



Christopher Isherwood: An Interview

Author(s): Carolyn G. Heilbrun and Christopher Isherwood

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Christopher Isherwood: An Interview

CAROLYN G. HEILBRUN

The following interview must stand as all the introduction these collected essays will have. The reader is, I think, fortunate in the contributors, who give pictures of Isherwood and his work which are remarkably individual, alive, and readable.

My interview with Isherwood is really one conversation in two parts separated by ten months and three thousand miles. Our first talk was in Isherwood's study in his home in Santa Monica, and covered two afternoons divided by an evening in which my husband and I had dinner with Isherwood and Don Bachardy. (On the day after this dinner, I also interviewed their friend Gavin Lambert, who happened to be visiting Los Angeles; that interview is presented later in this issue.)

In May, 1976, just before he flew to England, Isherwood came to New York, and the conversation was continued in my study. I tried both times to ask him questions he had not been asked before at interviews: I had studied them all. Christopher is, of course, a marvelous narrator and story teller; if you ask him a question to which he has already worked out the answer, perhaps in the book he is writing, he will present that answer with perfect aplomb as though he had just thought of it on the spot. Not that he pretends to have thought of it on the spot—but he is so stimulated by your question and his answer, that you suppose his response to have been created for this particular occasion. I think my desire for new questions and answers was occasionally inconsiderate. Still, I did manage *not* to ask him when he met Auden, or why he came to the United States. (Those who wish answers to these questions should consult other interviews cited in the Checklist.)

Let me admit (on the chance that other Isherwood admirers may share my impression) that I went to California in search of the Isherwood who appears in all his works, including *An Approach to Vedanta* and *Exhumations*, as well as in the novels. What I met was the Isherwood who had reached that point in his life when he wished above all to be absolutely open and honest about his life as a homosexual. I think that he wrote his forthcoming book, *Christopher and His Kind*, precisely to counter the rather saintlike and unwillful image of him which his readers had understandably formed from his earlier works. (*Christopher and His Kind* will be published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in October, 1976.)

When he published *Exhumations* in 1966, Isherwood wrote: "This book is compiled chiefly for those who already feel some interest, never mind how slight, in my writings and, hence, in me." Ten years later, this number of *Twentieth Century Literature* is compiled for the same audience, now very much larger and more than ever intensely interested in both the works and the man.

Santa Monica, July, 1975.

Heilbrun: Ramakrishna, the Indian avatar whose biography you wrote, was very yin-yang. A good American might suspect him of being homosexual.

Isherwood: Well yes, and there was in fact some man who went around at the time accusing him of this and saying "What's he doing with all these boys around the place?" Actually, Ramakrishna was completely simple and guileless. He told people whatever came into his mind, like a child. If he had ever been troubled by homosexual desires, if that had ever been a problem, he'd have told everybody about them. He said in the most completely calm, uninhibited way of Naren (one of his chief disciples), "when I'm with him, I feel as though he were my husband and I was his wife," and then again he said (taking another disciple), "I see him entirely as a woman." He was completely without any hang-ups, talking about sex-roles, because his thoughts transcended physical love-making. He saw even the mating of two dogs on the street as an expression of the eternal male-female principle in the universe. I think that is always a sign of great spiritual enlightenment. Another thing, related to this, which the Hindus feel, and indeed you find this in the Christian tradition too, is that God can be worshipped in all sorts of different ways; you can look at him as though you were his mother or father, you can look at him as a friend and as a lover—the whole Krishna thing came into that, you see. And you can also look at him as your father or your mother or your master.

H: It is interesting that he worships God in a feminine form, in Kali.

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I: Again, he was trying to enter into all the possible spiritual relationships, and one of them was to worship God as a woman, and he found it simpler to do this if he dressed up as one.

H: And yet he would always speak of women and gold as the great threats to the spiritual life. They had to put a footnote in the gospels explaining that he liked women.

I: That's the most deplorable error, because he actually said—you know, his language was very simple—he said “woman” when he was talking to men, but whenever he was talking to women, he said “man and gold.” What he meant was sexual lust and greed for possessions.

H: It's never put that way.

I: That's very unfortunate, and I think the phrase “woman and gold” puts people off terribly.

