

Transcription

University of Minnesota Press

Episode 2: *Christopher Isherwood in Transit: A 21st-Century Perspective*

<https://soundcloud.com/user-760891605/isherwood-in-transit>

**Host introduction:** [\*Isherwood in Transit\*](#) is a collection of essays that considers Christopher Isherwood as a transnational writer whose identity politics and beliefs were constantly transformed by global connections arising from journeys to Germany, Japan, China and Argentina; his migration to the United States; and his conversion to Vedanta Hinduism in the 1940s. We're here today to talk about Isherwood's reception and history of publication in the US, as well as what we mean by the title *Isherwood in Transit*, which is open to interpretation and refers to the writer's movement on a personal and spiritual level as much as geographic. Here we have book editors Jim Berg and Chris Freeman, who have co-edited several volumes on Isherwood, including [\*The Isherwood Century\*](#) and [\*The American Isherwood\*](#). [Berg is associate dean of faculty at the Borough of Manhattan Community College in New York City.](#) [Freeman is professor of English and gender studies at the University of Southern California.](#) They are joined by [University of Minnesota press director Doug Armato.](#) This conversation was recorded in June 2020.

**Jim Berg:** This is Jim Berg. Here's a quick bit of background on Christopher Isherwood. He was born in 1904 in England. His best-known British work is [\*Goodbye to Berlin\*](#) from 1938, which was published with [\*Mr. Norris Changes Trains\*](#) in the United States as [\*The Berlin Stories\*](#) featuring [Sally Bowles](#). And that was turned into the musical [\*Cabaret\*](#). Isherwood moved to the United States with his friend, the poet [W.H. Auden](#), in 1939 and settled in California. He became a devotee of [Swami Prabhavananda](#) and was a practicing Vedantist for the rest of his life. He died in 1986 in California, where he had lived for many years with his partner, [Don Bachardy](#). His best-known American works include [\*A Single Man\*](#), from 1964 and [\*Christopher and His Kind\*](#), his memoir. Those two works together pretty much made him into a gay icon late in life.

**Chris Freeman:** And this is Chris Freeman. I'm happy to be here today talking about Christopher Isherwood, especially our new book, *Isherwood In Transit*. This is the fourth collaboration that Jim and I have done on Isherwood — his legacy, his importance to literature and to culture. We try always when we work together on Isherwood to assemble a group of scholars and writers who will appeal to a broad reading base because Isherwood has a lot of fans because of *Cabaret*. But we always think about ways of using Isherwood's accessibility as a writer to reach out to readers who might come to him through some of our work. This book actually started as a conference at [The Huntington](#) in Pasadena. The Huntington is a museum and a library and an archive, and they house the Isherwood archive; and it's one of the best literary archives, really, in the world. Isherwood was very meticulous and worked very hard to keep records of everything that he did. And we'll be talking more about that in the next half hour or so.

**JB:** We want to make sure that we thank the Huntington, [The Christopher Isherwood Foundation](#) and the University of Minnesota Press for cooperating and helping to support the publication of *Isherwood in Transit*. I would like to also welcome [Doug Armato, the director of the University of Minnesota Press](#), to this conversation. Doug and I met in Minneapolis around 2000 when I was working on what would become a book, *Isherwood on Writing*, which is based on transcripts of talks Isherwood gave about his writing career at universities in California in the 1960s. The transcripts, the recordings and all of that, the notes for all of those lectures are in those archives at the Huntington. Doug and the press acquired rights to many of Isherwood's works and supported scholarship on Isherwood since about 1999. We asked him to present a publisher's point of view at the 2015 conference at the Huntington. Doug, tell us more about your efforts to bring Isherwood's work back into print at that time and to promote scholarship on Isherwood.

**Doug Armato:** I think at that point, I sort of made the joke when I was starting out that presentation that an alternate title for it would be *Mr. Isherwood Changes Publishers*, because that's what happens a lot even with authors as well-established and famous as Isherwood. And it's a sort of constant dilemma — what is in print and what isn't in print, and Isherwood himself complained passionately that when *Cabaret* came out for a good amount of time, still almost all of his books were out of print, even as people were clamoring for them. He literally said he got fan letters every day saying, “Why can't I find your other books?” And so, this is a dilemma that a lot of authors go through, and as a scholarly publisher, one thing that we do is we listen for things that scholars tell us or [is] just newly significant or it has significance again. And so, I think it was at that moment when meeting Chris, [we] began to see that what we were doing wasn't just returning some Isherwood work to print, but also having a chance to publish scholarship on Isherwood and really bring him back into both scholarly and sort of popular prominence. The thing that happened actually to kick off the whole issue was literally just on noticing that Isherwood's books had largely disappeared from the marketplace. You would go into bookstores, and you'd see *Goodbye to Berlin*, you'd see *The Berlin Stories*, but you wouldn't see anything else. And I'd read all of the Isherwood books when they'd been reissued at an earlier period not long after the movie *Cabaret* became such a hit. And it was a real revelation just to follow Isherwood's career and also his thoughts as he moved from England to America and then as his concerns became more global. And so, when we did get to the point of this most recent collaboration, *Isherwood In Transit*, it really rang well with me because he's an author whose concerns evolved dramatically. Even this, they had a certain continuity.

