


Research Chronicler

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(Dr. S.V. Parwar)
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A Single Man

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When *A Single Man* was originally published, it shocked many by its frank, sympathetic, and moving portrayal of a gay man in midlife. George, the protagonist, is adjusting to life on his own after the sudden death of his partner, and determines to persist in the routines of his daily life: the course of *A Single Man* spans twenty-four hours in an ordinary day. An Englishman and a professor living in suburban Southern California, he is an outsider in every way, and his internal reflections and interactions with others reveal a man who loves being alive despite everyday injustices and loneliness. Wry, suddenly manic, constantly funny, surprisingly sad, this novel catches the texture of life itself.

On November 30, 1962, a month after the Cuban missile crisis, George Falconer is a middle-aged English college professor living in Los Angeles. George dreams that he encounters the body of his longtime partner, Jim, at the scene of the car accident that took Jim's life eight months earlier. After awakening, George delivers a voiceover

discussing the pain and depression he has endured since Jim's death and his intention to commit suicide that evening.

George receives a phone call from his dearest friend, Charley, who projects lightheartedness despite her also being miserable. George goes about his day putting his affairs in order and focusing on the beauty of isolated events, believing he is seeing things for the last time. At times, he recalls his sixteen-year-long relationship with Jim.

During the school day George comes into contact with a student, Kenny Potter, who shows interest in George and disregards conventional boundaries of student-professor discussion. George also forms an unexpected connection with a Spanish male prostitute, Carlos. That evening George meets Charley for dinner. Though they initially reminisce and amuse themselves by dancing, Charley's desire for a deeper relationship with George and her failure to understand his relationship with Jim angers George.

George goes to a bar and discovers that Kenny has followed him. They have a round of drinks, go skinny dipping, and then return to George's house and continue drinking. George goes out and wakes up in bed with Kenny asleep in another room. While watching Kenny, George discovers that he had fallen asleep holding George's gun, to keep George from committing suicide. George locks the gun away, burns his suicide notes and a voiceover explains that he has discovered the ability "to feel, rather than think". As he makes peace with his grief, George suffers a heart attack and dies.

Professor Corydon is now in California, driving the freeways with a day-dreaming ardor, attacking the ants with a Flit gun, and mourning among the hibiscus bushes. His name is George and perhaps he must be called the "hero" of Christopher Isherwood's new novel, *A Single Man*. George is chagrined, restless, grieving over the death of his lover and housemate, Jim, as a widower would grieve for his wife. George is an Englishman. He is ironical, middle-aged, and yet boyishly passionate. His is a fairly modest anal disposition, respectable enough, with a finicky, faggoty interest in the looks of things—far

from the corruption and splendor of his type in French fiction. And yet perhaps he is a little corrupt and a little splendid, too. George lives in a hideaway cottage on Camphor Tree Lane. He knows all about the human and decorative insults of suburban California; his tastes are low but his Taste, of course, is reasonably high. He is a perverse mixture of arrogance and shyness, suspicion and indifference. Devastating revolts threaten in daydreams, but in truth he is controlled enough to get by. His neighbors, the Strunk and Garfein couples and their rackets children are the object of George's fears and his satiric vexation.

George teaches at San Tomas State College in Los Angeles. If he were not so "English," so plausibly bred, he might, as he faces his classroom of boys and girls lined up before him like bulldogs, be some S. Levin out of Malamud. His entrance into the classroom "is a subtly contrived, outrageously theatrical effect." When he gives his brittle, hysterical lecture on Huxley's *After Many a Summer*, we see that George is not a real teacher, but one of those American artists or writers, hanging by his fingernails to his academic and sexual freedom, making a diversive display

to hide a natural leaning toward indiscretions.

George is abjectly presented. Indeed his first scene takes place on the john. ("George feels a bowel movement coming on with agreeable urgency and climbs the stairs briskly to the bathroom book in hand.") The book is by Ruskin and from his throne George looks down upon Mrs. Strank "emptying the dust bag of her vacuum cleaner into the trash can." It is not Isherwood's purpose to write a novel "about" homosexuality; rather, he appears to want to present, without "scholarship," or explanation, a homosexual who is, so to speak, just like everyone else, who claims his rights to be allowed to go about his homosexual life—a life curiously, in its little cottage, its domesticity, its social compromises, remote from angularity and singularity. There is a lot of Mr. and Mrs. Strank—or is it Mr. and Mrs. Garfein?—in George and Jim. They too are emptying, day in and day out, the dust bags into the trash can.

Isherwood knew early on he was gay. This theme is present in all his writing. Isherwood attended Repton School in Derbyshire. Later he went to Cambridge University but left without a degree.

A Single Man is a moving portrait of a man struggling to find himself in midlife. The narrative is edgy, controlled and subtle with moments of buried rage. Isherwood paints a beautiful picture with words of George's everyday life on a multicultural, multiethnic campus. Throughout the day (his last day), George tries to stave off his loneliness. He visits an old English friend, he goes to a bar, and he frolics with a student in the ocean.

Everything is about George trying to connect with someone, anyone before it's too late. The book is a study of grief and a portrait of the aftermath of a lost love. George being gay is only an afterthought. George is a man deeply mourning someone he loved. He is a man who has lost his rudder in life.

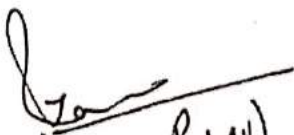
Isherwood is a brilliant novelist. His style of writing gets you into the headspace of George. We find out what makes him tick, how he feels and why he is so sad. Isherwood was a prolific writer. He was a novelist, playwright, screenwriter, biographer, and diarist. He is fun to read, "The creature we are watching will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alternative."

Staring and staring into the mirror, it sees many faces within its face – the face of the child, the boy, the young man, the not-so-young man – all present still, preserved like fossils on superimposed layers, and, like fossils, dead. Their message to this live dying creature is: Look at us – we have died – what is there to be afraid of?”

His excellent book is hysterical and deeply moving. He gives us insight into the human mind. Isherwood is an expert on prose. Not a word is wasted. A lot is crammed into this little book. The 2009 movie stars Colin Firth and Julianne Moore. Firth gives a brilliant performance as George.

Works Cited:

Christopher Isherwood, *A Single Man*, Simon and Schuster, 1964.


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