A Way of Love

JAMES COURAGE

Information pack

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ORIGINAL PUBLICATION. Jonathan Cape, London, 1959.

NEW EDITION. Lurid Editions, Bristol, 24 September 2026. First new edition since 1959. The National Library of New Zealand describes it as “the first gay novel written by a New Zealander”.

NEW MATERIAL. Introduction by Peter Parker; afterword, “James Courage: An Expatriate Writer”, by Chris Brickell.

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James Courage (1903-1963)

James Courage (1903–1963) was a New Zealand-born novelist, playwright and short-story writer whose life was divided between Canterbury and Britain. He grew up on the family sheep station, in Seadown, near Amberley, North Canterbury and was educated at Christ’s College in Christchurch. In 1922, aged eighteen, he left New Zealand for England and studied at St John’s College, Oxford. Although he spent almost all of his adult life in Britain, New Zealand remained central to his imagination, and much of his fiction returned to Christchurch, Canterbury and the landscapes of his childhood, including five out of his eight novels. He made only one extended return visit to New Zealand, in 1933–35. Family accounts suggest that during this visit Courage’s mother told his father about his attraction to men, after which “all hell broke loose”, although his parents continued to support him financially. Courage returned to England in 1935 and never again visited the country of his birth.

After Oxford, Courage settled in London and developed a prolific literary career. He wrote plays, poetry, short stories and eight novels between 1933 and 1961. His work frequently drew on his family, upbringing and relationships, and increasingly explored homosexuality at a time when it remained both criminalised and heavily medicalised. His 1938 play *Private History*, about a relationship between two boys at a boarding school, was staged at the Gate Theatre to acclaim but was prevented from transferring to the West End because the Lord Chamberlain refused it a licence on account of its homosexual subject matter.

Courage explored queer lives well beyond *A Way of Love*, though often less directly. Homosexuality is implied or woven into several earlier novels, including *Fires in the Distance* (1952), *The Young Have Secrets* (1954) and *The Call Home* (1956). In *Fires in the Distance*, the teenage Leo is marked out by his family as “unnatural” and eventually leaves for Christchurch in search of a queer life; *The Call Home* includes the lingering attachment of Peter Fitzgerald to a former schoolboy lover who has since married a woman; and Courage’s final novel, *The Visit to Penmorten* (1961), includes a gay couple. Peter Parker furthermore describes ‘A Guest at the Wedding’, published in *Landfall* in 1953, as the first short story with a homosexual theme published in New Zealand. In later life Courage wrote that it was only when writing about homosexual love that he felt “truly at home”.

Courage’s own relationship with his sexuality was complicated. His diaries record both a strong conviction that homosexuality was natural and periods of guilt, anxiety and self-reproach. Around 1950, after a nervous breakdown, he was admitted to Napsbury psychiatric hospital and thereafter spent much of the 1950s in psychiatric treatment, including extensive Freudian psychotherapy for depression. Although homosexuality was heavily medicalised at the time, his treatment should not be reduced to an attempt to “cure” his sexuality; the surviving accounts identify depression and serious mental distress as the principal reasons for it. His experiences of psychotherapy later informed *The Visit to Penmorten* (1961).

At the same time, Courage was connected to overlapping queer, literary and expatriate networks in Britain and New Zealand. His friendships included Charles Brasch, Frank Sargeson and D’Arcy Cresswell, and his correspondence kept him closely connected to New Zealand literary life despite his long residence in Britain.

His romantic life was marked by intense attachments, separation and loss. In 1930 he met Frank Fleet, a half-Argentinian, half-Cornish man, on a train; the two briefly lived together in London, and Courage soon wrote that he loved Fleet “unreservedly”. When Fleet returned to Argentina, Courage followed him to Buenos Aires later that year. Their relationship did not survive as a love affair, but they remained friends for the rest of Courage’s life. During the Second World War he became involved with Chris Huth, a sailor whose death in action in the Mediterranean devastated him. In his later years, Stuart Hurrell, an insurance broker and militant trade unionist, became one of Courage’s closest companions, helping him through periods of ill health.

James Courage died in 1963, four years before the partial decriminalisation of homosexual acts between men in England and Wales in 1967, and twenty-three years before homosexual law reform in New Zealand in 1986.

