

The Sound And

Alexander Stuart channels his anger into inspiration

■ FOR A GENTLE, genial, English novelist, Alexander Stuart has a lot of anger. It's kept hidden beneath the surface, but he's understandably angry about the death of his five-year-old son Joe from cancer last year; he's angry about the literary prize he won for ten days before the decision was overturned; and about what he feels Mrs Thatcher is doing to Britain. He's even angry about the normality of his upbringing.

'My entire life is a reaction against my incredibly boring, battened-down, middle-class childhood,' says 35-year-old Stuart. 'I feel very threatened by niceness, by the idea that the world is safe.'

Certainly his latest novel, *The War Zone*, published in paperback this month by Vintage, fully embraces that rebellion. A controversial book, which *Time Out* labelled 'a *Catcher in the Rye* for the Nineties', *The War Zone* deals explicitly with the dangerous taboo of incest. Told by Tom, a teenage hellraiser, the book is about the affair between his self-absorbed father and his knowing, elder sister – a girl who wants 'to go farther than all the way'.

Entered for the 1989 Whitbread Novel Award, Stuart was informed *The War Zone* had won by a 2:1 majority, until the decision was reversed under pressure from the outraged and repelled dissenter, novelist and critic Jane Gardam. Stuart is adamant, however, the book is not primarily about incest. '*The War Zone* is about adolescence and defining for yourself what's right and wrong. It's also my attempt to write about families in the intense, claustrophobic way it is for most people. What's interesting in calm, middle-class families, as in a film like David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, is everything going on despite that calm exterior.' Stuart's conversation is punctuated with references to movies he feels are unsettling and important – a result of his past experience as a film critic, writer of screenplays and as the executive producer of *Insignificance*, directed by Nicolas Roeg.

As upsetting as the controversy about the book must have been, it came shortly after the death of his son from Wilms Tumour, a rare form of cancer. Joe's illness, however, would lead to Stuart tackling two further books – *Henry and the Sea*, a children's book co-written with its originator, Joe himself, and *Five and a Half Times Three* – published this summer – a startlingly honest and unsentimental account of Joe's life written with Joe's mother, film critic Ann Totterdell.

Even though he is currently working on his third novel *Tribes*, Stuart admits that following Joe's death, he has also been living a second childhood. At times, he comes on every bit the troubled, effusive, angry young man of his fiction. 'One of my problems is I still believe the things I did at sixteen; I still believe the same things are important. I just don't accept a lot of adulthood; I don't accept its answers.' ■ PHILIP WATSON

The Fury



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