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Colin Wilson's autobiography

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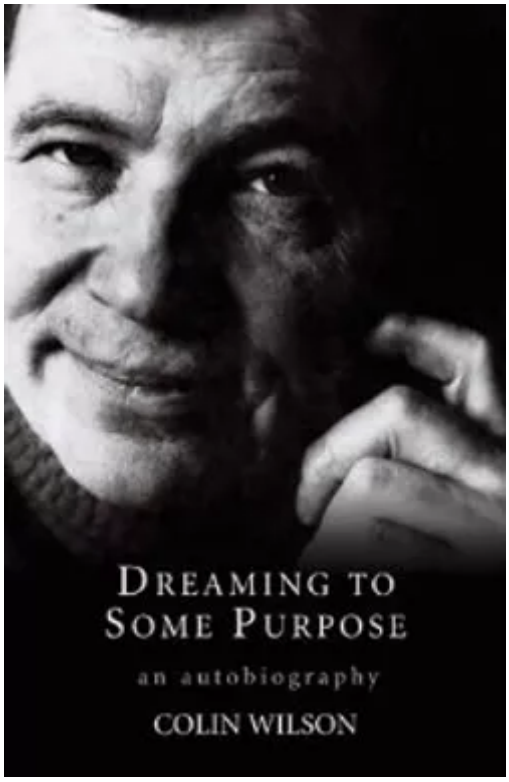
The autobiogaphy: Dreaming to Some Purpose



From The Independent, June 6, 2004

Since his dazzling arrival on the literary scene in the 1950s, the author Colin Wilson has exhibited unshakeable self-belief and enviable vivacity. Gary Lachman enjoys an autobiography that's more candid and revealing than most

At 16, Colin Wilson decided to commit suicide. After he dropped out of school, a series of meaningless jobs led him to a state of unrelieved gloom, and the unpromising insight that it was “simply not logical to go on living like this”. Paradoxically, the thought of suicide made him feel “in charge of myself and my destiny”. Entering his chemistry class during a brief return to school, he removed the stopper on a bottle of hydrocyanic acid - capable of killing him in seconds - and was about to take a swig when something happened. Suddenly, Wilson had become two people: the idiotic teenager about to throw away his life, and a somewhat wiser individual, irritated at his foolish other self. Wilson realised that what he craved was more life, not less. That insight into the “immense richness of reality” occasioned by a “peak experience” became the focus of his subsequent career. Now, at 73, the morbid 16-year-old has published his autobiography. Dreaming to Some Purpose is a readable, entertaining and candid review of Wilson's life and work. It goes a long way to justifying his early decision to put the stopper back in the bottle.

Wilson is best known for the rags-to-riches story surrounding his first book. On 28 May 1956, the 24-year-old Wilson - recently living in a sleeping bag on Hampstead Heath - woke to find himself famous. The Outsider, a study in alienation and extreme mental states - written in the old Reading Room of the British Museum - had been published to universal acclaim, and Wilson was hailed as Britain's home-grown existentialist. John Osborne’s Look Back in Anger had opened the same week, and the two, who had nothing in common, found themselves at the head of a publicity storm surrounding “the Angry Young Men”. Before The Outsider, his career had been a dizzying attempt to

avoid the mediocrity of modern life. Reading and writing, and years of keeping journals produced the self-assurance and erudition that impressed early reviewers like Philip Toynbee and Cyril Connolly. They also provided an outlet for Wilson's growing conviction that he was destined to be an important writer.

Reading of Wilson's early years, we get an idea of the beating that self-belief took. After a stint in the RAF, from which he escaped by pretending to be gay, Wilson moved from job to job and room to room in Leicester and London, with a few months wandering in France in between, where he worked briefly selling subscriptions to the Paris Review. The dreary work, the pokey rooms and hellish landladies ("Becoming a landlady," he remarks, "is the surest way to forfeit your immortal soul") and becoming an unexpected father and husband at 20 punched several holes in Wilson's romanticism. One means of restoring some balance was meditation, a practice he picked up after reading the Bhagavad Gita. Another was sex.

