

It ends with a touching but unsentimental portrait of his encounter with cancer told in typical un-heroic Bennett style through observation of life's and death's minutiae. 'But I don't want my life, or what there remains of it, to be all about cancer, any more than I ever wanted it to be about being gay' (p. 602).

Throughout this enormous book there is a delicately woven sense of the Bennett family's social marginality (not that they were marginalized) as a carefully considered choice: of how they didn't quite manage to be like other families, and this forms the vantage point from which the writer plies his trade. *Untold Stories* is a personal, political, cultural and social archive of Britain in the last half century told with humour and elegance and ground through an autobiographical lens. I highly recommend it.

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THE 'TRUE' AND THE 'GOOD' STILL NOT SORTED

Iris Murdoch as I Knew Her. A.N. Wilson, 2003. London: Arrow Books; ISBN 0090723107, 288 pp., £7.99, paper.

Wilson has produced an interesting biography of a woman he knew – the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. The title consequentially suggests a subjective viewpoint of his perception of her and gives the book a much more personal touch than usual for a biography. As it is in large parts very autobiographical, it actually can be seen as a true amalgamation of autobiography *and* biography.

Wilson admits that he felt 'handicapped' in writing Iris Murdoch's biography because of having 'known' her and her husband, John Bayley, but points out that this is also a vantage point based on a better insight and understanding of her also as a person. It is a question that arises for any biographer, depending on how well he or she knows the subject. However, Wilson unfortunately creates his own quandary, as he describes his dilemma which spins a thread through the whole book, in at times an apologetic manner – 'I had also lost faith in the possibility of writing biography' – when he debates with himself whether or not he should write Iris Murdoch's biography in a diary-style approach.

Wilson's philosophical excuse-like question is whether 'the human personality was altogether more protean, complex and strange than the simple exercise of biography would usually suggest?' And as he had given the answer already at the beginning at the book that 'a biography of a writer [Murdoch] which came close to understanding the mystery of its

subjects would in all likelihood have ceased to be a biography' (p. 7), it seems pointless and tiresome.

Then again, if one reads the book as a truly auto/biographical account in the context of Wilson's personal knowledge and understanding of Iris Murdoch, his own true feelings along with his fondness for her and her works, plus an eagerness to 'restore' the one-sided picture John Bayley portrayed in *Iris* at its film version, then it is an enjoyable book. After stating firmly 'I'm not writing her biog, and that's that', Wilson loses himself in doubts and exposes his mixed feelings:

My purpose in the book is not to 'expose' every detail of IM's private life, as a Communist, a lover, a wife or a friend. It is, rather, to see whether it is possible to discover from the life those elements of her revealed personality that gave birth to the works. As soon as I began to compare things which she had told me about herself with the facts as they unfolded, I became aware of the disparity between appearance and reality.

(p. 81)

Wilson comments, 'she protected herself by shameless and habitual social lying . . . IM was happy in Murdochland, and not always at home in the world of the real'. She for example lied to him about her still existing relatives in Ireland. All this may explain his difficulty in writing her biography and also could be seen as a reason why she would have liked Wilson to compose her 'official' biography, because his discretion would have been the better part of valour. Wilson recalls that she always resented the notion of becoming the subject of a biography: 'She bitterly resented the idea that it should be biographical, and says that it must concentrate entirely on her "ideas".' Her character Bradley Pearson in *The Black Prince* contemplates that 'life is unlike art . . . characters in art can have unassailable dignity, whereas characters in life have none'. In fact, Wilson does open the door to Iris Murdoch and does shine a light on what she was about, as mirrored in the character of Bradley Pearson: 'If you write, write from the heart, yet carefully, objective.' However, the light is partial and he is most certainly not objective in his account of her and his relationship with her and her husband. Was the task he took on impossible? Certainly, Murdoch would not give him enough autobiographical information or substance to work with and was 'cagey' with private information about herself.

As Wilson keeps debating whether he should or should not write/have written the biography: 'It is what one looks for and seldom ever gets from a literary biography' – he throws in a one-liner: 'thinking how much, much more I should prefer having an affair with IM to writing her biography. *Dammit, why not?*' What does this say about his relationship and his true feelings for her? Has Wilson used the opportunity to write Iris Murdoch's biography just as a 'storyline', as the egomaniac in search of himself in her

novels? Is it part of the recognition he claims all writers are in search of?

Wilson's book is an entertaining mix of anecdotes, stories, diary entries, use of tape recordings, philosophical discourse, facts and fiction, descriptions of surroundings and people he or she knew. He makes it clear that he wishes to 'restore' Iris Murdoch's true and brilliant personality as a great novelist and philosopher, which he feels has been damaged in recent years by her husbands publications, the film or Conradi's work. Consequently, Wilson's biography of Iris Murdoch can be seen in the light of Scott's (1998: 44) conclusion about the role and responsibility of the biographer:

in the depiction of the 'life' ... do not take away the responsibility of the author for producing an interpretation. It follows that this account is one of many that could have been made. Indeed, the closure occasioned by the researcher necessarily treats the evidence as fixed and reliable and glosses over ambivalence and uncertainty.

Wilson's search for and debate on the nature of 'the truth' and 'the good' throughout the book, can possibly be seen in parallel with Iris Murdoch's lifelong search for answers about religion, politics, philosophy and human relationships. The reader can certainly feel the 'goodness' of Iris Murdoch, which Wilson shows by matching her philosophical work with her novels and with much of her personality.

In conclusion, one is inclined to agree with Wilson that 'the best picture of Iris Murdoch is actually to be found in the novels of Iris Murdoch. She certainly felt this. She was otherwise a more than usually secretive person'.

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NEVER FELT LONESOME

The value of solitude: the ethics and spirituality of aloneness in autobiography. John D. Barbour, 2004. Virginia: University of Virginia Press; ISBN 0813922887, 240 pp., £36.49.

We often choose to be alone yet feel lonely against our will and it is this degree of volition that determines our reaction to solitude. Barbour relates solitude to autobiography as a necessary condition for the examination of conscience and consciousness. It is a spiritual rather than emotional or social distance. The book 'deals primarily with the spiritual experiences of Christians who interpret solitude using the classic symbols and beliefs of their faith tradition' (p. 4). For religious hermits, 'Asceticism replaced martyrdom