



# WRITERS IN CONVERSATION

An Interview with A.N. Wilson

Nick Turner

*Andrew Wilson, published as A.N. Wilson, is a British writer of fiction, non-fiction and journalism. Beginning his career as an acclaimed comic novelist in the late 1970s, his work has since embraced literary biography, history, and novels that have moved beyond comedy to encompass faith and historical settings. In 2007 his novel Winnie and Wolf was long-listed for the Man Booker Prize; his most recent work is the acclaimed literary biography The Mystery of Charles Dickens.*

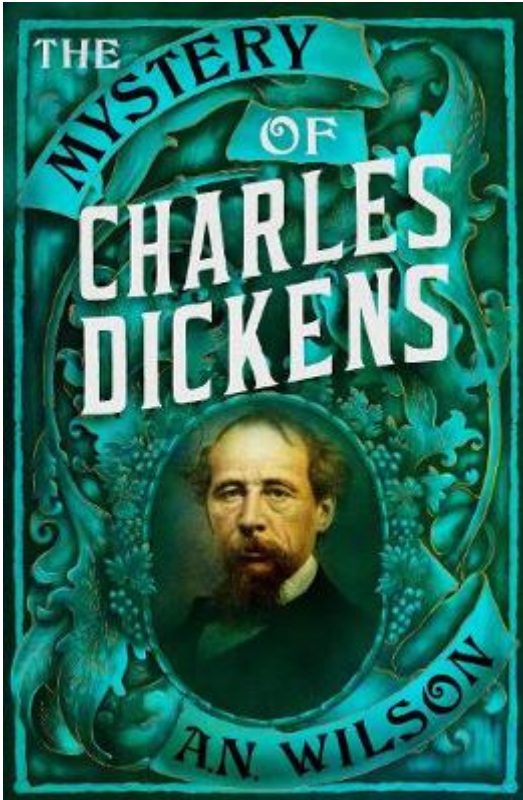
*Nick Turner conducted the interview with Andrew Wilson by email in April 2020, focusing on the Andrew Wilson's diverse writing interests, the work of Iris Murdoch, his new book on Dickens, the appeal of the Victorian age, and the writers that have inspired him in the past.*

Q. To start with perhaps a trivial question – what made you decide to use ‘A.N.’ rather than ‘Andrew’ in your work?

**A. Secker and Warburg published my first five books. They already had an Andrew Wilson on their list. He wrote about aeroplanes. It is an extremely common name. They also had Angus Wilson, who suggested I wrote under my initials. I rather like initials.**

Q. You have written across many genres – fiction, biography, history. Can you say any more about this mixture, or the connections between them when you write?

**A. I started as a novelist and I still think of myself primarily as an author of fiction. If you have published a book, the likelihood is that some publisher or editor will come along and suggest you write in a different genre, not least if your novels do not sell very well. Non-fiction of the kind I have written – especially the biographies of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert – has sold more than my novels. That is the simple reason I was asked to write them by publishers. Nearly all my non-fiction was commissioned. The exception is a book I wrote about the Victorians losing their religion. It was entitled *God's Funeral*, after the poem of that name by**



Hardy. It is my best non-fictional book, I should guess, except perhaps *The Mystery of Charles Dickens* which I also wrote without a commission and which is about to appear. It is part biography, part criticism, and in it I have explored the relationship between his divided self, his damaged relationship with his mother, his love-hate of his own times, and watched how all these ingredients turned into his magnificent artistic achievement. It's much my best work of non-fiction to date. But I married very young; I have always had dependents of one sort or another, and bills must be paid.

Q. That makes sense! I'd like to ask more about your non-fiction. You obviously have a great interest in the Victorian era, for example in your cultural history book *The Victorians* (2002), *Charles Darwin, Victorian Mythmaker* (2017), the novel *Gentlemen in England* (1983) and *The Mystery of Charles Dickens*. Can you say something about what draws you to this period?

Q. The nineteenth century is both so close – both my father's sisters were born in the reign of Queen Victoria – and so far away. I suppose that explains some of the fascination. I feel at home in the Victorian age. To my mind, the greatest English novelist, by far, is Charles Dickens, and my love for him, my veneration for his artistic achievement, grows and grows. He saw what a revolutionary, evil, horrible, energetic, exciting era he had lived through. It still excites and horrifies me in equal measure. The Victorians' energy, their capacity for self-doubt and doubt in the Almighty, their coarseness, these are all things I recognise in myself.

