

# Books

## Fiction

### In Love and War

Alex Preston

(Faber & Faber, £14.99 \*£13.49)

BOOKSHOPS ARE awash with wartime fiction and it can be hard to sort the trite from the genuinely affecting, but this novel definitely falls into the second category. The hero, Esmond Lowndes, is the son of prominent, upper-class Fascists, the sort of people who genuinely thought they were doing the right thing for Britain at the time.

When Esmond is sent down from Cambridge in 1937 for being found in bed with a man, his parents send him to Florence to set up a radio service broadcasting Fascist propaganda. He interviews the poet Ezra Pound ('bonkers'), swims in the villa pool of Edward VII's former mistress, Alice Keppel, and helps self-centred, camp writer Norman Douglas escape the Blackshirts. This last escapade involves a terrifying car chase that ends

in tragedy, after which Esmond re-evaluates his political loyalties.

Although his fanatic mother is still worshipping Hitler, his father has also distanced himself from the party's increasing violence and wants Esmond to come home and fight for Britain. But Esmond is in love with Ada, a Jewish freedom fighter, and they hole up in the Keppels' deserted villa, their haven becoming daily more perilous as they try to bring down Carità, the insanely evil, shrill, pudgy chief of the Fascist secret police. Rage and grief transform Esmond from unworldly fop to reckless warrior.

Alex Preston is excellent at conveying the claustrophobic terror that chokes occupied Florence and the bleak juxtaposition of the martyrdom depicted in the city's art treasures with the real-life torture meted out to those who stood up against such brutal unfairness. The result is a moving *tour de force* that will leave you exhilarated by human courage, yet numb with sadness.

*Kate Green*