

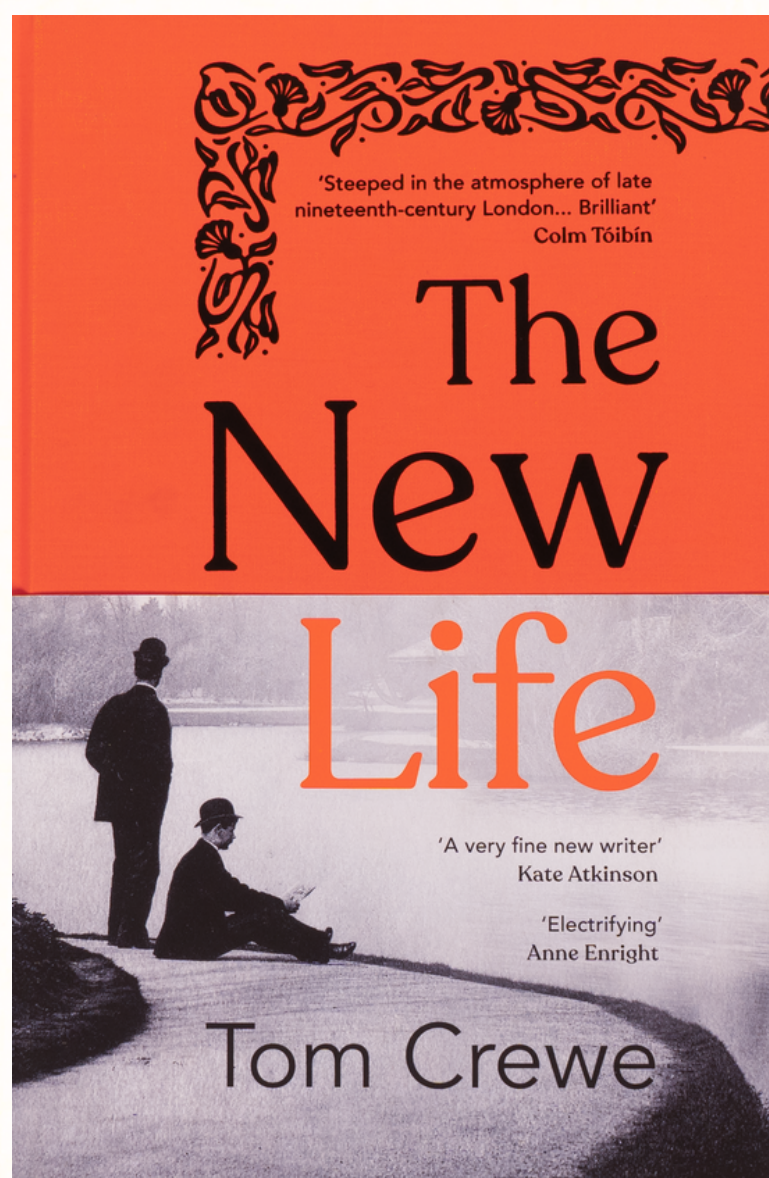
NERO

BOOK AWARDS

Reading Guides

Debut Fiction Shortlist

The New Life by Tom Crewe



Tom Crewe was born in Middlesbrough in 1989. He has a PhD in nineteenth-century British history from the University of Cambridge. Since 2015, he has been an editor at the *London Review of Books*, to which he contributes essays on politics, art, history and fiction. He currently lives in London.

'Deeply satisfying on an intellectual, psychological and emotional level, but also full of page-turning pace and atmosphere, it is achingly evocative and deeply moving.'

- Debut Fiction judges, 2023 Nero Book Awards

'The book might, might, be a success of some kind, a spur in the nation's conscience. Which would put him on the side of right and clear his path for the work to come. He did believe – as did Angelica – in the value of what he and Addington had written. In the New Life. Wilde had not ruined that for him. And how could they know what would happen, if they did not try?'

Set at the end of the 19th century, and based on real events, *The New Life* tells the story of two individuals, Henry Ellis and John Addington Symonds, who together wrote a book that brought out into the open the secret lives of 'inverts', men and women in homosexual relationships whose very existence challenged the laws and moral standards of the day. Ellis and Symonds mount a public defence of same-sex love which exposes and tests their own unconventional lives. Although both married to women, Ellis' wife is in love with another woman and Symonds fantasises about, then pursues, affairs with other men.

Set against the backdrop of Oscar Wilde's scandalous trial for gross indecency and the uproar of the suffragettes fight for women's votes, *The New Life* is an atmospheric and erotic read which plunges readers into Victorian London. Crewe's

sensuous passages and account of the individuals who pursued social change at great personal cost combine to create a portrait of London long-ago that feels as alive and dynamic as the city today.

Exploring themes of personal freedom, the divide between our private and public selves and the cost of defying norms and conventions, *The New Life* challenges readers to consider what sacrifices we would be willing to make to remain true to ourselves.

Discussion points:

- How much do you think attitudes towards homosexuality have changed since the late 19th century and what do you think each of the characters' lives would look like if they lived now?
- How has Tom Crewe portrayed John Addington Symonds wife, Catherine? Can Catherine make any choices in this book? Can she be described as exclusively a victim of her class and era?
- In what instances in the book is it made clear to the reader that a 'new', liberated life was only available to some?