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An Interview with Christopher Isherwood

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Source: *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (Sep., 1972), pp. 143-158

Published by: Journal of Narrative Theory

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30225283>

Accessed: 09-12-2018 14:43 UTC

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# AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

David J. Geherin

*The following interview took place on March 17, 1972 at Mr. Isherwood's home in Santa Monica, California. The interview, as it appears here, has been corrected and emended by Mr. Isherwood.*

**One of the most interesting aspects of your fiction is the use of a character named Christopher Isherwood in several of your novels. I'd like to begin by asking what prompted you to use this Christopher Isherwood persona in the first place.**

Simply this. I felt that the story could only be told from the point of view of myself as the narrator. The reason being that I couldn't really project myself into anybody else and tell the story through his or her eyes. I found it a very unnecessary bypass because if you are going to tell the story through somebody else's eyes, you first of all have to imagine the person through whose eyes the story is being told. I felt this was absolutely unnecessary and tiresome and I don't really trust my ability to know what anything looks like through anybody else's eyes anyhow under any circumstances in life whatsoever.

I therefore said to myself, I'll tell the story in the first person. Then, of course, the question was, who is the first person, and the answer was, the first person is me. Now at first, in *Mr. Norris*, because of a kind of coyness, or goodness knows what, I gave myself an assumed name. It was in fact my two middle names, but nevertheless it was an assumed name since I have never called myself William Bradshaw.

When it came to beginning to write the pieces which formed *Goodbye to Berlin*, (the other half of the omnibus volume, *The Berlin Stories*), I thought to myself, how silly this is, this William Bradshaw. If I'm telling the story, let me call myself Christopher Isherwood. But when I did this, I began to realize that the person who tells the story is also a character in the story. This set up a kind of conflict because I didn't really want to be a character in the story and, furthermore, I was a little bit embarrassed with my own name and all, getting too deep into the story and fictionalizing about myself. It's why the stories that have the Christopher Isherwood persona have something odd about them, in my opinion.

In starting to plan and construct a novel, one of the major questions is how are you going to approach the subject. Are you going to approach it in the first person, or in the third person? Are you God looking down at everybody? Are you inside one of the characters, or are you inside various characters in succession, as in *The Memorial*, where the viewpoint is changed from one character to another? (Incidentally, in that novel it is always passed on by touch, like the baton in a relay race, from one character to another who then takes over the narration.) I liken that to trying to fix the electric light. Something is wrong. You wonder, now how should you get at the fixture. Sometimes it's more convenient to go up the stepladder, sometimes perhaps you should come down through the attic to get at it from above. Or perhaps you should stand on the table and get at it sideways because if you're right under it you can't see properly what you're doing. I've often got on the table when I should be on the stepladder, or got in the attic when I should be on the table, with the result that I had to start all over again because I realized that I wasn't approaching the thing in the right manner to get the maximum result.

**Deciding to use the persona device was obviously the right choice for many of your novels, particularly the Berlin novels. However, putting a character with your own name into a novel brings up the whole question of the autobiographical nature of your fiction. What is the relationship between autobiography and fiction in your work?**

I was always concerned primarily with live models. But I was trying to show the inwardness of the models that I was using for my characters. That is to say, I was trying to show what it was about them that really interested me, why they seemed to me more than themselves, why they seemed to me to be almost archetypes, and therefore why I was writing about them, what was magic about them, what was noumenous about them. In order to show that, I didn't hesitate to alter actual facts and create scenes which never actually happened, invent circumstances of all kinds. The analogy I usually use here is that of a horse that you're

showing off at a show. You want to put it through its paces. In the same way you want to put a character through its paces, provide scenes which will make it behave in the way which is almost characteristic of itself. Therefore you very quickly get away from what really happened into what might have happened—that is to say, you get into fiction.

**Do you think that some critics have become too concerned with the autobiographical aspect of your work and have not paid proper attention to the artistic, the creative, the purely fictional quality of your novels?**

Why that should excuse the critics from paying attention to anything, I don't know. After all, a lot of autobiographers are terrible liars, which means that what they write is fiction. There are many, many famous writers of memoirs who are extremely untrustworthy, as has been discovered later. Why shouldn't the critics still like what they write?

