

## The great sea-dreamer's nightmare: New fiction

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## New fiction

### Christopher Wordsworth

**The Dogs Of Paradise**, by Abel Posse, translated by Margaret Sayers Peden (Hamish Hamilton, £13.99)  
**Last Loves**, by Alan Sillitoe (Grafton, £12.95)  
**Taking The Devil's Advice**, by Anne Fine (Viking, £12.99)

**T**HERE was something almost miraculous about the way in which Spain, a poor, parched, fragmented country cut off from the European mainstream by the barrier of the Pyrenees, burst on the world at the end of the 15th century. Only writing of the most royal purple, a translation worthy of it, and an irrepressible imagination could hope to

do justice to such an historical phenomenon, and all three are sumptuously provided in *The Dogs Of Paradise*. From the incense of noble cathedrals to the stinking hold of a caravel, from the mating cries of the fateful couple, Ferdinand and Isabella, to Columbus's ambivalent circumcision by the rabbi ("slightly snub but he'll pass" confirm Torquemada's Jew-sniffers) and the callipygous maidens at an Aztec beanfeast (destined to be waitresses and dishwashers at the Nebraska Cafeteria when the great sea-dreamer's earthly paradise is located) the pageant of flesh and spirit is a torrent.

History says that the royal pair never met until their nuptials in Toledo; there is a more scandalous version here of preliminary rutting, and an interesting gloss on the intimate reasons for Ferdinand's umbrage at being the junior partner. Did Hitler wear a miniature of Isabella in the bunker, Ferdinand ever declaim "one

empire, one people, one leader" or the Amerindians contemplate a pre-emptive strike against the bearded ones (they discovered Europe in 1392)? Anything and everything is possible as the ships of destiny await the tide. "Who was who? There were Jews disguised as monks, their underdrawers stuffed with watches and silver spoons; priests dressed as musketeers travelling as agents of the Inquisition or Vatican, and a plethora of spies from England who had signed on as flamenco dancers". Anchors aweigh!

Bernard is a successful publisher with a posh background although Mr Sillitoe makes him more like a randy commercial traveller in *Last Loves*; divorced schoolmaster George is of finer clay but reverts to boozy adolescence when they get together, the friendship dating back to the Malayan Emergency (in which the author himself took part as a wireless operator) although their paths

have seldom crossed since. Bernard's ever-loving wife has stumped up for reasons of her own to be later divulged; they are at the Raffles — why change the name? — in Singapore on a sentimental return to the Johore jungle where they were blooded against the terrorists and, judging by their reminiscent chuckles, permanently sozzled — on Van der Hum moreover, South Africa plum brandy, arguing unusually weak brains and strong constitutions as well as yet another cock-up by the Naafi (some years earlier we were reduced to the local snakejuice in the ulu, rumoured to leave a lead precipitate on the stomach lining — another story). There is also Gloria, shapely, mid-30s, from a provincial solicitor's office, drawn to Malaya by memories of her father, a prison governor. As each of them comes face to face with himself she might as well be labelled "catalyst" and have done with it, being otherwise

pure cardboard throughout. A romantic country, a smiling people, signposting the inevitable tragedy in the jungle when the letter from Bernard's wife arrives revealing that two can play at that game. Mr Sillitoe is never less than honest value, but need he have been quite so portentous this time?

After Sr Posse's fantastic riches and Mr Sillitoe's sobered seekers in their private jungles it is back to the crumbling home front and the crackle of domestic cross-fire in *Taking The Devil's Advice*, Anne Fine's clever and entertaining second novel. It is said to take two to make a quarrel but the casus belli for Constance after 16 years of marriage is her philosopher husband Oliver's serene unawareness of ever having given grounds for one. "After the thunder, the rain" as Socrates is credited with saying when his shrew threw the chamberpot at him; Oliver preens himself on similar restraint, Constance being no

mean crockery-hurler herself in her outbursts; he reminds Constance of Bertrand Russell shattering his first marriage with Olympian unconcern. Now after some 3,041 sexual occurrences by his calculations he has been evicted in favour of the gardener who at least is always around.

So, still, is Oliver, in the airing cupboard, writing his autobiography with its catalogue of grievances and stuffing the pages in a pillowcase where Constance finds them and adds her own rasping comments. What about being dragged at his chariot wheels for six rented years in America? The children's dead gerbils? That disastrous jet-lagged Christmas, no battery with the toys? And the counter-charges: did Aristotle have to put up with Hoovers and nappies? But when you are slung out, at least you are free of each other? Fat chance! Beware of the deadly nightshade in this direly witty achievement.