Censorship history

A Way of Love was published by Jonathan Cape in 1959 and was Courage's most direct treatment of gay life. The National Library of New Zealand describes it as "the first gay novel written by a New Zealander". It emerged after years in which Courage had struggled to write openly about homosexuality and had repeatedly encountered warnings that it was unsuitable material for fiction. In Britain, where homosexual acts between men remained criminalised despite the Wolfenden Report's 1957 recommendation for reform, obscenity law restricted what could be published. Britain's *Obscene Publications Act* was passed later in 1959, introducing a public-good defence, but prosecutions and censorship battles over literature continued well into the 1970s.

Courage was required to excise or rewrite substantial portions of the manuscript before Cape would publish it; earlier versions contained more direct erotic material, and an ending in which Philip, the younger man, left Bruce for another young man. In New Zealand, the novel's publication coincided with the first political stirrings of homosexual law reform. In 1959, the same year *A Way of Love* appeared, Attorney-General Rex Mason unsuccessfully attempted to reduce the criminal penalties for some homosexual acts. The *Crimes Act* 1961 subsequently abolished the possibility of life imprisonment for sodomy, but retained the criminalisation of sex between men. That same year, *A Way of Love* was itself banned in New Zealand on grounds of indecency. At the time, book censorship operated under the *Indecent Publications Act 1910* and questions could be dealt with by the courts, Customs and Justice officials, or various advisory committees. The result was a fragmented and often opaque system in which administrative decisions could effectively determine whether a book was allowed to circulate without a formal court ruling.

The surviving evidence concerning the banning of *A Way of Love* is fragmentary, but suggests that the novel may have come to the authorities' attention incidentally. In August 1961, police seized a private collection of thirteen books, described by the Secretary for Justice as comprising "pornographic, indecent and near-indecent publications". *A Way of Love* was among them. The Assistant Commissioner of Police submitted all thirteen books to the Inter-Departmental Committee on suspect literature, which judged Courage's novel indecent because it appeared to place "undue emphasis upon matters of sex". What followed was an effective administrative ban: Customs advised that action could be taken if the book was imported or displayed, and libraries and booksellers subsequently withdrew it.

The novel's suppression was not the last obstacle to Courage's place in New Zealand's gay literary history. In 1997, Peter Wells and Rex Pilgrim published *Best Mates: Gay Writing in Aotearoa New Zealand*, a landmark anthology intended to recover a longer history of gay male writing in New Zealand. In their introduction they identified *A Way of Love* as New Zealand's first gay novel and called it a "breakthrough novel", praising in particular the narrator's emotional

honesty. Yet Courage himself could not be represented in the anthology. His sister and literary executor, Patricia Fanshawe, refused permission to reproduce his work, maintaining that Courage had not publicly identified himself as homosexual. Rather than omit him altogether, Wells and Pilgrim printed his name above a symbolic blank page, making the absence visible. They argued that Courage was consequently being "nurtured into a deeper silence and covert oblivion". The refusal was part of wider difficulties the editors encountered: the estates of Charles Brasch and Eric McCormick also prevented material from being included, producing three conspicuous absences in the anthology. Wells later recalled his frustration that some literary executors appeared to regard inclusion in a gay anthology as a threat to a writer's reputation rather than an opportunity to enlarge their readership.

There is also a family precedent for Courage's own experience of censorship. His paternal grandmother, Sarah Amelia Courage, published *Lights and Shadows of Colonial Life: Twenty-six Years in Canterbury, New Zealand* in the 1890s, an account of her experiences as an early settler in Canterbury. Written with unusual frankness about the people around her, the privately circulated book offended some of her neighbours, and many copies were reportedly burned. The parallel between grandmother and grandson was later made explicit in 1998, when the New Zealand Society of Authors inaugurated Courage Day, its observance of the International Day of the Imprisoned Writer, and named it jointly for Sarah and James Courage.

Reception history

The novel received mixed and sometimes openly hostile reviews in both Britain and New Zealand. Courage had anticipated this reaction. On the day of publication, 12 January 1959, he wrote in his diary that he felt as though he had thrown himself, "as a homosexual, on the hostile mercy of the world". Not every review confirmed those fears. *The Observer*, for example, responded favourably, but much of the reception was considerably less sympathetic.