Q. Do you have a work of fiction you've written of which you're most proud?

A. I think in some ways my best novel is *My Name is Legion* (2004). It embraces a side of my life you have not touched upon, namely my involvement with the world of journalism. For nine years of my life I was a teacher – two in school, seven at university level. Then I was offered a job in journalism and I have been a jobbing journalist ever since. For seven years I worked on *The Evening Standard*. I am fascinated by the press, and, like most of the novelists I have admired – not all, but most – Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Arnold Bennett – I have written journalism as well as books. *My Name is Legion* is a passio-angry book, and explores what is rotten at the heart of England, as well as what is evil, putrid even, about our popular press. But I am fascinated by it as well as repelled, and this combination made what I felt was a strong book. I wrote a novel called *The Vicar of Sorrows* (1993) which I also think quite good.

Q. I will have to read *My Name is Legion*! You have obviously said a great deal in the past about Iris Murdoch, in your biography, for example. I remember you saying there that *A Severed Head*

was her masterpiece. Do you still believe that? How do you view Murdoch as a fiction writer at the moment? Some people, myself included, have a love affair or even obsession with her work that then fades somewhat, more than with other writers, perhaps.

**A. She haunts me, but although, for example, many reviewers thought a recent novel, *Aftershocks* (2018), was influenced by her, I did not notice that until they had said it. I think that her best work is in *The Bell*, *The Black Prince*, and *The Sea, the Sea*. I do like *A Severed Head* but I had forgotten saying it was the best. I would not say that now. I wish she had written a truly philosophical novel, i.e. one which incorporated her ideas. In some of them, for example the excellent *Nuns and Soldiers*, we meet the figure of Anne Cavidge, an ex-nun who nevertheless, while being an unbeliever in God, has a vision of Christ. This is very close to the Murdoch who wrote the *The Sovereignty of Good*, but she does not explore the notion as, say, Dostoyevsky would have done, through the fabric of the characters' lives. *The Time of the Angels* seems as if it is going to, but in spite of unforgettable images and the fog surrounding the Heidegger-obsessed atheist priest, I miss what I am looking for in that book – a realisation of what it is like to BE HIM! In many ways she was a very unpretentious novelist, and one could have done with a bit more, not pretension, exactly, but preparedness to bring ideas into the actual texture of the work.**

Q. That's interesting. To me as a writer she's always seemed a curious mixture of philosophy and easy-reading. I've particularly enjoyed your Lampitt novels, especially *Incline our Hearts* (1988). It feels as if you're taking an Anthony Powell or even Proust approach to fiction here: do you agree? I've also seen an article discussing the postmodernity within them.

**A. Nice of you to say so! I enjoyed writing them but have not dared revisit. I am an addict of both Powell and Proust and felt that the Lampitt books were written too much under the spell of both. But since I have not read them since they were written, I am a poor judge.**

Q. In terms of influence, Evelyn Waugh seemed to be cited as one in reviews of your earlier fiction. How conscious do you think that was on your part?

**A. The second and third novels, *Unguarded Hours* (1978) and *Kindly Light* (1979), were much influenced by Waugh. I admire him – who doesn't, this side of idolatry? – but he is not someone to imitate. I did not do so consciously; it was simply when I tried to write fiction about a particular phase of my young manhood that it seemed natural to do so in the manner of *Decline and Fall*.**

Q. I feel I'm missing something always as I admire Waugh without quite getting him. The connection takes us perhaps to the role of religion and faith in your work: *Unguarded Hours*, *Kindly Light* and *The Vicar of Sorrows*, for example. Could you say something about this theme, for example how its presence in your work may have changed, what motivated its presence, etc.?

**A. I find this a difficult question to answer. Clearly there is a recurrent preoccupation with matters of faith, both in the fiction and in the non-fiction. There is a bit in *Unguarded Hours***

where the hapless young man, a version of my younger self, attends the service of Benediction in a high church and sort-of feels himself in the presence of something or another, sort of. That sort of feeling sort of grows with age, what Wordsworth called something far more deeply interfused, whose dwelling was the light of setting suns etc. I have almost NIL interest in any church any more, but when I look back, I must have had some sort of obsession, to have written about it so much.

Q. That's interesting. As a contrast, I particularly enjoy the comic elements of your work, and wonder if 'comic novelist' is a title you feel is appropriate, or has been in the past? For me, *The Sweets of Pimlico* (1977) and *Kindly Light* as earlier novels are comic to a degree that later work isn't, perhaps.