Wilson is more than candid about the importance of sex in his life. There's a clinical desire to be objective, which, if nothing else, provides a good excuse for some steamy stories. Although he's now convinced that sex is a pleasant but ultimately insubstantial "illusion", early works like the novel Ritual in the Dark and the "phenomenological study" Origins of the Sexual Impulse, as well as several others, link the erotic to both the mystical and criminal elements in the psyche. Like most teenage boys, Wilson was obsessed with sex, and at an early age he developed the underwear fetish he openly admits to - a taste most likely acquired as a small boy, when he would put on his mother's knickers. Wilson's account of his sexual experiences around Soho in the 1950s - a milieu he soon wearied of - suggests that his subsequent fame would have provided many

more, were it not for the restraint he exhibited because of his second wife. Even still, his discipline didn't deter a neurotic, hysterical fan who threatened suicide if her advances were rejected. At one point enduring her attentions while driving, Wilson noted that being fellated in transit was "an oddly nondescript sensation".

Wilson is a charming raconteur, and the book's best moments are when he recounts his meetings with the famous. From being "a bum and a drifter... living outdoors to avoid paying my [first] wife maintenance", Wilson found himself among the cultural high rollers. T S Eliot, W H Auden, Angus Wilson, Kingsley Amis, Elias Canetti, Anthony Burgess, Albert Camus, Christopher Logue, Robert Graves, Iris Murdoch all have cameos, as well as some less literary figures like Charles Laughton, Lawrence Olivier and Marilyn Monroe. Wilson exchanges opinions on Truman Capote with Norman Mailer, gets into a fist fight with Kenneth Tynan, wonders if Graham Greene is a paedophile, recounts some of Kenneth Rexroth's raunchy stories, and reminisces on the career of the novelist John Braine. During a tenure in California, Wilson spent an afternoon with Christopher Isherwood, Aldous Huxley and Henry Miller. One meeting that didn't happen was with Jack Kerouac, who on two occasions got too drunk to show up.

By the late 1960s Wilson's career had been in eclipse for a decade, a product of the backlash against the early acclaim. By 1971 he found himself on the bestseller list again with a massive tome on the paranormal, The Occult. Since then, Wilson has been, in his own words, a kind of "writing machine", obsessively working from his home in Cornwall, producing book after book on disparate but related topics: crime, serial killers, the paranormal, psychology, sex, UFOs, ancient civilisations,

biographies (of Wilhelm Reich, Aleister Crowley, Rudolf Steiner and G I Gurdjieff), as well as many novels. Much of the second half of the book is about the nuts and bolts of being a professional writer and workaholic. His industriousness took its toll, and for a time Wilson suffered unnerving panic attacks that left him unsure of his own reality, and which he only slowly learned to overcome.

Wilson isn't afraid of holding unfashionable views. Poltergeist phenomena are most likely caused by spirits. The earth was probably visited by extraterrestrials in the ancient past. Civilisation more than likely started much earlier than archaeologists believe. There's sufficient evidence for some form of life after death. Wilson remarks on these with a "take it or leave it" brevity, and we may not agree with him, but an open-minded reader recognises that he didn't arrive at these views easily, and that they are not essential to his basic insight into the "curious power of the mind that we hardly understand".

In person warm, cheerful, generous and upbeat, Wilson admits that "being alive is grimly hard work". Dreaming to Some Purpose is a good argument that the reward is worth the effort.

This article, written by Geoff Ward, appeared in the Western Daily Press (Bristol) on June 10, 2004, the official publication date of Dreaming to Some Purpose.

The outsider who won't look back in anger

Soon after the publication of his famous first book The Outsider in 1956, Colin Wilson was approached by the Daily Express to contribute to a series called "Angry Young Men" and - together with playwright John Osborne - explain just what it was they were angry about.

But, in his immensely entertaining autobiography, Dreaming To Some Purpose, published today, Colin says: “I wasn't in the least angry, except about my years of struggle, and now that I was recognised, even this hardly applied. “But the Express was paying well, so I agreed to write for them - and, of course, helped to establish the ‘angry young man’ myth. I had no idea how much I would come to hate this label.

