to have been marred by failed love affairs and artistic aspirations, and he was considered by some of his friends as a tragic figure; his lonely death certainly seeming to indicate that as well. However, other people (like Prue) believe that he had found what he was looking for on Corfu: *'No, no, Kester doesn't seek happiness ... No, it's something more like peace.'* (p.84) **Greta** has stayed in Greece with an alcoholic husband who dies during the course of the novel, but she has no desire to go to wherever 'home' might be anymore. Corfu has become home for her. Other characters include **Arthur**, an Irish teacher of English; **Bernie**, Arthur's sister who has a second hand bookshop; **George Michaelis** who is a patriarchal Greek figure who has been powerful on the island but whose influence has decreased, so that *'the days when you had to have his permission to sneeze are long gone'* (p.102); his mistress **Gisella**; his ageing servant **Martha**; **Prue** an artist whose partner is a Greek sailor; **Maxwell Coop**, an acerbic wit who occasionally dons female clothing; **Celia** the snobbish wife of 'somebody'; and the **Vicar**, a mewling conservative. Each are fading figures, who perhaps provide a warning to the narrator that he should make the best of his life while he can.

**Elizabeth, Empress of Austria** is another 'character' in the novel. *'Sisi was in love with loveliness - her own mostly, to be frank, which was the talk of Europe, but also Corfu's orange-scented beauty, aglow with drifts of golden broom'* (p.26). She built a grand folly on Corfu, and fled from Vienna's *'brilliant court and her extraordinary family ... in order to be nobody, to come to rest and just be herself, ... her moonstruck life was a stupendous failure, and failure on that scale is fascinating.'* (pp.29-30) The narrator finds her example intriguing and perhaps identifies with her desire to absent herself from expectations, though he ultimately decides to return home to 'face the music', as it were. **But the narrator identifies most closely, of course, to Kester Berwick, and his life becomes a sort of shadow-play of that lived by the older man. He never actually meets him, because in the end there's no need to do so.**

Romantic love is a further concept which is explored in the context of this conflict between 'real' and 'pretend' life (or feelings). The narrator is infatuated with William, but is frightened of not being able to stay the distance emotionally and is not even sure of the depth of his feelings; Kester Berwick spent his life falling in love with unsuitable young men who later jilted him; Greta has been living for years with a drunken husband who doesn't speak to her; the vicar's son was found in an uncompromising position with Maxwell Coop, and yet he is the one person who has a key to his house when he's found alone and dead. Relationships in this novel are described as a sort of dance between sexual or erotic love, and the comfort offered by connections between friends, or even strangers.

This is a novel which proposes as a philosophy for life that we should simply 'see what there is to see'; open our eyes and enjoy the view. It advocates that we should maintain both a faith in life's rich offerings, and an enquiring mind, via music, art, literature, or moments of simple joie de vivre occasioned by the often momentary apprehension of something beautiful, interesting or worthy of notice. Such moments might include appreciating visions such as that captured in the Henri Cartier-Bresson photograph of '*a delicate instrument in a stony place*' (p.356) or seeing a butterfly like '*a fluttering summery note from nature's orchestra tuning up.*' (p.202) Curiosity - be it intellectual or emotional or physical - is the spice of life. '*it's miraculous ... they're like a drop of water on a leaf ... all those angles and tensions, as well as of the everyday beauty of the droplet on the leaf*' (pp.206-7) One senses at the end of the novel that the narrator will spend the rest of his life admiring and marvelling at the view, rather than finding it wanting. **His own life, despite its ordinariness, has been made beautiful, by this redemptive process.**

## WRITING STYLE AND TECHNIQUES

1. Dessaix's style is always a tantalising mixture of references to classical literature and popular culture. He manages to write an erudite novel with a subversive and anarchical flavour which is enticing. Discuss.
2. Dessaix is interested in the variant forms of communication which human beings use to convey their feelings, some designed to explore inner conflicts, and others to simply pass the time of day with no real connection between creator and recipient. For example the novel contains letters; a postcard which he describes as '*an offering ... which elicits nothing in return, except a brief remembrance*' (pp.37-8); fiction; poetry; plays; paintings and photographs. He also shows the nuances that people put on 'speaking' in any one of these voices. eg The postcard can be selected to convey a certain idea, by virtue of the illustration on it; the narrator postpones writing a letter of apology to William for abandoning him in Rome, because '*he couldn't find the voice*' (p.31); different productions of plays convey different ideas as well. Dessaix suggests that every form of communication is capable of being manipulated by both the creator and the recipient to convey endlessly fascinating meanings. Choose one of the forms of writing in the novel and discuss its meaning. eg The excerpt from *The Cherry Orchard* (pp.22-4); the poem by Sappho ( p.115).
3. Metafiction is a device by which Dessaix invites his readers to enter into the narrative with him, in a number of ways:
  - by discussing the way he has chosen to tell the story as he progresses;
  - by indicating that he himself is not always reliable. eg '*I caught his eye, smiled, and walked quickly across the platform - to hug him and tell him the first lies.*' (p.5) or '*and nothing I say is to be trusted*' (p.56);
  - by questioning the intentions of other writers. eg After the excerpt from *The Odyssey* he writes an aside telling the reader that Odysseus was a '*notorious if spellbinding liar*' (p.3). This sort of note encourages the reader to interrogate the meaning of what is being said in terms of what might be kept hidden, or of what might have been falsified;
  - by making the reader complicit in the telling by using conversational phrases such as '*Greece, as we know, is full of foreigners...*' (p.13) and thus making the reader an 'intimate partner' in his narration.