Some British reviewers treated homosexuality itself, rather than the literary qualities of the novel, as the principal problem. In the *Daily Telegraph*, Peter Green dismissed what he called the "homosexual myth" as a source of "sterile tedium". Anne Duchene in the *Manchester Guardian* wrote that homosexuality was "doomed of itself to dissatisfaction" and its practitioners therefore "in varying measures, pitiable". Peter Parker notes in his introduction that such responses often allowed distaste for the subject matter to obscure serious engagement with the novel as literature.

In New Zealand, Courage himself regarded the *Christchurch Press* review as "remarkably tolerant and well-balanced", yet even this comparatively sympathetic notice raised doubts about whether

the novel's subject "should have been attempted" at all. In the *New Zealand Listener*, David Hall described Courage as depicting "an alien society", while Margaret Scott in the *New Zealand Monthly Review* drew an even sharper distinction, writing that the novel was "about homosexuals rather than human beings". Courage told Frank Sargeson that the reviews had been "cruel & dense" and that they had left him depressed.

The same pattern was evident in M. K. Joseph's review for *Landfall*. Joseph described *A Way of Love* as "a quietly ruthless exposure of the pretensions of homosexuality" and contrasted homosexual relationships with what he regarded as the "natural" complementarity of men and women. Chris Brickell places this response within a broader intellectual culture in which gay men could be imagined as cut off from reproduction, family and social continuity. Charles Brasch, *Landfall*'s editor and one of Courage's closest friends, had commissioned Joseph expecting a cool and judicious critic; after reading the review, however, Brasch admitted to Courage that it was "not at all sympathetic, to my dismay", although he published it nonetheless.

The private response appears to have been very different. Courage received what he called "wonderfully enthusiastic letters from strangers" from Britain, Europe and further afield, including correspondents in New Zealand. Some were playful: one man in Invercargill, who described himself as a display artist, sent Courage an "enormous self-made Christmas card", painted with Santa Claus reading *A Way of Love* "with avid but astonished interest" while nearly falling from a pile of Courage's own books. Courage recorded the gift with amused delight: "There's fame for you! And all from Invercargill (N.Z.)."

Other responses were more intimate. A letter dated 29 December 1959 told Courage, "I have rarely enjoyed a book so beautiful as *A Way of Love*," adding that it would remain in the writer's bookcase as "a friend, a leaning post in times of stress". Within weeks of publication Courage noted that he was receiving more and more letters from well-wishers. Some were difficult for him to answer because they revealed what he described as "agonies of loneliness" that were "heartbreaking". The response seems to have confirmed for Courage that writing openly about his own experience could create recognition in others: "if one puts down honestly and frankly something one feels oneself," he reflected, "how it awakens vibrations in other people". The novel continued to elicit responses long after its initial publication. In January 1962, Courage recorded that a reader in New Zealand had told him that *A Way of Love* had given them a "wider & more tolerant attitude" towards homosexuality than "hours of lecturing and explaining would ever have done".

Yet the recognition *A Way of Love* found among individual readers did not translate into a secure place for Courage within New Zealand's gay literary history. While Courage never disappeared entirely from literary scholarship, literary scholar Philip Steer later identified *Best Mates* in 1997 as an important turning point in his reassessment, which continued through the 2000s and 2010s. A

particularly important figure has been Chris Brickell, Professor in Gender Studies at the University of Otago and author of the afterword to this edition. Brickell edited the *James Courage Diaries* in 2021 and has helped make *Private History* and the previously unpublished memoir *The Promising Years* freely available online through Genre Books. Lurid Editions' 2026 republication of *A Way of Love*, the first new edition since 1959, continues this recovery. Read now, the novel offers a vivid and complex account of intimacy, domestic life and queer community under criminalisation.

Literary context

Postwar British fiction and queer literary history

A Way of Love appeared during a period of considerable change in British fiction. The literature of the 1950s was responding to a society reshaped by war, changing class relations and weakening assumptions about established social authority. Novelists increasingly explored questions of class, identity, social convention and the relationship between private experience and public expectations. Realism remained an important mode, but the fiction of the decade was far more varied than later shorthand sometimes suggests. Writers as different as Kingsley Amis, Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch, Doris Lessing, Barbara Pym and Alan Sillitoe were exploring different aspects of contemporary British life.