“I was a hermit by nature, a recluse. Being the author of a best-seller was certainly better than working in a factory. But I felt just as uncomfortable, just as alienated. Instead of becoming more fulfilled, my life had turned into a kind of gossip column.” Then an interview appeared in a new magazine called Books And Art, under the headline “Colin Wilson talks about: my genius”. Colin admits: “This did me no good - and the silly interview added to the increasing groundswell of irritation that was now being directed at the ‘angry young men’.”

Ironically, having helped to “establish the myth”, Colin found that within a few weeks of The Outsider and Look Back In Anger- the play opened three weeks before the book came out - most of the press stories about him and Osborne were either satirical or hostile. Others who suffered the “angry young man” label included Kingsley Amis, John Braine and Philip Larkin - even, incongruously, Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing.

These young writers had burst into a world of skiffle groups, the Suez crisis, teddy boys and coffee bars, and were a mismatching bunch; some were frequently at loggerheads, others never even met each other.

As a young man from a working class background in Leicester who, to save meagre funds, had slept rough on Hampstead Heath while researching his first novel at the British Library, Colin suddenly found himself in the heady atmosphere

of the most celebrated literary and artistic cliques of the time. Of that famous group of “angries”, only Colin and Doris, now 85, survive. But today, at 72, Colin is far from an “angry old man”.

He remains as intellectually challenging and purposeful as ever, optimistic, and certain that his works are gaining ever greater recognition. With 120 books to his name, he is one of Britain’s most prolific and controversial writers but, still planning new projects, he is not resting on his laurels.

The Outsider - a groundbreaking study of alienated genius, published when Colin was only 24 - propelled him to literary stardom but the critical backlash, and the associated media frenzy, led him to move from London to Gorran Haven in Cornwall, where he and his wife Joy still live today.

He defied the critics by continuing to be a best-selling author, his works embracing philosophy and criticism, biography and criminology, studies of the occult and the paranormal, investigations into UFOs, ancient civilisations and the Atlantis legend, and 20 novels including the Spider World series.

The Outsider went on to be translated into 20 languages and has proved to be an enduring landmark on the 20th century literary landscape, its latest edition appearing as recently as 2001. It is the cornerstone of Colin's practical, intuitive, philosophy for life, his “new existentialism”, which he has expounded in various books.

However, over the decades, he got used to the idea of remaining a literary “outsider”, and thought that if there was ever going to be a general understanding of his work it would probably be after his death. “I regard my work as a kind of existential jigsaw puzzle in which apparently disparate parts lock together to make a whole,” he once remarked.

A central strand of Colin’s autobiography is an appraisal of

issues raised in The Outsider by means of his own life story, about which he is remarkably candid, and the title is significant. “When I started thinking about a title I realised that I’d already used the ideal one for another book, The Strength to Dream (1962). That’s what I wanted to get at. George Bernard Shaw said: ‘Every dream can become a reality in the womb of time for those who have the strength to dream’. It’s that business of actually being able to dream purposefully, so to speak. Here is the basis, I suppose, of my optimism.

When The Outsider came out and it was a huge overnight success, Colin wasn’t at all surprised. “I'd always known it would happen,” he said. “But what I didn’t expect, of course, was the terrific backswing after it, the tremendous backlash, and the attacks on me which I found pretty hard going. I’d produce some book which I knew to be brilliant and I’d get lousy reviews.

“In America I was having an effect on college audiences a bit like an intellectual Elvis Presley. I’d get these groupies following me around. I thought, how was it possible that someone as brilliant as I am never seems to get anywhere, and I’m always broke? It’s only recently that I’ve realised the answer to that question. What I had to do was to push on because if I had become as successful as I thought I should have been it would have been terribly bad for me.

“Having put all this down in the autobiography, I feel in a way that it is the consequence of what I’ve been doing all my life. It is my life’s work. It is, in a way, my classic book, it’s what I was put in the world to write. There are still a lot of other things I want to write, but that’s our business as writers, we’re supposed to carry on, we’re not supposed to say ‘OK, I’ve done what I came into the world to write, now I can relax’.”

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WHAT was the origin of the term “angry young man”, used to describe that group of “dissenting” novelists and poets who came to prominence in the mid-1950s?

* The autobiography of the Irish writer Leslie Paul, a communist turned Christian apologist, was published in 1951 under the title Angry Young Man.

* George Fearson, PR man at the Royal Court Theatre, labelled John Osborne an “angry young man” a few weeks before the premiere of Look Back In Anger.