**You advised the readers of your autobiography *Lions and Shadows* to read it as a novel, suggesting perhaps that it wasn't all true. Is the Christopher Isherwood persona in *Lions and Shadows* really any different from the persona in the novels?**

Well, yes, obviously, because in *Lions and Shadows* he at least holds the center of the stage, more or less, and therefore is seen in much greater depth. The whole endeavor of the Christopher Isherwood persona in the novels is to be in the background as much as he can because what he is trying to do is tell a story. He's not telling *his* story really at all, or only incidentally, and only just to explain why he was there with those people and what he was up to. But in all cases, fundamentally, Christopher Isherwood is in the background. Whereas *Lions and Shadows* is about Christopher Isherwood. Only there are certain reticences which to my mind, now anyway, rather constrict the whole thing. The principal one is that I didn't come out and say I was homosexual, which really colors a tremendous lot of one's value judgments and of attitudes to other people.

**You once said that what strikes you today about the Christopher Isherwood persona in *Mr. Norris* is its heartlessness. Do you think if you had emphasized or developed the persona's homosexuality, this would have helped to explain his behavior more?**

Well, it would have made the persona more human and, insofar as somebody is more human, he is less heartless. What one means by heartlessness is indifference, a characteristic of robots. The Christopher Isherwood persona is more than somewhat of a robot.

**Would you say in a later novel, such as *Down There on a Visit*, the Christopher Isherwood persona is less of a robot and more of a character with feelings and emotions of his own?**

That's quite true, but I think in doing that I rather upset the apple cart in the book itself. I mean I think he became too rambunctious. It didn't really help. It was like getting somebody drunk in order to make him talk. But it wasn't really as good as having a character. There was always some kind of inhibition in my use of this device, this Christopher Isherwood thing. I don't find it satisfactory.

**This confusion between the persona as device and the persona as character does create some problems. Do you think, for example, that some critics have put too much emphasis on the "I am a camera" statement at the beginning of *Goodbye to Berlin* as a statement of your technique?**

Yes, very much so. What I was simply trying to do was describe my mood at that particular moment. Obviously, the description does not fit Christopher Isherwood in many of the other sections.

**In which of your novels do you think the persona device works best?**

In *Prater Violet*, simply because the main character, Friedrich Bergmann, talked so much and dominated the stage so much that it was natural for the Christopher Isherwood character to stay in the corner and listen. As long as he was listening he was a perfectly efficient pick-up machine and scanning device, and nothing more. Therefore, it was all right because he wasn't pushed out into the middle of the stage, wasn't compelled to act, to behave as a character, so this problem didn't arise. I discuss the use of this persona in a brief statement which can be found in a book by Leon Surmelian, called *Techniques of Fiction Writing: Measure and Madness*. [New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1968. Reprinted Anchor Books, 1969]

**You originally intended *Goodbye to Berlin* to be a huge epic novel in the Balzacian tradition. It didn't work out that way. What happened?**

It was too plotty. I am much, much more concerned with character than plot, because a little plot goes an awfully long way.

**Are there any unpublished sections from this lost novel still extant?**

I don't think so.

**Do you consider *Goodbye to Berlin* to be a unified novel, or just a series of loosely connected sketches?**

The latter.

**Have you seen the film version of *Cabaret*?**

Yes.

**Are you pleased with it?**

No. Not altogether, by any means. But it's quite entertaining, I think. My criticisms are the usual ones, the ones that many people have made. The moment you have a cabaret, you're going to have performances which are somehow amusing in it. I mean, you can have one song sung badly, like Marilyn Monroe in *Bus Stop*. She's marvellous when she sings the song in that. But she's meant to be a bad singer. You can't do that when you show as much of the cabaret as they did. I think the whole idea of having this cabaret throws the rest of the story off balance.

Now what are they stuck with? You have this little girl saying "Oh, I'll never make it. I haven't really any talent." Then she comes on the stage and you realize that she's every inch Judy Garland's daughter. And Joel Grey comes on the stage and he's simply fantastic. The truth is that this cabaret would have attracted half of Europe. You wouldn't have been able to get in for months on end.