**A. Good. I am glad you think that. Chaucer (my favourite poet) says at various stages he writes 'betwixte game and earnest' and that is the territory which I inhabit.**

Q. Good! Moving on, which recent or contemporary novelists do you particularly admire?

**A. Most of the contemporary books I read are crime novels. Three authors this year who stand out are Steph Cha, American, whose *Your House Will Pay* is one of the best novels I have ever read. It is a revenge tragedy. Deepa Annappara has also written a superb book in *Djinn on the Purple Line*. I like Nicola Upson's novels about Josephine Tey, such as *An Expert in Murder*, but also her brilliant novel about Stanley Spencer, *Stanley and Elsie*. I also very much admire Daisy Johnson, for her retelling of the Oedipus myth in *Everything Under*. I have admired everything published by Zadie Smith. I admire Andrew Wynn Owen's collection of poetry, *The Multiverse*. I also have bought and admired most of Carol Ann Duffy's work. I admire Will Self's fiction, and his refusal to compromise.**

Q. Many I've not heard of there! I've seen you write with enthusiasm about Barbara Pym, whose work is one of my passions. Can you say any more about how you regard her work?

**A. It is always sad to say this, either about a person, or a book, but I am much less keen than I once was.**

Q. I suppose that's inevitable. We can't retain our love for all writers. Staying with other writers, I've also seen you praise Rose Macaulay and Jane Gardam. Would you like to say any more about their work?

**A. I read *The Towers of Trebizond* every few years. I think it is not only a marvellous novel, but also the type of novel which one hardly ever reads, one which really incorporates autobiography, ideas. I can't say how much I admire it. A recent novel of mine, *Aftershocks*, borrowed a Rose Macaulay plot, *Keeping Up Appearances*, about someone who is a personality. For the first half of each story you think, or you are meant to think, they are two separate people. I think Rose Macaulay is underestimated. Is she studied at Universities? She is much more interesting, really, than Virginia Woolf. Another writer, her contemporary, whom I hugely admire and reread all the time, is Ivy Compton-Burnett. And yes, Jane Gardam is a very fine writer whom I have often read.**



Q. I love *Towers* and want to read it again. I'd recommend all reading this interview try Gardam: she's really underrated, with a terrific sense of place and style, producing poetic images unselfconsciously.

Hitler is a figure that you have written about more than once: in your Man Booker-longlisted novel *Winnie and Wolf* (2007), and *Hitler: A Short Biography* (2011). Within four years you wrote about him as a historian and a novelist. Could you say more about the two approaches and what led you to this?

**A. I befriended Diana Mosley in the last fifteen years of her life. I came to love her very much. Our friendship was deep. She was the most tragic person I ever knew, utterly tragic. Brilliant, beautiful, extremely funny, kind and good. She had encountered Hitler as a young woman. This preoccupation, which in some ways was independent of her love for her second husband, with the Fascist leader, completely destroyed her life. My novel about Frau Wagner, *Winnie and Wolf* was born partly out of my own Wagnerian obsessions, and partly out of a desire to see how it was possible, not merely to admire, but to love Hitler. Having attempted the exercise with, some would say, a little too much success in *Winnie and Wolf*, I felt I ought to write a non-fictional account, a very short book, to remind myself of the appalling truth about him.**



Q. Well Diana Mosley was certainly a controversial figure, and that's food for thought. Have you ever felt drawn to poetry or short story writing?

**A. I am writing some short stories at the moment, funnily enough, all about the same character. I wrote one and a half novels about her and then decided maybe it would be easier to explore what I wanted to say in a series of inter-related short stories. Don't know if they'll ever see the light of day. Poems? Ah! If I could write poetry, I would write nothing else. Poetry is what I read day and night, for hours each day. I have made many many attempts to write poetry and never succeeded. I gather Iris Murdoch was a prolific poet. I wonder what her poems are like. I have read her book of bird verses: rather beautiful.**

Q. Which poets are your favourites at the moment?

**A. During the lockdown I am reading Chaucer in his entirety. Dante I read a lot. Last summer I developed a mania for Ezra Pound's Cantos. I love Rilke and Baudelaire – the latter more and more.**

Q. Thank you for your time and sharing your thoughts, Andrew.

**Nick Turner** is an Associate Lecturer at the University of Salford. His monograph is *Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon* (Routledge, 2010). He is co-chair and co-founder of the *Elizabeth Bowen Society* and co-editor of the *Elizabeth Bowen Review*, co-editor of the journal *Writers in Conversation* and a specialist on the work of *Barbara Pym*. Recent publications include work on *Elizabeth von Arnim* in *Women: A Cultural Review*, an article on Golden Age crime writer *Mary Fitt* for *A Journal of Detective Fiction*, and the edited collection *Interwar Women's Comic Fiction: 'Have Women a Sense of Humour?'* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020) with *Nicola Darwood*.