H: You say of yourself in *Kathleen and Frank*: “Heterosexuality wouldn't have suited him, it would have fatally cramped his style.” You go on to explain that being homosexual allowed you to see things from an oblique angle, which is important for a writer. But one has the sense that you meant something more than that?

I: What I meant was that I have always had a strong tendency to get involved in domestic relationships. If I had been heterosexual, I would have been married by now about four times, with lots of children and paying every cent I earned in alimony.

H: That brings us to the whole idea of marriage. You've always mentioned conventional marriage with a shudder.

I: For myself, yes. I see it as a social trap. I find it indecent to try to protect a relationship by swearing an oath. What's so sacred about permanence, as such? Why shouldn't you be completely promiscuous? If you could only appreciate the sacredness of one-night stands—and realize that these are all God's creatures, you know, they're all my brothers or sisters.

H: You don't really feel a distinction between love for another person, sexually expressed, and the one-night stands you mention?

I: I don't see, theoretically, why there shouldn't be the most powerful sort of love, like St. Francis's, applied to one-night stands, where you really love a different person each night. But that's very advanced.

H: And a relationship that can go on for twenty years or more is not better, it's just different?

I: I think it's different. It's probably much easier, in one way. Really, to have that feeling, that you are overwhelmed with empathy and with love, not to mention lust, for a person that you just meet for a few hours, that's surely a *very* advanced state to be in. I can imagine that it'd be very near a kind of enlightenment.

H: In *Kathleen and Frank*, Frank said that he was not manly, that he would make a much better husband than lover. Vita Sackville-West said that all men could be divided into lovers and husbands. I take it you believe more in lovers than husbands?

I: It's not that one can't be both, it's more that you're limiting the experience if you put walls around it. I mean, to put it in a much simpler, cruder way, shouldn't it really be that at the end of it all, the central pair always come back to each other and say "Yes, it was absolutely marvelous, but really it only confirms my feeling that I would rather be with you than with anyone else in the world"? And I think that if you really have something going with somebody, one can hope that that will happen, and that applies equally to heterosexual relationships.

H: As long, as you say, you don't have any children. But now homosexual couples speak of marrying and adopting children.

I: Oh I know. I mean, goodness, I don't knock it and I think they should do exactly what they want, but it wouldn't do for me. Of course, I've had several relationships where there was an age difference, I don't feel myself at all far from being a father. In fact, a woman psychologist who's known me for many years, said to me "What a father you are!" I certainly never feel that I've missed anything by not having children of my own.

H: You've said that you had slept with one or two women, but that you didn't really like it.

I: Oh, but it worked all right. There again of course—it's so difficult to say, whether under other circumstances one might be able to feel romantically about a woman. And then, you see, getting right down to the core of myself, I begin to feel the old obstinacy coming up. I've tried to write about that in this book I've just finished. Then I think, "Well, fuck them all, why should I? Why?" As long as there's this pressure, as long as there's this majority saying "that's the way, that's what you ought to do," as long as nearly all the poets, and nearly everybody are going to harp on heterosexuality, I think "No, I won't, I absolutely won't." And I do see that there's a certain streak of perversity in me, of refusal to go along with the others. Somebody was telling

me that I said in some interview that I felt that I would certainly have become heterosexual, if everybody else was homosexual—there's a streak of that in my make-up.

Of course, when I was younger, all sorts of other emotions came into the picture. There was a thing about the class structure; like a lot of upper-middle-class homosexuals, I was very much for working-class boys and all that. Into that entered an element of what I call "sexual colonialism." There was a time when, I realize now, I saw my sex partners as belonging to a sort of tribe which I was approaching in the spirit of a colonial exploiter. There was also, I suppose, a shyness involved; I preferred having them not only another class, but another race, so they could speak a different language. Talking English to them embarrassed me. But all of this disappeared. In that sense, America did not disappoint me; as soon as I got here, I got into a much more Whitmanesque sort of attitude, and in the essential democracy of life here I never again had any of these problems. And most of the people I've really cared deeply about have been Americans who I met since I lived in this country—I came when I was thirty-four.