* Shortly after the advent of Look Back In Anger and The Outsider in May 1956, an article by J B Priestley in the New Statesman about Osborne and Wilson was headlined “Angry Young Men”.

* Then The Times and Daily Express also used the phrase to describe the pair. In 1958, Kenneth Allsop’s book The Angry Decade, examining the literature of the period, was published.

From the Sunday Times, June 20, 2004

Still an angry man, always an Outsider

Interview: Jasper Gerard meets Colin Wilson

He's still looking back in anger. Colin Wilson was, with John Osborne, the original angry young man whose fame nudged Beckhamesque levels. Now, with floppy hat, silk scarf and cheery smile, the slight figure greeting me at the Cornish railway station looks less angry young man than amiable old buffer. It is

hard to imagine why this writer was seen as such a threat to civilisation that his future father-in-law tried to horsewhip him and Kingsley Amis tried to murder him. But if anyone assumes he is now harmless, wait for his next book: a history of the angry young men. They were the turks who rebelled against the mannered drawing-room coterie of Noël Coward and injected some kitchen sink realism into 1950s culture.

Amis, Osborne et al are dead but Wilson still wants to bury some reputations. For Wilson, although he is too charming to admit it, is bitter. While the other angries are remembered, Wilson's sulking is largely forgotten: yet when he raged to national attention aged 24 in 1956 with his book The Outsider, he was lauded for making the greatest literary debut since Lord Byron. Wherever this self-styled genius went, a press pack followed. It is inconceivable that a writer could now acquire similar celebrity. Alas, this proved not just a dazzling beginning but also a premature end to his time as a top rank novelist. He has published more than 100 books since, but most have been savaged or ignored.

His new autobiography, Dreaming to Some Purpose, is a touching but - yes – angry study of failure. Delightfully, he has not mellowed. He tells me that his son was in a band called Roderick and the Wankers. "He's married to a judge now," he smiles, revelling in this anti-Establishment tease. Numerous folk who crop up in conversation are "f******", especially Humphrey Carpenter, whose recent biography The Angry Young Men so infuriates Wilson that he feels moved to write his own. He almost froths at the mouth as he recalls Carpenter coming to visit him. He cooked him venison and opened a 1936 bottle of something expensive, only for Carpenter to dismiss him in print. It is clear that history does need to be rewritten, mainly to show that it was

only in later life - as reputations began to dive - that most of them grew really angry: "I wasn't in the least angry, except about my years of struggle. I didn't have any social concerns then, unlike now." Well, he did, but they were more cocktail party than Communist party. (Like Amis, Wilson lost faith with socialism to become a Conservative. He was a devotee of Margaret Thatcher and now says Tony Blair is "such a good Conservative".)

Eliot, Auden, Isherwood, even Marilyn Monroe, became acquaintances as literary London swooned. One moment he was an impoverished young man living as a tramp on Hampstead Heath; the next he was standing at the urinals of the Athenaeum with Aldous Huxley. "I never thought I'd be having a pee at the side of Aldous Huxley," Wilson told the great author. Huxley replied: "Yes, that's what I thought when I was standing beside George V."

With endless roistering and rogering, the angry young men were having a ball. "I'm busily contacting people such as Christopher Logue and John Osborne through a medium - Alan Sillitoe," he says, eyes twinkling, lips smiling, voice lush and theatrical. "I've got letters here saying they would be delighted to be in the book, but they don't feel they were angry young men." The exception, it seems, was Amis. "Kingsley, like John Osborne, put on a front of being bold and bouncy. He was a nervous, shy sort, terrified of the dark. Even though I tried very hard and thought we were friends, he always had this terrific resentment against me, so he actually tried to push me off this flat roof overlooking London once at Anthony Blond's." Was he serious? "Perfectly serious. He was drunk and said, 'Look, there's that bugger Wilson, I'm going to push him off', and John Wain (another angry young man) grabbed him. I was totally

unaware this was going on behind me. He would probably have broken my neck because it was quite high."