Did these techniques create a stronger 'bond' between you and the writer?

4. The action occurs in a series of flashbacks which are not in sequential or chronological order. eg We meet the narrator first when he is greeting William from the train in Rome, and then the action switches to Corfu, when he is answering Berwick's advertisement some weeks later; and then back to their first meeting at a play rehearsal in London eighteen months earlier. What effect does this structuring of the narrative have on your reading? (You might also compare it to a film script which does the same thing such as Harold Pinter's *Betrayal*.)
5. This is part fact and part fiction. The narrative is interspersed with historical and mythical explanations, and is partly a travelogue as well. Does this style make history more vivid?
6. The novel frequently uses the device of imagining scenes like those in a script for a play. eg '*I'd worked out what to say while Clive's wife was reading the poems. I knew my lines. In my head was a short dialogue, suave but sincere, friendly but detached*' (p.41) One could imagine this 'blocked out' as a play including party scenes; meetings; failed meetings etc. How does this theatricality enhance the message?

## THE AUTHOR

**Robert Dessaix** is known as a leading broadcaster, for many years the producer and presenter of the ABC's *Books and Writing* program. He left his twenty year academic career as a lecturer in Russian language and literature at the University of New South Wales, and the Australian National University, to work in theatre and for the ABC. He is an essayist, critic and translator. Adopted as a baby, in 1994 he published *A Mother's Disgrace*, an autobiographical account of his experience of adoption, and also edited *Australian Gay and Lesbian Writing: an Anthology* for OUP. Other books include *Turgenev: The Quest for Faith* (1980); *Picador New Writing* (1993, edited with Helen Daniel); *A Practical Handbook of Russian Aspects* (1994); *Night Letters* (1996) which was his first novel, and was shortlisted for a number of awards including the Miles Franklin; *Secrets* (1997, with Amanda Lohrey and Drusilla Modjeska); and *Speaking Their Minds* (1998); a book of short fiction, essays and journalism entitled (*and so forth*). He also worked on *Great Travellers* a ten-part series for ABC Radio. His most recent publication is *Corfu: a Novel* (2001). He lives in Melbourne and has travelled widely.

Dessaix says of this novel that 'There were two themes which were important to me: friendship and ordinariness ... the question of what friendship is and how it is different or similar to other kinds of love, especially sexual love, is fundamental. The narrator 'shilly-shallies' simply because he can't work out what sort of love this is ... this book is about how to redeem an unremarkable life.'

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is the expatriate community on Corfu tightly knit or is it a hotbed of intrigue and insecurity? Discuss.
2. William is enigmatic in some ways. Why did he say, '*Well, the next time you see me with other people... you must promise me faithfully you'll come and get me.*' (p.129) Was he only flirting or did he genuinely mean what he said? Does he really intend to join the narrator at the end of the novel? What do you make of his intentions?
3. '*But then, it's very hard to forgive someone we've wronged, isn't it?*' (p.38 ) Are most acrimonious partings fuelled by guilt rather than anger or hatred? Do we always watch love fade with a sense that we're at fault in some way?
4. The narrator's description of his wife's affair with Harold (pp.90-1) is told in a flippant voice. Did it wound him or was it a relief?
5. There are a number of coincidental meetings in the novel (eg with Alex, Leila, Elvira). Is this typical of life, or is it simply typical of the small circles within which tourists or travellers often move? Discuss.
6. '*If you can mark yourself off from the ordinary folk in some way - through outrageous immorality ... or eccentricity ... then the ordinary folk will think of you as glamorous*'. (p.61) The narrator is reflecting here on the parts people play to make themselves feel special and to impress others. What part does he generally play, or does he refuse to play a part in real life?
7. Is Kester Berwick a heroic and tragic figure or is he a victim of his own petty ambitions? Discuss.
8. Ambivalent sexuality plays a role in this novel too. Eg The conversation between Greta and Bernie about '*her Chilean*' (p.58); Greta's affair with Kostas, whose wife Zoe is also her good friend; the vicar's son Ashley's affair with the cross-dressing Maxwell Coop; the divorced narrator's love for William; Kester's boys. Sexual relationships are described in terms of their 'game-playing' aspects as well. eg '*Hotels have an amazing effect on my libido. The games with the desk-clerk, the key in the lock, the smell of the sheets, the fluffy towels, the glances from strangers...*' (p.168) What does this novel suggest about sexuality?
9. The narrator has a sort of '*epiphany.*' (pp.87-8) What did you make of this description?
10. Which of the literary works or writers quoted in this novel does *Corfu* most resemble in style? Discuss.
11. '*But you're right to go now. I think we've probably given you all we can.*' (p.333) What does Greta mean by these parting words?
12. '*But what is 'petty' and what is grand? And if reaching for the stars means trampling all the beautiful little things in life into the mud, is it worth it?*' (p.69) Discuss.



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