**What is it about Sally Bowles as a character that has made her so popular all these years, first in your story, then in the stage and screen versions of *I Am a Camera*, and now in the stage and screen versions of *Cabaret*?**

Well, I understood her first when I saw Julie Harris play the part. Julie Harris played her as though she were Joan of Arc. It was the whole idea of militant bohemia, so to speak. One of the best theatrical moments when the play was first produced was in the last act where Julie is believed by Chris and everybody to be completely under the thumb of her British mother who has come over to Berlin. But as a matter of fact the mother has given up in despair and has left for England. Julie, as Sally, comes in in this terribly frumpy, respectable middle-class coat, which the mother has given her. She takes it off and appears in the dress that she wore in the first act, a sort of bohemian uniform, a tight-fitting black silk dress with a flaming scarf. And the audience shrieked because what it meant was that the squares are defeated, the establishment has gone down in ruins, and Greenwich Village is triumphant over all. Julie had the power, quite unconsciously because it was so much her own character, to project this. And there was a great scene, which would have meant nothing with another actress, where she pours the champagne and raises the glass and says, "Even *warm*, it's wonderful!"

**Is the model for the character of Sally Bowles still alive?**

Yes.

**Is she living in England?**

Yes.

**There was the note at the end of the story about Sally where you asked her to get in touch with you if she ever read the story. Did she?**

Oh well, that part was all made up. We kept in touch always. I had lunch with her and her daughter the last time I was in England in 1970. It's just that she's a private citizeness and I've never, never given out her name. Some journalist got hold of it, found out who she was, and asked her. She said "Yes, and now go away." And that was that.

**All your characters are so realistic, so lifelike. Are they all based on real people you have known?**

Yes, I would say that. Very occasionally an amalgam, but I could always identify at least one person with any major character. The minor characters are very often invented. I always draw on my experience in one way or another.

**Many critics, beginning with Cyril Connolly's famous comment on the "fatal readability" of your prose, have noted the clarity of your writing. Is it as easy for you to write as it is for your readers to read, or do you take great pains with your style?**

Great pains, yes.

**Do you normally work from diaries when writing your novels?**

It's not as direct as all that. What I mean is, there is this material in many cases available and when I'm feeling on unsteady ground, then I often turn to the diaries to look and see if I can get some kind of hint from them. I don't think there are any long passages of direct quotes from the diaries because a very little will set me off. If I get half a dozen lines of dialogue which are characteristic of a certain character, then I feel I can make that character speak indefinitely. It's just a matter of getting the rhythm of speech, or getting a few little details of how a place looks, or something of this kind. Most of it really is simply to give me confidence. I mean, I can do without it but I don't think I can and therefore the diary gives me just that little bit of confidence. I say to myself, well at least *this* part of it is authentic.

**Your most recent book, *Kathleen and Frank*, is constructed almost entirely from the diaries of others—your parents. Were there any particular problems you faced in writing that book?**

The chief problem was to wade through this material and pick out the bits which seemed to me to describe the characters most succinctly and things that I thought were good that they had written. There was a tremendous lot of this stuff. My embarrassment was that there was too much good stuff.

As for the writing of the commentary on it, that was extremely simple, relatively speaking. I did a great deal of research on the Boer War and various other areas, historical and social. I had an enormous amount of help from Robert Collison, the head of the research department of the library here at U.C.L.A. It was all great fun, really. It all came together quite easily.

**You conclude *Kathleen and Frank* with the statement, “This book too may prove to be chiefly about Christopher.” Do you plan to write an autobiography which will more obviously be “chiefly about Christopher?”**

Maybe.

**In another section of your commentary in the book, you credit your mother with being the counterforce in your life, the impetus which helped you to become the person and the writer you became.**

All that’s perhaps kidding, to a point. But in a sense it was true. Somebody had to be and she was. There’s always a kind of counterforce, isn’t there? In Vedanta philosophy, they say the physical world is made up of these three forces, which they call the gunas. There is the idea, the inspiration, and there’s the principle of force, and there’s the principle of inertia. Now you need all of these in order to get anything done. And the inertia is just as important as the force, because the inertia is the counterforce. You must have a fulcrum for your lever. You must have an interaction of force and resistance. And one can always find someone to thank, for playing the part of this force of resistance.