H: I wonder if it's your having spent so much of your life in America that accounts for your attitude toward Jews. A student of mine, when we read *Goodbye to Berlin* in class, was very moved by the section on the Landauers. He had got so used to anti-Semitism in English literature, that your feelings about the Landauers came as rather a shock to him—a good shock.

I: You know, in this book that I've just written, I have a great deal about the Landauers and particularly, about Bernhard Landauer, because, as a matter of fact, I don't altogether like the attitude toward him that's displayed in the story and I try to go more and more into that. As I point out in this new book, he led a life which became incredibly heroic toward the end.

I was enormously involved with Jews at this period, I felt far too involved with them to feel guilty about criticizing them. I really feel that, in a sense, I couldn't be anti-Semitic if I tried, because we're too much in the same apperception, you know. On the other hand, with some individuals, on both sides, there's undoubtedly been hostility. We called each other dirty names. But that meant very little.

My real involvement with Jews was after I left Germany, and found myself, wherever I went, in the midst of the emigration. I don't know who it was, some writer, who said jokingly "Christopher is an honorary Jew—ein Ehrenjude." Coming out to California, I was absolutely surrounded with all the refugee writers who'd come to Hollywood, who were almost 97 percent Jewish, of course, and not to mention all the American Jews in the

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entertainment business. One was always in the middle of this sort of Central European atmosphere.

H: Erika Mann was half-Jewish, and Auden married her to give her British citizenship. Since you knew her through the cabaret where she sang, why didn't you marry her?

I: Well, as a matter of fact, she asked me, first of all. She didn't know him, but I had various reasons for not doing it, one of which, the most valid reason, was that I didn't want to involve my German friend with those extremely prominent anti-Nazis, in this spectacular way. As things turned out, it might well have made terrible trouble for him later, when he got arrested by the Gestapo. Also I did really have the feeling that there was something inherently disgraceful in getting married. I had an absolute horror of the suggestion that I was in any way trying to pass as a heterosexual, even for the noblest motives.

H: You only would have done it if there was no one else?

I: Yes. As a matter of fact, Auden was the first person I suggested, he agreed instantly and Teresa Geihso, the other great artist in the cabaret, a much greater actress than Erika, a really wonderful actress (who only died the other day), she got married to an Englishman too, another arranged marriage, not very long afterwards, with one of our friends, a man named John Simson, who is a writer. Erika was absolutely saved by the gong; it was the very day that Goebbels took away her nationality that she became a British subject; it just happened that the actual order came out that day.

H: I've become impressed, as many have, with the books of J. R. Ackerley. I gather, from *The Ackerley Letters*, that you knew him.

I: Oh, very well, yes, he was very much part of the Forster group, an intimate friend of Forster's. I was with him, actually, about a week before he died, we were all together, very festive; he died quite painlessly in his sleep, there was some idea he had a bad heart, but he was in perfect health, apparently. I must have met him around 1936, but I'm unclear whether I started working for him before I met him or the other way around. He was then the literary editor of the *Listener*, the literary magazine of the BBC, and I started reviewing for him. This was a great financial support for me, at that time, I lived largely on it, and I reviewed about thirty-five books for him in all, in the course of about three years. Then I got to know him, of course, and I saw him again a great deal after the War, with Forster. Ackerley was extraordinarily handsome. He had tremendous style, you know, he was really very, very intelligent and had great charm, but there was a certain kind of dreary

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sadness about him. Sometimes it was actually irritating, he was so negative; it's very British, a lot of us are like that, gloomy and grumbly. It is a sort of Jewish gloom, but without the Jewish wit which always goes with it, the gallows humour—it's just gloom. Those refugees were masters of it, you know, there was nothing, nothing, nothing you could do to cheer them up, but on the other hand, suddenly they said something piercingly funny, they were just having a ball, that was their way. But you felt that Ackerley wasn't enjoying it very much, and that wasn't so sympathetic.

[Isherwood showed Heilbrun, as she was leaving, a piece of carved wood which was the work of D. H. Lawrence. Isherwood said he had once visited the place where Lawrence had stayed in New Mexico.]

I: We went there, made a pilgrimage; I went up with some friends and we spent the night under the trees, sleeping in bags outside the High Ranch. To my mind, that's one of the greatest passages in English literature, his description in *Saint Mawr*, of the ranch house and the New England woman who hated the wilderness, because it was so frightening. There's a wonderful description of that.

