

television & radio

Why Last Tango can never change its tune

Andrew Billen
TV review**Last Tango in Halifax**

Sunday, BBC One

★★★★★

The Secret World of Lewis Carroll

Saturday, BBC Two

★★★★★

In *Last Tango in Halifax* Sally Wainwright has created a family rather than a "precinct" drama. That is a problem for a returning serial. In a precinct drama — set in a police station or hospital, say — characters leave and new ones take their jobs. With a family story you are confined within a family and it is only limitedly expandable. This is why, with three seasons behind it, *Last Tango* looks increasingly like a

quadrille waiting for the music to stop.

Last series, Kate, attractively played by Nina Sosanya, was embedded as the wife of one Sarah Lancashire's Caroline. This season she was killed off, leaving Caroline with her baby. There is not much you can do with a baby, however. Caroline's storyline will need a new beginning next year and I am not sure if I am particularly hungry for it. Whatever happens, Wainwright must keep the excellent comic creation that is Caroline's ex, John. If there is such a thing as an inopportune opportunist, John, as superbly played by Tony Gardner, is it. Caroline no longer needs him. The show does.

Meanwhile, this season Wainwright gave Derek Jacobi's Alan an illegitimate son, Gary. By aggression so passive it is loving, Gary has spent the past few weeks dislodging Alan's halo, and about time. Winningly played by Rupert Graves, Gary is charming but he is also needy and controlling. That makes him the opposite of his half-sister Gillian, who is frequently out of control and needs no one (except men for sex). As Gillian, Nicola Walker played the Ancient Mariner at her own wedding feast last night, full of dark history.

In the end, Caroline used the last available argument to encourage her stepsister to wed the unprepossessing Robbie: you can always divorce afterwards. And so, in ever more



Sarah Lancashire as Caroline and Nicola Walker as Gillian

familiar melodies, the band shall play on into season four.

On Saturday, my old friend Martha Kearney made an excellent and possibly revelatory documentary about Lewis Carroll. I wish she hadn't. All was well for the first half of *The Secret World of Lewis Carroll*, as his anarchic, child-centred masterpiece, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, was placed in the context of the obsessive young maths don's secret craving for disorder and Victorian literature's discovery of the child protagonist. Then Kearney, who herself played Alice as a child but by now, in this film, was no longer accompanied by a little animated rabbit in a frock coat, dived down the hole of Carroll's sexual imagination.

Happily, there was no evidence of anything beyond his platonic love for the book's child dedicatee, Alice Liddell. The bad news was that the programme's researchers found a clearly labelled picture quite possibly taken by Carroll of, almost certainly in a forensic expert's eyes, her older sister Lorina. It is nude, full frontal and shows the breasts of a young adolescent.

Lorina would have been 14 the year the Liddells banned Carroll, the keen photographer, from visiting them. "Who in the world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle," Alice asked of herself. I truly hope Martha has not answered the corresponding question for Carroll. andrew.billen@thetimes.co.uk