**CF:** So, it seems to us, we also saw that same opportunity with Isherwood kind of at the same time, Doug, that you guys were having that recognition in the late '90s. In the mid-to-late '90s, Jim and I were both in Ph.D. programs, and there was a lot of work being done on queer theory. It was the brand new thing. There was a book on [\[E.M.\] Forster](#). There was a book on [\[Oscar\] Wilde](#). There was a book on [\[Truman\] Capote](#). There was nothing happening on Isherwood. And Isherwood seemed

important, but nobody seemed to be paying attention. He was kind of under the radar, and that's when the first volume of his diaries was being prepared and published by [Kate Bucknell](#). I think that was published in 1996-97, and that's when we were really also kind of simultaneously recognizing that niche, but also that kind of opportunity. And the books that Minnesota has published, the scholarly books, [Lisa Colletta's edition of the letters between Kathleen and Christopher](#), Christopher's mother and himself. And then [Jaimie Harker, \*Middlebrow Queer\*](#). Both of those are tremendously useful in terms of what we learn about Isherwood. And then we later did *The American Isherwood* with you guys in 2015. And we still have Colletta and Harker in the new book, and it's part of the tradition that we have of cultivating this kind of scholarly community around what we're doing.

**DA:** Let me just talk a little bit more about, you know, how important it is — scholars often think of themselves and people think of scholars as operating in a separate realm, as if they're not part of the way that culture moves. But scholars rediscover work all the time. Sometimes, people don't believe that there was a period of well over half a century when no one read [Herman Melville](#) at all. And all of his works were out of print. And it was actually scholars coming together shortly after World War II in the '50s who saw something there and said, “No, this work needs to be engaged.” But Melville had disappeared. This even happened to [William Faulkner](#), who also disappeared from not only scholarly courses, but also from reading lists; almost everything of Faulkner's was out of print, and still an [editor in New York, Malcolm Cowley](#), created a reader of just highlights from Faulkner. And even when Faulkner won the Nobel Prize, all that was in print was a selection. Most of his books were out of print. Another example of this is [Zora Neale Hurston](#), who we now think of as an absolutely key writer. But at one point, all of her work was out of print, and it was one scholar, literally one scholar who believed that this work needed to be understood and taught and read that turned her back into an absolutely crucial voice. Well, the crucial voice that she was in American literature. So, there's always this process of scholars and publishers sort of collaborating on seeing the parts for a literary heritage that have disappeared. And I think that you make a great point about the sort of rise of queer theory in the moment of rediscovering, you know, all these writers who almost passed us as rumors in the main part of culture, even as others knew it. And so, this is part of the natural process. But still, it's frustrating. And as I said, it was frustrating for Isherwood himself that no one could read his works even as there was an incredible demand. So, the University of Minnesota Press specifically saw an opportunity. We've been a leading publisher in queer theory from very early on in its emergence. And we just saw an opportunity, and we also saw a need — these works weren't available. People couldn't read them. And even before we brought out really the key work there, *A Single Man*, it was remarkable, the reception of some of the early books that we reissued, including [Down There on a Visit](#) and [Prater Violet](#), which I think were the first two that we reissued. People were eager for them, and they worked their way back into readership.

**JB:** Well, and then you had the opposite experience that Isherwood had with *Cabaret*, when you were ready and able to issue the movie tie-in for [A Single Man](#), when that movie came out in 2008-2009. So, the press then also benefited greatly from the publicity of the book of the film. And since then, Chris and I both would get those emails that Isherwood used to get: “Where can I find *A Single Man*?” It's like, well, now, you are ready for that to happen.