H: You admire him very much?

I: Tremendously, yes. Not his philosophical point of view, but I admire tremendously his approach to writing. It's something very, very basic, and something one can learn from all kinds of different writers, but for me, it came from Lawrence: the revelation that you could write about nature in a purely subjective way. In other words, there wasn't an absolute *truth* about nature; it was all in the eye of the beholder—if you are in a bad temper, the valley is obscene, ugly, and bad, and if you aren't, it's beautiful. Well, *Saint Mawr* is really one of my favorite works, because I find the kind of farcicalness of it so marvelous. This girl marries this artist named Rico who's a rotter, and this horse, which of course is Lawrence, takes one look at him and sees he hasn't got a dark center so it just stomps on him.

New York City, May, 1976.

Heilbrun: In Santa Monica you mentioned a “woman psychologist who's known me for years.” Would you tell me something about her?

Isherwood: Evelyn Hooker. Our relationship really started because she was making a study of various types of homosexual. And she was working toward her great thesis which in those days was quite revolutionary: that we homosexuals are not necessarily sick. This she finally demonstrated and got gradually accepted. She was also—and that interested me far more, because

whether I was sick or not, I was me and that's all I cared about—she was a social psychologist. She was one of the few people I know who was interested at that time in the structure of the gay world from a purely social point of view. And I used to spend a great deal of time trying to answer her questions. Also she was an exceptionally bold field psychologist and would go to the gay bars at a time when all that was much less usual than it is now. She was therefore widely trusted and loved. She is a very remarkable woman, deeply emotional in her own way and yet as regards the scientific part of her life, I think admirably objective.

She married twice and the second time she married a professor of literature, named Edward Hooker, who was editing an edition of Dryden when he died of a heart attack. And that was a terrible blow to her. They were very devoted. It was a late life romance and they were married for several years. And that's when I knew her. And it was in their garden that I had this little house for a while and lived there. Then when I met Don, it was obviously much too small for two people to live in. It was really just a studio in the garden. I've kept in touch with her and so has Don.

H: I'm also interested in your friendship with Maria Huxley, Aldous's wife. You said that you were very intimate with her.

I: Maria was a person who invited the deepest confidences. What I had going there was a brother-sister relationship, but she was such a devoted wife that she could never have become a possessive sister. I have had some experiences with pseudo-sisters who started to boss me and then there was trouble. Theoretically I was in the market for a sister or two, you know. But in practice, it seldom worked.

During the thirties, one of my strong sister relationships was with John Lehmann's sister, Beatrix, the actress. We've always been very close. And that was a completely successful sister relationship, even though politically we didn't entirely see eye to eye. She was rather more radically Left than I was. And then, as I describe in my book, my Leftism came into a clash with the fact that the Communists were starting to persecute the gays, after declaring earlier that they respected individual freedom in sexual matters. Very much as Jews must have felt who were Communists but then found that Soviet Russia wasn't the best place to be Jewish in. *Goodbye to Berlin* is dedicated to Beatrix as well as to John. There was a whole period when we saw each other daily in Berlin. And then she got to know this man who was the model for the director in my novel *Prater Violet*, Berthold Viertel. I introduced her to him because I wanted to get him to take her on in the film we did together, *Little Friend*. She wasn't right for that but she did play for him in the next picture that he made which was *The Passing of the Third Floor Back*.

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H: Will you say something about your new book?

I: What I shall be very curious to know is if you feel that this book, although non-fiction and although autobiographical, is a kind of novel. There are themes that run through it. And there's a sort of payoff. In a curious way, it arranged itself like that. And I don't think that I have bent the facts. It is a description of the inner drives and external forces which took me away from England. And I wonder to what extent all this will seem to form an artistic whole. I'm always conscious of the psychosomatic aspect of life. I mean, in other words, that there is a part of one's will over which one has no conscious control. It is moving you in certain directions, and makes you do the darndest things. It has its own plans for you, but not necessarily plans which you would think of as being nice or good or benevolent.

H: Are you going to go on to write about your life after you came to the United States?