Courage belonged to this postwar literary culture without fitting neatly into its best-known groupings. He was from an older generation than many of the writers associated with the late-1950s revolt against the establishment (the so-called "Angry Young Men"), and his fiction was more psychologically and domestically focused than the working-class social realism for which the period later became famous. Yet *A Way of Love* shares the broader postwar interest in the pressures exerted by social convention on private life. Its concern with relationships, domestic arrangements and the possibility of constructing a life outside conventional structures places it within some of the central preoccupations of postwar fiction.

The novel also occupies an important place in queer literary history. Peter Parker argues in his introduction to the new edition that *A Way of Love* "takes its place among those other pioneering novels of the 1950s and 1960s" —Angus Wilson's *Hemlock and After* (1952), Rodney Garland's *The Heart in Exile* (1953), Mary Renault's *The Charioteer* (1953), J. R. Ackerley's *We Think the World of You* (1960) and Gillian Freeman's *The Leather Boys* (1961). Although very different in form and outlook, these novels belong to a period in which gay men and relationships between men were becoming increasingly available as the central material of fiction rather than remaining primarily coded, or peripheral.

This development was not simply a matter of individual authors becoming more explicit. Publishing historian Chris Adams's research, *Obscenity, Literary Censorship and Queer British Fiction*, examines the networks of publishers, editors and other book-trade figures through which postwar queer fiction was created, marketed and received in a period when homosexuality remained criminalised and publishing operated within a powerful system of obscenity controls. His research shows that British firms nevertheless published hundreds of works featuring queer characters or plotlines during the postwar decades. *A Way of Love* belongs within this wider transformation: one of a growing body of postwar novels that helped make homosexual relationships the sustained subject of fiction before "gay literature" existed as a clearly recognised publishing category.

Courage's work therefore belongs to two related developments in British literary history. His work participates in the broader postwar expansion of the novel's social and psychological territory, while *A Way of Love* belongs more specifically to the emergence of a modern queer literary tradition. By the end of the 1950s, experiences previously relegated to implication or the margins of fiction were increasingly moving towards its centre, even as the social structures surrounding their publication remained far less transformed.

Aotearoa New Zealand fiction

Courage was also closely connected to the development of postwar New Zealand literature. From the 1930s onwards, writers and critics increasingly sought to establish a distinctive national literary culture rather than treating New Zealand writing as a provincial extension of Britain. Frank Sargeson's fiction and his 1945 anthology *Speaking for Ourselves*, Allen Curnow's influential *A Book of New Zealand Verse 1923–45*, Denis Glover's Caxton Press and the establishment of Charles Brasch's *Landfall* in 1947 all contributed to this growing literary self-confidence.

Landfall was particularly important. Under Brasch it became New Zealand's leading literary journal and a central forum for debates about the country's developing literary culture. Courage was closely connected to this world despite spending almost all of his adult life in Britain: his work appeared in *Landfall*, Brasch was one of his closest friends, and his wider circle included Frank Sargeson and other New Zealand writers.

His career also reflects the international structure of New Zealand publishing at mid-century. The domestic industry remained relatively small, and many New Zealand writers continued to publish in Britain or the United States to reach larger markets. Courage therefore belonged simultaneously to British and New Zealand literary cultures: he lived and published in Britain, while much of his fiction remained rooted in New Zealand, particularly Canterbury. He was also part of the postwar flourishing of the short story, and contemporary accounts grouped him with writers including Dan Davin and Roderick Finlayson in the development of New Zealand regional fiction.

By the later 1950s, New Zealand fiction was broadening beyond the earlier project of establishing a recognisably national voice. Janet Frame's *Owls Do Cry* and Ian Cross's *The God Boy* appeared in 1957, followed by Sylvia Ashton-Warner's *Spinster* in 1958, bringing new attention to psychological interiority, social conformity and lives that sat uneasily within conventional structures. *A Way of Love*, although set in London, belongs to this same moment of expansion, extending the range of experience represented in postwar fiction into homosexual life.

Courage therefore sits between several literary traditions. He was part of the consolidation of postwar New Zealand literature while conducting his professional literary life largely through Britain, and *A Way of Love* connects that history to the emerging body of queer fiction being published there. Its position between Britain and New Zealand is not incidental to the novel, but central to understanding its place in postwar literary history.