But what would have driven Amis to it? "He made his reputation with Lucky Jim just as a humorist. He was very resentful of the kind of success that had to do with being taken seriously as a philosopher. He was delighted when Freddie (A J, the philosopher) Ayer did this famous review comparing me to a dancing dog." The animosity grew when, Wilson believes, Amis had him blackballed from the Garrick Club after the actor Tony Britton proposed him. Wilson has carried his feud into the next generation, describing the incomprehensibility of Amis Jr's latest novel.

He looks back on Osborne in more amiable mood. "John and I got on very well," he says. "I even proposed to him that we set up an Angry Young Man coffee bar. But I can see that Look Back in Anger was mostly self-pity, so I wasn't surprised when I was told that he died an alcoholic. "His plays got worse and worse reviews till the last one was taken off. John justified himself by saying, 'Oh well, they hate me because I hate them'. In fact they were mostly terribly bad plays." Wain was also a whiner – for being considered inferior to Amis.

If this all seems absurdly petty, Wilson at least was trying to promote a serious idea: optimism. His life's work has been to counter Yeats's "tragic generation". "They all had this strange glimpse of what Yeats described as a million lips searching for the feeling of something else, other than our down-to-earth solid world," he says. They didn't find it, so "the number of suicides and alcoholics among them was enormous. "GK Chesterton wrote a book called Man Alive about a philosopher who goes round pointing guns at the heads of nihilists saying, 'Okay, shall

I blow your brains out?' and being deeply satisfied when they scream 'No, no'."

The pessimist movement died, Wilson believes, with Graham Greene playing Russian roulette: "The clue to me is that in that state of facing possible death he suddenly wanted to live. That wasn't just artificial optimism; it is the real thing. That is the basis of my work. Here I was stuck among all these contemporaries like William Golding (Lord of the Flies) assuring us that when school kids are left on an island they revert to the savage state or Samuel Beckett declaring it all meaningless. I hated this. I would have liked to kick them all in the balls."

Instead of staring gloomily into a glass like his contemporaries, Wilson tells us we should seek out "peak experiences". For him this often meant sex. In his autobiography he describes random encounters (even an embarrassing urge to peek at the knickers of female students during lectures). He recalls literary groupies coming down to Cornwall to pay homage by diving into his flies. At this his wife Joy potters into the charmingly shambolic sitting room of their seaside bungalow and asks, "More biscuits with your tea?" seemingly unfazed. But then, she went into the relationship with her eyes open. When her father read Wilson's day book - full of fruity, sexual descriptions - he tried to drag Joy home and threatened Wilson with a horsewhip. The police were called, the press arrived and the couple escaped, pursued by hacks. Wilson was already married with a son. Unlike most of his rivals, he was genuinely working class, the son of a bootmaker. When he was thrown out of the army after claiming that he was gay - he was anything but - Wilson took a series of casual jobs in factories as he struggled through poverty to write.

He has been hampered by a youthful boast that he was a

genius. Now, while not entirely disowning the notion, he insists that he needed self-confidence as he had nothing else going for him: a boy who had left school at 16 and who thought rather too much about suicide. His salvation was the reading room of the British Museum, where he defrosted after a night on the heath and wrote The Outsider. "I had to struggle so hard working in offices and factories there wasn't really room for much except the thought: am I any good or not? The great terror is that suddenly you find you are no good. Even after The Outsider I used to wake up dreaming that I was back in a factory." Still, "the great writers" as opposed to merely good writers "have all had to dig their carts out of the mud".

Talking of mud, what was it like living on Hampstead Heath? "The wind in my face was lovely and when I did go back inside to live I found it very hard to sleep. But towards the end I was getting very depressed, carrying around this great sack of books." But nothing quite depressed him like the years of being shunned by the literary Establishment. He thought about lecturing in America full-time, but always he returned to Cornwall and his collection of 30,000 books. If he accuses Osborne of having an excuse for failure, Wilson has a good line in blame, too: our refusal to take men of ideas seriously. "In France they are much more interested. Can you imagine a thousand people queueing up here as they did in Paris to attend a Sartre lecture on what is existentialism? The English just watch football."