I: Well, you see Carolyn, that's a very different thing because I have this gigantic manuscript already, at least for the first few years—from the beginning of 1939, when I arrived here, right through 1944, by which time I'd had some experience of the film world and Quakerdom and the Hindus.

H: A lot of which is in "Paul" in *Down There on a Visit*.

I: The material is used in various places. But nevertheless there's a lot more of it. And anyway it has a different significance when it's directly applied to me. It would be easy for me to reprint that with comments, as in *Kathleen and Frank*. I could easily make a book out of that.

H: But you're not sure if you will?

I: Well, you see, in this book I've just finished, the book about the thirties, so many of the characters are now dead or they have become such old friends that I'm sure they won't mind. But if I get into this later stuff, I shall be dealing increasingly with people who aren't dead. So perhaps rather than be overly discreet and be a bore, I shall leave it to be published after my death. But I don't know. It is there anyway.

H: So it isn't what you look forward to doing next?

I: Oh, I would love to do some tiny little thing. One-page stories or sort of exquisite little *pensées*. Everybody always imagines they can do that. It's harder than the longest book in the world.

H: Oh, it's much harder. How much do you feel when you write a book like this and it's about to be published, that part of your obligation to being an

author is publicizing it—as opposed to having a sense that it has to make its own way?

I: I do find publicizing a bit embarrassing. First of all I feel embarrassed because you're presumably talking to people chiefly who haven't read the book. And now what are you doing, running an ad for it you know. And then I feel, particularly in the case of this book, that a lot of people are just going to find it exceedingly distasteful.

H: Why?

I: Because of its aggressiveness. It's not pornographic, not by standards of nowadays. It would never be banned, at least not in any sort of semi-civilized place. But that's not the point. I think a lot of people would say: "What's all the fuss about?" The most effective form of annihilation is to say "Yes, so he's a fag, what else is new? Some of our best friends are fags and we don't mind."

H: Much of what you have to say about the situation in Berlin is important; many people don't really know about Berlin in the thirties, and need to learn.

I: Well of course there is a great deal about Berlin in this book. And I go through the whole thing and take all the major characters in the Berlin story and tell the real facts which were always a bit different. But all that only takes up about a quarter of the book. I mean there is what happened after that, wanderings about in different countries and meeting all sorts of people.

H: When you first came to California and talked to the swami, did the question of homosexuality come up?

I: Instantly.

H: Instantly?

I: I mean I never had any religion before except what I was raised with and had rejected. And I was determined that at least we should get off on the right foot.

H: And what did he say?

I: Well you see, he's a monk. And his view is that all attachment is attachment, that life exists only for God within one's self and that everything which hinders that is to be kept to a minimum, or sublimated. In a word, he said homosexuality is merely another form of attachment, neither worse nor better. And that was all I wanted to hear. I said all right, good. Now we can understand each other. The friend I was with at the time when I met Swami also became a devotee. So that made it immediately in itself much easier

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because then we had the status of householder disciples, as the Hindus would say. But you know, I've really come to the conclusion, in the wisdom of my seventy-one years, that there are even more beautiful and terrible obstacles to enlightenment than sex. And one of them is writing.

H: Why writing?

I: Well I just found, for instance, while I was working on this book, that as Katherine Mansfield said, "I look at the mountains, I try to pray and then I think of something clever." I really couldn't meditate at all until it was finished. The moment the mind became the least little bit calm, it simply said to me, do you realize that in Chapter 3, you completely forgot to refer to Anna, or something. And I thought, Oh Jesus, I forgot, I must remember that. I was afraid I wouldn't even remember it until I'd finished my meditation and could note it down.

H: Do you think this could in any way be a comment on meditation? After all, what could be better than to calm one's mind and get on with one's own work?

I: Perhaps I should have done what I believe Gide used to do. It seems he actually had periods of literary meditation. Every day he spent an hour just pacing up and down and sort of letting the whole book (*The Counterfeiters*) go through his head. Now of course it's arguable that then you might have two periods of meditation. During the meditation on *The Counterfeiters*, you think of nothing but God and you would be absolutely unable to think about *The Counterfeiters*. And during the period of meditation on God, you would have all your literary ideas. I don't know why I've never tried playing this trick on myself.