**One of the most interesting things to me about *Kathleen and Frank* is that you seem to have devised a whole new approach to biography, letting the characters literally tell their own stories.**

What is amusing about it structurally, I think, is this: The extracts of the diaries and the letters are all in strict chronological order. But darting around them is the commentary, which starts at the present day and goes back and forth and sideways and all over the place, and keeps



coming back to the present and comparing it with the past, and darting back to the past and comparing it with the present. In that way it's a somewhat Proustian kind of structure because the past is literally recaptured and certain things which were already stated at the beginning of the book are restated in the end.

**Do you think this particular biographical technique could also be used effectively as a novelistic device, by inventing letters and diaries and providing a running commentary?**

Oh yes, you certainly could do it. There is a little bit of that in my novel, *The World in the Evening*, because there you have one character, Stephen Monk, commenting on his wife's letters a long time after her death. He gives extracts from the letters and then comments on what she said in them, which involves darting about in time.

**The first section of *The World in the Evening* was published separately a few years before the whole novel appeared, wasn't it?**

Yes, the first chapter appeared in the first issue of *New World Writing*, April 1952.

**Many of your novels — *Goodbye to Berlin*, *The World in the Evening*, *A Single Man* — all started out to be quite different from their final form. Do you find you usually discover your true subject only as you begin writing a novel?**

Oh yes, almost always. And ideally what I do is, I like to write whole drafts. I don't like polishing things until right at the end. With *A Single Man* and *A Meeting by the River* I wrote three complete drafts right through from beginning to end, picking up things as I went along and making alterations and gradually getting into the theme.

In the case of *A Single Man*, I started off with my experience on California college campuses, and of two friends of mine, an Englishwoman who had married a G.I. when they were both very young and he was over in England right after the war, and how they came to this country and what her life had been in this country. The book was originally called *An Englishwoman* and I was meaning to write it in a sort of Willa Cather manner—very, very simple and describing this woman entirely in the third person. Then of course the question arose, how to get at the electric light. Well, I think to myself, I'm teaching at a college and I get to know this kid, and he's having a lot of trouble at home with his mother. And he says, after he and I get to know each other, "you're British too, you ought to go see her. Maybe you could talk some sense into her, maybe you could explain I'm not ungrateful. I simply want to go and live with Loretta. And she must understand that."

And so, that's how I started off. And then I realized by progressive stages that I wasn't primarily interested in the boy or in this woman. I was interested in the professor character. But nevertheless, this woman and, very far in the distance, her husband, and the son, who isn't her son after all—he's called Kenny—all appear in the book.

**Have any of your novels presented themselves to you almost whole, so to speak, so that there was little difference between the original conception and the final product?**

No, I couldn't ever really say that. If such a thing happened, I would absolutely hate it. I don't think I would write it. I love the exploration of writing. That's exactly what appeals to me. When I was working on *A Meeting by the River*, I used to think, I wish this would never end.

***A Meeting by the River* is unlike any of your other novels in that there is no narrator at all in the novel, just the letters and diaries of the two brothers. Was this the best way of getting at the light fixture in this case?**

Yes. Of course, it can be criticized, and has been, because it's like a court and all the evidence for the prosecution and for the defense is presented and you suddenly realize there isn't going to be a verdict. There isn't any jury or judge and, at the end of it all, it ends with a deadlock.

**By presenting it in this form, by eliminating the narrator, the reader is forced to become the judge, isn't he?**

Which of course I intended. Certain qualities in that book come out much better in the stage version of the novel, which Don Bachardy and I have written and which will be produced soon here in Los Angeles. It is a religious comedy which ends up with both sides thinking they have won. At the end of the play Patrick, the worldly brother; thinks to himself, "It's very amusing the way Oliver has gone to this monastery, he thinks he's so humble. But I know exactly where that will all end." And he foresees a future in which Oliver will be a kind of English Gandhi. His last lines are, "Twenty years from now he'll be running Asia."