Sources & Further Reading

• James Courage, *A Way of Love* (Bristol: Lurid Editions, 2026), especially Peter Parker, "A Way of Love", pp. vii–xv, and Chris Brickell, "James Courage: An Expatriate Writer", pp. 251–258; Chris Brickell, ed., *James Courage Diaries* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2021); James Courage, *The Promising Years* (Dunedin: Genre Books, 2024); and Courage's *Private History*, freely available through Genre Books.

• Grant Richard Harris, *A Reading of the Novels of James Courage* (MA thesis, Massey University, 1990); Grant Harris, "Courage, James Francis", *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, Te Ara; Philip Steer, "James Courage, 1903–1963", *Kōtare: New Zealand Notes & Queries* 7, no. 2 (2008), 226–233; Christopher Burke, *Speak to Me, Stranger: Subjectivity, Homosexuality and the Preliberation Narratives of James Courage* (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2012); and Burke, "'And So He Died As He Had Lived, in Exile and Alone': Friendship, Narrative and the Politics of Remembering", *Journal of New Zealand Studies* 13 (2012), 89–104. Harris's thesis is also the source for several reproduced censorship records, while Burke is particularly important for the publication history and reader response.

• Peter Wells and Rex Pilgrim, eds., *Best Mates: Gay Writing in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Auckland: Reed Books, 1997), especially Wells's introduction.

• Contemporary reviews of *A Way of Love*: Peter Green, *Daily Telegraph*, 16 January 1959, p. 15; Anne Duchene, *Manchester Guardian*, 6 February 1959, p. 6; M. K. Joseph, "A Way of Love", *Landfall*, June 1959, pp. 178–179; "James Courage's New Novel", *The Press*, 28 March 1959; David Hall, "An Alien Society", *New Zealand Listener*, 26 March 1959; and Margaret Scott, review of *A Way of Love*, *New Zealand Monthly Review* 3, no. 26, August 1962, pp. 20–21.

Parker's introduction reproduces the Green and Duchene responses, while Harris identifies the Hall and Scott reviews.

• Christchurch City Libraries' Courage Day material, including Virginia Clegg's "Memories of James Courage", is also useful for Courage's family history and his 1933–35 return to New Zealand. Brickell cites Clegg for the family account that after Courage's sexuality became known to his father, "all hell broke loose".

• Other archival and primary sources: James Courage Papers, Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hākena, University of Otago, including Courage's diaries and correspondence with Charles Brasch; James Courage's correspondence with Frank Sargeson.

• Nick Bentley, Alice Ferrebe and Nick Hubble, eds., *The 1950s: A Decade of Modern British Fiction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), especially Matthew Crowley, "Angry Young Men? A Product of Their Time", pp. 53–79, and Martin Dines, "'Is it a queer book?': Re-reading the 1950s Homosexual Novel", pp. 111–140. Dines is particularly useful for situating the proliferation of fiction about male homosexuality within the literary and political culture of 1950s Britain.

• Christopher Adams, *Obscenity, Literary Censorship and Queer British Fiction: The Publishing Closet in the Mid-Twentieth Century*, Bloomsbury Academic, forthcoming October 2026. Adams examines the production, editing, design, marketing and distribution of queer fiction in mid-twentieth-century Britain, drawing on publishing, author, agent and editor archives to show how queer books were shaped by censorship, discretion and the social and legal constraints of the period.

• Lydia Wevers, "The New Zealand Voice, 1930s and 1940s", in *Fiction*, *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*; Elizabeth Caffin, "Post-war Publishing, 1945 to 1965", in *Publishing*, *Te Ara*; Ben Schrader, "Art and Literary Magazines, 1930 to 1950", in *Magazines and Periodicals*, *Te Ara*; and Sarah Quigley, "Brasch, Charles Orwell", *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, *Te Ara*. These are useful for the emergence of a distinctive New Zealand literary culture, the postwar prominence of the short story, *Landfall*, Caxton Press, and the continuing relationship between local writing and overseas publishing.

• "Post-War Developments" and "After 1950", in A. H. McLintock, ed., *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* (Wellington, 1966), reproduced by *Te Ara*. Useful as contemporary assessments of postwar fiction: the former groups Courage, Roderick Finlayson and Dan Davin under a developing "mild regionalism" and discusses Courage's Canterbury fiction; the latter identifies Janet Frame, Ian Cross and Sylvia Ashton-Warner as important new writers of the 1950s.