He has a point: the novels of Camus, who also struck the pose of an outsider in France, are still praised today. But Wilson, with a second and expanding family to support, damaged his reputation by churning out a lot of hack books on questionable subjects: UFOs, the paranormal, he even wrote the introduction to the memoirs of Ian Brady, the Moors murderer. In Dreaming

to Some Purpose he describes dinner with a Japanese man who had shot, raped and then eaten a young German woman. Wilson was rather charmed. Perhaps it is this lack of discernment that stops others taking him quite as seriously as he takes himself. Still, I hope his latest book does gain him some success. For nobody can it be longer overdue. Perhaps then he will be able to look forward in optimism rather than just write about it angrily.

From Scotland on Sunday June 20, 2004

Wilson looks back without anger at the fading of his angry man star

by Andrew Crumey

THIS is the autobiography of a literary superstar. In 1956, at the age of 24, Colin Wilson published his first book, The Outsider. A series of essays on outsider figures in art and literature, it did not have the obvious makings of a bestseller - but that is what it instantly became. Critics were soon hailing Wilson as Britain’s answer to Jean-Paul Sartre.

John Osborne’s play Look Back in Anger was premiered at the same time, and Wilson became pigeonholed with Osborne as an ‘angry young man’. His fame was such that when Groucho Marx’s UK publisher asked the comedian who should receive copies of his memoirs, Groucho said, "Winston Churchill, Somerset Maugham and Colin Wilson".

As Wilson admits, all of this lasted roughly six months. He was caught up in a domestic scandal that the popular press lapped up (the Express cartoonist Osbert Lancaster depicted the parents of Wilson’s lover arriving to beat him with a horsewhip),

and the critics grew weary of the hype they themselves had encouraged. Having started at the top, the only way was down. His second book was panned, and his later ones were increasingly ignored.

This autobiography is, by my reckoning, his 70th book, Wilson having doggedly published one or two every year since his debut.

An early interest in sexual deviancy and violent crime has given way to works on Atlantis and flying saucers, by way of pot-boiling thrillers and a science fiction novel that was filmed by Hollywood as Lifeforce, which flopped. Even as he reaches the final lines of this memoir, Wilson describes the arrival in the post of the page proofs of yet another book.

How did it feel to be Britain's greatest writer one moment, and a has-been the next? Frustratingly, Dreaming To Some Purpose fails to shed much light on the matter, for the simple reason that Wilson emerges from it as someone blessed both with eternal optimism and with an unshakeable faith in his own genius. The Outsider merely marked a time when the critics appreciated his true worth.

Lucky him - though the absence of self doubt, or of any periods in rehab that most other ex-celebs would consider compulsory, makes for a frankly duller read than one would wish. Instead, Wilson expounds his psychological theories - involving 'Faculty X' and a hierarchy of mental states including "level four and a half", all of which he uses to show that we can do anything if only we try hard enough.

Yet in amongst all this there is what makes this book really worth reading - his memories of the many literary figures he met. Iris Murdoch, Robert Graves, WH Auden, Albert Camus - they all come and go as Wilson tours the literary circuit of the 1950s

and 60s. He meets the man who inspired Noel Coward's 'Mad Dogs and Englishmen', and finds himself at a party, telling an anecdote about Sonia Orwell to an unknown woman who turns out to be Sonia Orwell.

Some of the writers are vividly portrayed - the bluff John Braine, for example; or Anthony Burgess, a "pompous know-all". Most flit past in a pleasant whirl - which is perhaps how it seemed to Wilson at the time.

Andrew Crumey is Scotland on Sunday's literary editor

From The Sunday Times, June 20, 2004. Review by Humphrey Carpenter.

His Dark Material

Now let's be clear about it. I'm not the most unbiased person in the world when it comes to reviewing this book. Colin Wilson and I are feuding, albeit in slow motion. He took against my portrait of him in my book on the Angry Young Men (of whom he is the last surviving important specimen), and he dwells on this in a recent newspaper interview: "[Wilson] periodically throws out the word 'f****r ' with extraordinary venom," writes the interviewer. "The f****r in question was Humphrey Carpenter, who had been to interview him and then betrayed him: 'We got on terribly well, I thought [says Wilson], though I did notice that Humphrey fell asleep when I was explaining what I meant by non-pessimistic existentialism'."