On the other side Oliver is hugely amused because he's had this vision in which he saw that Patrick is already completely under the swami's protection, and that he is saved. And that he will simply hate being saved because he will suddenly start being completely dissatisfied with his life, get into the most awful mess with it.

**Do you find yourself more sympathetic with the position of one brother over the other?**

Not really—except that I'm far more Patrick than I am Oliver.

**What are your thoughts about getting back to the theatre again after all these years since you and Auden collaborated on the three plays in the thirties?**

Well, I have worked in the theatre in one way or another since then. I did a thing some years ago at the Mark Taper Forum, an experimental theatre here in Los Angeles where *A Meeting by the River* is being produced. They asked me to do an adaptation of Shaw's novella, *The Adventures of The Black Girl in Her Search for God*. By just putting it on the stage in the kind of wandering way in which you make a play nowadays, and having a very good director, Lamont Johnson, and a perfectly marvelous actress, Susan Batson, I think we produced a very remarkable show. It went wonderfully and I had the greatest fun down there.

**I'd like to raise the question of what might be called "minority literature"—that is, literature written by and perhaps for blacks, Jews, homosexuals, etc. What are your thoughts about the value of minority literature?**

Well, you see, if you're really going to plead the cause of your minority, I think it's much better to do it in political literature, in pamphleteering, in articles and speeches, for the very simple, very obvious, but very much overlooked fact that your statistics are all faked in fiction. All the people who die in *The Grapes of Wrath* are killed by Mr. Steinbeck. He may say, well I killed exactly the proportion of Okies who would have been killed according to the figures on the Okie migration, but it's not the same thing. Therefore fiction is really not a very good vehicle for propaganda.

If, however, with great good humor and aggressiveness, you state an extremely slanted position, that I find delightful. I adore the prejudices of Tolstoy and the outbursts of Dickens because they are humanly fun and kind of invigorating, as all protest is. It strengthens all of us, just as moaning and whining depresses us.

**Would you call yourself a homosexual novelist?**

Oh no, I haven't written about homosexuality, at least not very much. I've introduced some homosexual characters, but that's not the same thing. *A Single Man* is about minority feelings, but really most of the stuff in it is quite generalized. It would apply certainly to blacks, and probably to Jews too, but to a lesser degree because obviously here in America the Jews are in a very much better position than either the blacks or the homosexuals.

**Do you think the homosexual writer, or the black writer, or the Jewish writer, have special insights which might be of value to the majority audience?**

Well, I think it's good for the majority to be reminded from time to time that there's a great underlying resentment on the part of the minority. Minorities want to be given their rights and also in a sense want to be allowed to live their own lives. These two things are very important and it's worth reminding people of them.

There's an old story told about the gold rush days. There's this fellow who doesn't know what to do—he can't get any sex. Finally he says to a friend, "What does one do for sex?" He's told there is this Chinese cook in the camp. The man in need of sex is terribly shocked, but finally says, "All right. I'll do it. But nobody else must know." The guy he's talking to says, "Well, that's a little difficult. You see, four other people must know." "*Four!*" the man cries. "That's right," his friend says, "the four men who hold the cook down. You see, he doesn't like it any more than you do." That's a wonderful civil rights story. It's very good sometimes as a minority member to remind people that you don't like it anymore than they do.

They think it's very charming, for instance, that they can neck all over the place but you're not allowed to kiss your boyfriend in public. A married couple, ever so liberal and nice, will ask a homosexual for dinner, and then impose and project their domesticity in every possible way. It never occurs to the married couple that they're being the least bit tactless. Little things like that are amusing to point out. You don't have to get nasty. When you have a serious statement of your wrongs, then I think political writing with facts and figures is better.

**You have been a Vedantist now for over thirty years and have written about it extensively in essays. Would you also say you are a religious novelist?**

Well, yes, I think *A Meeting by the River* is a religious novel. Very much so.

