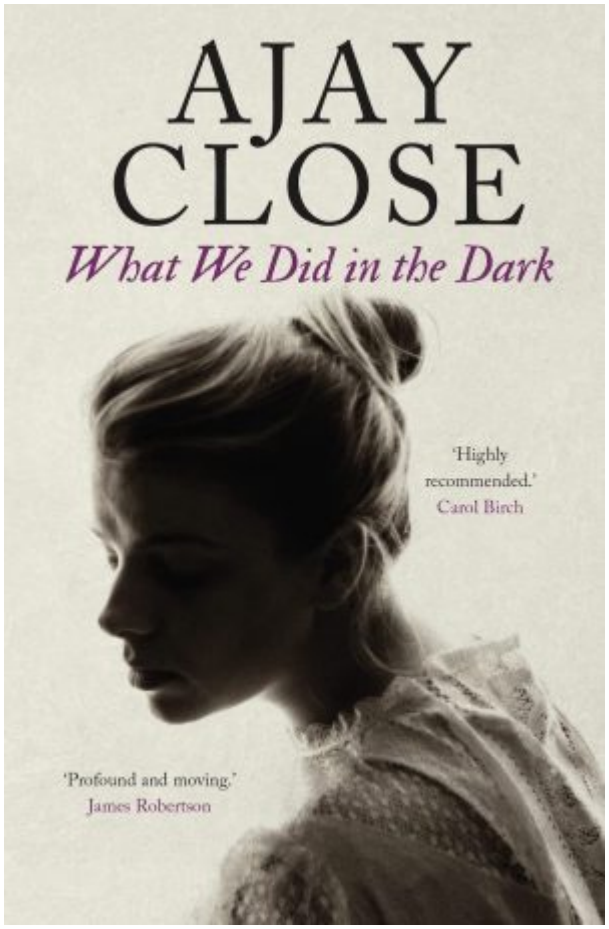
Opening Doors: how I wrote What We Did in the Dark

By Ajay Close



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But, reader, I wrote one.

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Initially I was wary of weaving a fiction around the author of one of the great Glasgow novels. Weegies look after their own. After a series of exchanges involving the question "Who?" it dawned on me that her fame was a twentieth-century phenomenon. These days almost no one has heard of her. Her books – a controversial biography of Burns; another of Boccaccio; a memoir of her friend D. H. Lawrence; a piecemeal autobiography, *Lying Awake*; *Open the Door!* and a second, slighter novel, *The Camomile* – are no longer on the Scot-lit curriculum. Reassured, and a little crestfallen, I carried on digging.

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My other lucky break came courtesy of the National Library of Scotland. By 1907 Cathie was so desperate to be free of her absent husband that she petitioned for an annulment on the grounds that Herbert had been mad, and so legally incapable, on their wedding day. She was working as a journalist and must have known that the most embarrassing aspects of her marriage would prove irresistible to the press. The judge decided in her favour and *Jackson v. Jackson* became a leading case in divorce law.

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adjustments we all have to make when we begin to share our lives with another. Isn't it always a shock, discovering quite how divergent a spouse's take on life can be?

And of course she loved him. Or did she? When asked this question in court, she replied that she was "very fond of him." A curious phrase to describe one's emotions shortly after making a whirlwind marriage. In *Lying Awake*, she wrote "I made what may be called a rash and foolish marriage to a man I scarcely knew. In reality… it was a desperately rational act." Which hardly sounds like love's young dream. Cathie wasn't destitute. She might have been bored with Glasgow and her religious mother and eager for a more adventurous life, but that *desperately rational* suggested to me a more extreme predicament. Or at least, the fear that she was in that sort of trouble.

It seems unlikely she slept with Herbert before the wedding. He was convinced he was impotent. After a few awkward nights they got on with doing what honeymoon couples do, but his delusion persisted. When she told him she was pregnant, early in 1905, he took it as proof that she had slept with another man – the Prince of Wales, no less! He tried to strangle her. They were on a steamer crossing Lake Maggiore at the time. The struggle was overheard and the captain locked her in a cabin for her own protection, but when they docked, she was handed back to her husband.

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know he lost command of them. Beyond that, the African chapters of *What We Did in the Dark* are educated guesswork. I have no way of knowing if the answer I came up with fits the facts, but the facts are likely to be just as shocking. I read enough about the Boer War to be pretty sure of that.

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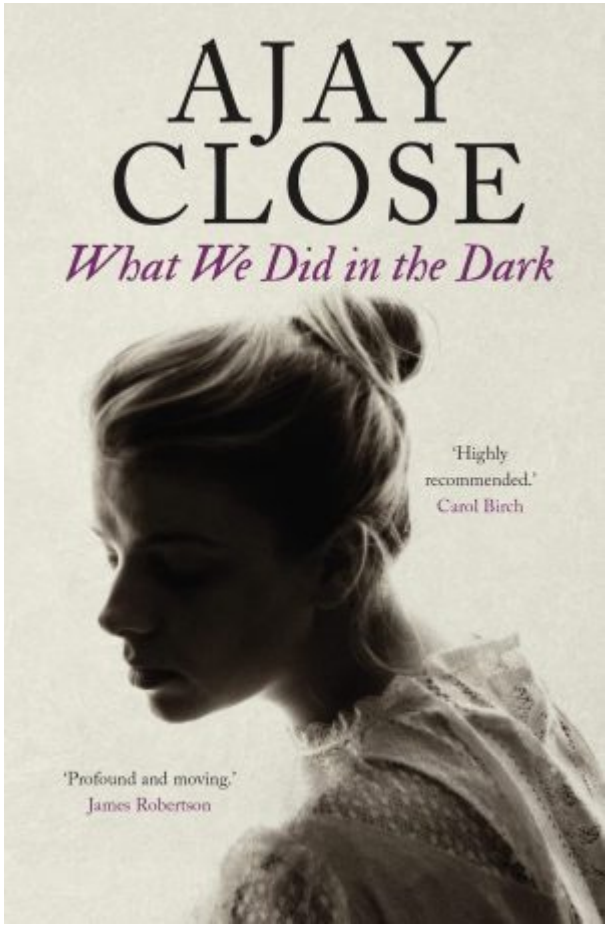

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