True, I did; but my arrival at Wilson's Cornish home had been followed by a brisk walk, then a memorable supper (local oysters and smoked eel), washed down with superb wines. My snores were not intended as a comment on the Wilsonian Weltanschauung. Now here is his autobiography, and I feel I

have been given a second chance. Stay awake at the back there Carpenter, or this time it's the headmaster's study.

Well, I'll do my best, sir, and the autobiography is certainly a good read - I galloped through it without the slightest droop of an eyelid. But I can't expect Wilson and his publisher to be content with that. ("It didn't send me to sleep" - Humphrey Carpenter, The Sunday Times.) They want me to give a serious assessment of Wilson's philosophical ideas. Well, let me try.

A self-educated working-class lad from Leicester, Wilson came to London just as the Angry Young Men craze was hotting up, and immediately made his name with The Outsider (1956), which gave thousands of readers their first taste of such authors as Rilke and Sartre. The first of Wilson's vast number of books, it is more an anthology than an argument, but Wilson makes the case for existentialism without the pessimism that usually accompanies it.

In this autobiography, Wilson takes that further, and argues the case for a life built around "peak experiences", moments of intense joy that illuminate the world. He gives as an example of this the occasion, many years ago, when his toddler Sally went missing in the middle of an unfamiliar town, and his overwhelming relief and happiness when she was found. Fair enough - any parent will recognise that experience - but how do we build a life-philosophy out of it?

Wilson has partly taken his "peak experience" idea from the writings of the American psychologist Abraham Maslow, and he meets Maslow during the course of the autobiography. Interestingly, we have Maslow's reactions to Wilson. In his journal, he describes Wilson as not interested in the experience of emotion, affection, or visual and aesthetic beauty. Wilson reports this quite cheerfully; but anyone familiar with Wilson's life

and work may feel that this analysis is devastatingly accurate. To this we add the fact that a considerable number of Wilson's books are about murder, serial killers and suchlike; at which point one remembers that the ever-perceptive Kingsley Amis claimed to be frightened of Wilson and once (according to Wilson's autobiography) came near to pushing him off a roof.

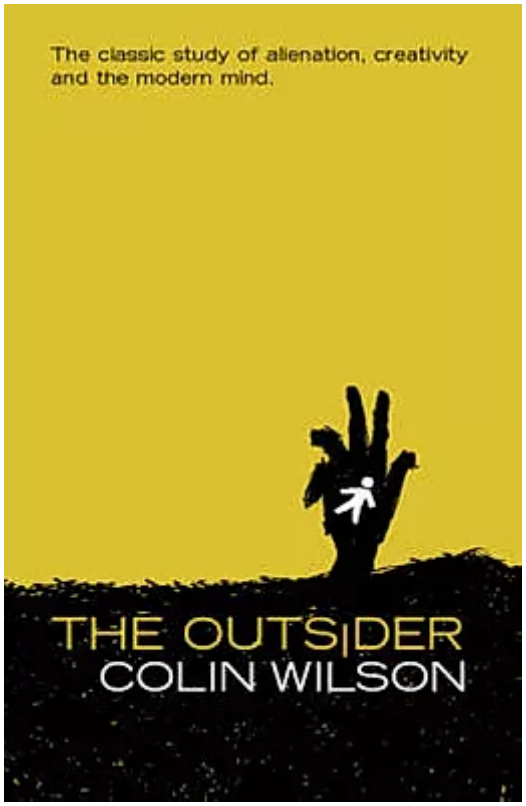
If dark materials lurk within Wilson, they remain mostly hidden. The personality that displays itself throughout this book is less of a Maslow than an Adrian Mole. "I was becoming something of a character in Leicester, at least among the young," Wilson writes of his early days (you may recall that Mole comes from Leicester, too). "It was time I had something published."

This naivety leads him, in later life, to introduce himself to Graham Greene and W H Auden, blithely unaware that he is not their equal - although on a purely journalistic level he writes about them well.

He will be furious when he reads that last sentence. He regards himself (and makes no secret of it) as one of the great figures in the history of literature, whose importance will eventually be recognised. Hence his irritation at creatures like me snapping at his heels. Perhaps he would prefer me to have stayed asleep after all.

Colin and Joy Wilson in 2002.

Photo by Kathy Toohey



Colin Wilson in Australia in 1993.

Photo: Catriona Sparks