**Would you include any other novels written since your conversion?**

Well, there are religious elements in them. There's not an awful lot in *A Single Man*. That's another thing I leave out of the character of George, that he really has no spiritual resources. In that way he's a kind of old-fashioned stoic. He's absolutely backed up against the wall. This is another reason he's unlike me personally, just as his predicament is unlike mine, because I don't live alone or suffer from those disadvantages, I'm happy to say.

**In his recent book about you, Alan Wilde concludes that as a writer, you can best be described as an ironic moralist. Would you agree?**

Well, I think I'm ironic, yes. Perhaps *was* rather more than *am*. There is a kind of irony in my work. And my humor, I don't know how to describe it. It has a sort of double edge thing to it, very often.

**Directed inwards and outwards, at the persona as well as at others?**

Yes, a little bit. It sort of makes fun of the persona.

**You once described yourself as a "serious comic writer." Do you still think of yourself in this way?**

Yes, I have no use for out and out comedy writing or out and out tragedy writing. They bore me to distraction equally. I think both pictures that they give of life are false in the most heartless way. I don't know which is worse—the triviality of the total comedian or the superficiality of the total tragedian.

**E. M. Forster was your model for this kind of serious comic writing, wasn't he?**

Yes, very much. He was my great, great shining example.

**I know that Forster was a long-time friend of yours. Did you ever try to convince him that he should have published *Maurice*, his posthumously published novel about homosexuality?**

Oh yes, we talked about it constantly, ever since I first met him, which was quite a long time ago, in the early nineteen thirties.

**Why didn't he ever publish it?**

First of all, it would have upset his mother. There were other people who felt it would have caused a disturbance. I think it would have, too. It's very nasty from their point of view, very subversive. It's a partisan book, it's a very slanted book. There's no question about that. It's really an absurdly militant book. But that, of course, is also its charm.

**Haven't you donated the royalties from *Maurice* to a fellowship fund for English writers who wish to visit America?**

Yes, but that isn't nearly as noble as you make it sound! It was always understood that I should use the money in this way. Forster and I discussed

this many years before he died. I was extremely lucky in that I had this marvelously simple way of doing it. It was very easy for me to hand the whole thing over to the National Institute of Arts and Letters, of which I am a member. I wouldn't have known how to set up a fund, or decide who should receive the awards, or anything. They have vast experience of doing this sort of thing.

**What are your feelings today about the uproar caused when you and Auden left England together for America in 1939? Do you think that perhaps some readers and critics responded negatively to your later works because of your leaving?**

I don't think it lasted very long. I don't think the English are very vindictive in that sort of way, to start off with. Also, I think they tended to see, as time passed, that all of this was really part of a life-pattern. You see, I had hardly lived in England since I was an adult. I went to Berlin when I was 25. I was always roaming around all over the place, coming back to England just for visits. Also, at the time I left, they hadn't known about my pacifism.

**You have done a lot of teaching and lecturing about writing at various universities. Do you find this beneficial to a writer?**

Well, I get very tired of it very quickly. I like it for just a little while. I get tired of hearing my old songs again. I get bored with them. I have a few tapes that people made and I think, oh dear, I said that much better ten years ago, why say it again, and not so well.

**Would you say you are a disciplined writer? Do you, for example, set aside a particular time each day to write?**

No, it's not a question of setting aside time. I do make a kind of act of the will every day. I mean I do something with it and if you do that, even if you do only a very little, it all gradually adds up. And then there are days you do a great deal. And of course as you get nearer to the end of something you always do more and more and more. That is my experience.

**Are you a slow worker?**

Yes. I always like to say to myself, "Well, you've got all the time you need. Don't fuss. Just keep on."

**Although many of your novels are distinguished by the use of the Christopher Isherwood persona, many of your other novels are quite different from these. Would you consider yourself an experimental novelist?**

I think in the very, very beginning, yes. *All the Conspirators* is full of little jazzy tricks, including a good deal of imitation of Joyce in *Ulysses*.

