

## A Note On Sargeson's '[The Hole That Jack Dug](#)'

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Why did [Sargeson](#) make Jack Parker's wife an avid reader of [Hugh Walpole](#)?

At first glance, the reason seems obvious enough. [Walpole](#), the highly popular, sentimental middle-brow novelist of English middle-classdom, is just the sort of writer snobbish, pretentious English-born Mrs Parker would read. Simply another small, but carefully selected, detail in [Sargeson](#)'s rather bitchy presentation. After all, he could have allowed her to be a reader of [E M Forster](#) or [Virginia Woolf](#); but that would have given her real pretensions to taste, sending the wrong message to the few readers who would have got the point of the literary reference.

So far as it goes, such a reading is perfectly useful and valid. But I suspect two further details affected [Sargeson](#)'s choice of [Walpole](#). First, he was born in New Zealand; so these 'English' novels Mrs Parker was so addicted to were not even written by a real English writer; another nuance for the more literary reader to savour.

Secondly, [Walpole](#) was homosexual. [Sargeson](#) would have known this, I assume, either from his two-year stay in England in the late 1920s when he moved in gay circles or from gay contacts in London like [John Lehmann](#), who had published his work in [Penguin New Writing](#). That Mrs Parker's favourite English middle-class writer should not only have been a quasi-Kiwi but a homosexual adds a further disguised twist to her portrayal and of course contributes to the homoerotic subtext of the story (the narrator Tom's love for Jack). The inclusion of such an encoded detail acts as a covert corollary to Jack's laconic teasing of his wife with the puzzle of why the blowfly would not fly inside the safe or the puzzle of why Jack dug the hole and then filled it in again.

Presumably the point, for [Sargeson](#), was that virtually none of his local readers were going to get this particular subtlety. The [Hugh Walpole](#) clue did not even look like a clue; for any who noticed it at all, it would seem no more than a satirical flick at the pretentiousness of English women immigrants. So, apart from the (not inconsiderable) satisfaction of a bit of private game-playing, why include the detail? Was it really, I wonder, a gesture towards that select, highbrow, overseas readership which [Sargeson](#) secretly longed for while he plugged on with his self-appointed mission of producing fiction in which we 'speak for ourselves'.