**There are some other parallels between Joyce's novel and some of your other novels. For example, there is the relationship between the young artist and the Jewish father figure in *Prater Violet*, the question and answer technique at the end of *A Single Man*, and the single day aspect of that novel.**

In neither of these cases was this kind of thing conscious. Possibly yes, in the case of the single day unit, but of course that had been used by people long, long before Joyce. It's very seldom that I actually say to myself, I'll do it in a certain way because somebody else did it.

**I'm almost hesitant to bring this up, but there is a character named Joyce in *Prater Violet*. Was that purely accidental?**

I should say that is absolutely and totally accidental, yes. Joyce, after all, has quite a different connotation when it's a woman's name. It suggests a certain kind of person to me.

**Which of your books gave you the most difficulty in writing?**

*The World in the Evening*. The reason for that was that I was up the wrong tree, trying to get at it in different ways, and never could. I wish now that I had taken it apart. I often think that I would like to have written it from the point of view of a minor character and begun it like Ford Madox Ford in the beginning of *The Good Soldier*—"This is the saddest story I ever heard." I would say, "This is a story about the two most unpleasant people I ever met."

I believe it would take the curse off Elizabeth and Stephen completely if you admitted that there was something unpleasant about them. In fact, Don Bachardy and I started to write a play years ago based on *The World in the Evening* which we called *The Monsters*, and the monsters were Elizabeth and Stephen.

**Is the problem with Elizabeth's character the fact that she is presented as being almost perfect?**

In a way. I wanted to have a woman who had sort of a legend. But of course underneath you showed a whole life going on between them, full of friction. I mean, they were beautiful people on the surface. Everyone thought, what a beautiful relationship they had.

**Which of your books pleases you the most?**

*A Single Man.*

**Why?**

Because everything fits. It sort of keeps going, and it's varied. Something is happening under the surface. And it's all very much out of my experience, very close to my experience...I don't know...It's hard to say.

**It seems to me that *A Single Man* would make an excellent film.**

Oh yes, it's very often been considered as a film. As a matter of fact, we have every intention of making it into film, sooner or later. But you've got to have the right director.

**I suppose you would hate to see the novel damaged in any way by transferring it to the screen.**

Well actually, one would begin by departing very much from the book. One thing right away which occurs to me which I would like would be that the dead lover ought to be seen every so often, just sitting about in the room, smoking, lounging with his feet up, quite solid. Or he would be coming down the stairs and they would pass each other, or he would be seen looking in at the window. In other words, the thought of this person is quite solid so you would see the person. I think there should be a considerable period before you realize that the person isn't alive.

There are many, many other things. For example, the way the fantasies are treated, the sex fantasies, and the fantasies of destroying the high-rise buildings. There's a sequence toward the end where George is masturbating and has these sex fantasies and keeps changing the actors in the fantasies because they don't function properly. This could be an extraordinary scene of comedy which I have never seen on the screen. There would be new people like players in a football game continually running out onto the field.

And I think maybe this detached narrative voice could actually lecture at certain points. I'm not sure, for instance, that toward the end, just when George is going to die, there shouldn't be an actual chart shown, with animated diagrams where you see the formation of the plaque, showing exactly what happens. You see the heart working and have this explained in a very flat voice by a sort of lecturer.

**You have used a number of different narrative forms over the years — in novels, biographies, plays, movies, etc. Do you find the narrative problems essentially the same in all forms?**



Oh no, certainly not. After all, with film, the whole business is to create the image, to clear the way for the image. All the talk is nothing. If you want to talk, use the theater. If you want to show, use the film.

**What about the novel?**

Oh well, the novel, my goodness, the novel is much subtler to my mind than either of these media because you can have all this dialogue. Description is all very nice and none of us can resist it, but actually it's not very powerful as a rule and doesn't take us very far into the way things look. But, you see, you can also analyze everything in the novel. You can stand back from the conversation and say, "Yes, now you watch those two. Isn't it funny. You see, he's the one who keeps waving the knife, but it's perfectly obvious he's not going to stab her. He has no intention of it." Why hasn't he? Does she know that? All these kinds of things are impossible, I don't care who is writing, for the stage and the screen. You can't show that in the same way. You can show it perhaps in another way, but this is what the novel is all about to my mind. It cuts much deeper.

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