**DA:** Well, it's absolutely true, and I think it's probably safe to say that Isherwood has been consistently underestimated, especially in the American marketplace. So, most of those books were out of print in England as well. And so, when *A Single Man* was announced, really, there wasn't all that much of a sense that it would be as popular a movie as it was or would be nominated for [the] Academy Awards. None of that was really anticipated. And so, people just said, “Oh, yeah, another movie.” An awful lot of independent movies never really become hits. They never really get the audience. But again, people were ahead and realized that it was a movie they really wanted to see. And so, the book did much better than, I think the original publishers, [Farrar, Straus and Giroux](#) or the agent really understood it. Well, as it cracked, I think just in the period leading [to] the Academy Awards, 35,000 copies, going on to sell around 50,000 copies. They were amazed. And as both of you know, the net result of that was that they pulled the rights back. Because, once again, they saw the value. And that's something else that we're used to as a sort of scholarly and independent presses.

**JB:** Right. And the way that you talked about it earlier in the marketplace, and the academy, scholarship and popular readership, scholarship and popular culture, they all are interrelated. And so, the press reissuing the works, scholars having access to the material, students having access to the books in the way that our teaching and our scholarship often also interrelate. And in the best of times, they do quite seamlessly. When Chris and I were both in graduate school, the scholarship on Isherwood was in a pretty, I would say, dormant stage. And we solicited a panel at the [Modern Language Association](#) for 1996, which we called “Christopher Isherwood: 10 years Time.” And we didn't [know] Isherwood scholars at the time. We knew of maybe two. And so, we sent out a broad solicitation, and we didn't know what we would get back. And we ended up with that panel. We ended up turning that into our first book with the [University of Wisconsin Press](#) — [The Isherwood Century](#), which was published in 1999 and won the [Lambda Literary Prize for Gay Studies in 2000](#).

**CF:** Well, and it was really funny putting that book together. We were baby scholars. We were barely 30. We were fresh out of graduate school, and were dealing with some very eminent people because people were ready to write about Christopher Isherwood, and Doug, to go back to what you were talking about in terms of bringing Isherwood back, there's the idea of sort of reintroducing a writer. There's the idea of rediscovering and then there's the idea of kind of recuperating and expanding. So, literally, the first essay in *The Isherwood Century* is called *Who Was Christopher Isherwood?* And we felt we needed to put that in there. We had a

kind of architecture in that book that also wanted to make the relationship with Don Bachardy important and also wanted to make literary theory around Isherwood important and wanted to make his spiritual life with Vedanta important. And we've sort of, that pattern has continued throughout not only our work, but in the work that other scholars have done. You guys in Minnesota published the letters, Lisa Colletta's edition of the letters between Christopher and his mother, Kathleen and Christopher. That historical background is really important because it connects him to the Victorian era. You published Jaimie Harker's *Middlebrow Queer*, which put Isherwood in the context of modernism and postmodernism in American culture. And then you published our *[The] American Isherwood* that really established the sort of second half of the 20th-century part of Isherwood's career and his significance. When I did my dissertation at Vanderbilt in the mid-'90s, and I wanted to write about Isherwood, my advisers were very sort of unenthusiastic about it. I had to really make the case that he did matter and that he fit into this genealogy of [Oscar] Wilde and Forster and sort of an emergence of queer identity. But yeah, Jim and I found it to be very interesting to go into that really unexplored territory completely.

**JB:** There was, thinking back to that first book, we reached back as Chris said, talking about Isherwood in the Victorian period. But also, there were a couple of scholars that contacted us who had done work on Isherwood in the 1960s, including [Carolyn Heilbrun](#), who had written one of the first monographs on Isherwood. She wrote a memoirish kind of piece about her relationship with Chris and Don. And then the other piece that we got was [from] [Carola Kaplan](#), who is a scholar in California who wrote the first dissertation on Isherwood. She gave us an unpublished interview that we used as the final piece in that book. And a lot of that now is sort of reinforced because a lot of that material now is in the Huntington archive. And those papers only became available in 1999. And I was awarded the first fellowship to study at the Huntington, which was sponsored by the then brand new Christopher Isherwood Foundation. And so, I want to read a bit from this new book, *Isherwood in Transit*, from our colleague [Sue Hodson](#), whose expertise on the archive is probably unmatched by anyone else. She's the one who managed and cataloged the archive once it came to the Huntington. And she's written about it quite a bit. For this book, she wrote about Isherwood and what she calls the "California Dream." I'll share some of what she wrote. This is from chapter one:

*Reviewing Isherwood's writing career after he settled in California, we can observe that he did advance his writing technique while at the same time staying largely true to his long-standing, largely autobiographical approach. In examining what he knew best—himself—he was able to tease out meaning that could speak for others as well. His characters were drawn from life, but they also were his own creations. He had long believed in truth, as distinct from facts. That is, one can, and sometimes must, stretch and alter the literal facts in order to arrive at the truth behind and within them. He told an interviewer, "I do try to convey, if it doesn't sound too pompous, the inwardness of experience. . . . You cut corners, you invent, you simplify; you heighten certain lights and deepen certain*

*shadows, as you might in a portrait.” In a lecture titled “Writing as a Way of Life,” Isherwood elaborated on this concept: “You only use the experience to create the myth which corresponds to the inner reality. . . . That explains why what is really truthful in art is not the same as what is truthful in a newspaper report of a fire or a murder and is not the same as your autobiography told in completely factual terms.” Isherwood’s place in Anglo-American letters is assured and his stature continues to grow. Since his papers came to the Huntington in 1999, scholarly publications have burgeoned, and his own books continue to be reprinted. Did Isherwood attain his California Dream? I think we can assert a resounding yes. Through his belief in Vedanta, he developed his ability to discover his own nature and to live according to it. In the greater freedom of life in California, he was able to live much more openly as a gay man, and he met his life partner, Don Bachardy. Finally, he produced works of fiction that reached scores of readers with their combination of creativity and experience. Isherwood knew how important California was for him. He described the Golden State as the place “where we make the mistakes first and then learn from them” and he certainly did this. At the end of his life, he was beginning to work on an autobiography. Its working title was “California.” It was never completed, but the rest of his remarkable works are there for us, acclaimed by both critics and fans. Alan Wilde, in his biography, *Christopher Isherwood*, observed that Isherwood “has been one of the period’s most original ironists and one of its most subtle moral thinkers as well.” Isherwood’s favorite fan letter said, “You try to describe what it’s like to be alive.” It’s a grand, oversized claim, but he did that for all of us, and we will all benefit from, and be enriched by, his works for many years to come.*

That's from the first chapter in the book, *Isherwood on Transit* from our colleague Sue Hodson.

**CF:** And we wanted to start with Sue's essay because it provided another kind of introduction to Isherwood, not the kind of introduction we needed in a book from 20 years ago, but the kind we needed from a new, 21st-century approach to Isherwood and really thinking about this accessibility; that line about creativity and experience really resonates. And we also have encouraged the people who contribute to our books to remember that you don't need a Ph.D. in English to read about Christopher Isherwood. We tried to sort of emulate the lucidity and the engaging level of his prose style with the people who write for our books. Go ahead, Jim. You want to say a little bit more about the conference and how this book came to be, and then we'll look at a few more essays.

**JB:** You bet. So, it was in 2012 when we first started talking to [Steve Hindle](#) at the Huntington about hosting some kind of symposium on Isherwood at the library. That event became “[Myself in a Transitional State: Isherwood in California](#).” What we mean by transit and that transitional metaphor comes really from Isherwood's own writings, I think from his diaries, where he talked about being in a transitional state from the time he moved to the United States through into probably when he met and became partners with Don Bachardy. And so for us, that period in

Isherwood's life, and that period in the United States, it's very transitional. And so, we used that phrase as the title for the symposium, and it became *Isherwood in Transit* for the book. For Isherwood and many of his fellow émigrés coming to the Americas, this was the continuation of a search. [He] settled in Los Angeles, where he lived for the rest of his life, sort of the final act of his effort to define himself, his spirituality and his personal freedom. As he said in a BBC interview in the early '70s, "I was searching for a kind of homeland." And in Los Angeles, after a decade and a half of wandering all over the world, Isherwood found what he was looking for. For *Isherwood in Transit*, we asked [Christopher Bram, a novelist](#), the author of [Gods and Monsters](#), and a literary history called [Eminent Outlaws](#), to write a foreword. In the foreword, Bram talks about realizing he was gay, seeing *Cabaret* on the screen and the scene, particularly where [Liza Minnelli\['\]s](#) and [Michael York\['\]s characters](#) realize they're both sleeping with the same man. Bram researched the *The Berlin Stories* for just such a sex scene, but of course, he didn't find it. Then a couple of years later, he found *Christopher and His Kind* in his library in Virginia Beach. This is from Christopher Bram's foreword:

*The public library was across the street. I found the Isherwood on the New Books shelf, checked it out, and wolfed it down in two days. It was so real, so direct, so necessary, like a glass of ice water on a hot day. Being gay was treated as an important piece of his life, but only slightly more important than writing or politics. He presented love and sex as plain facts of nature.*

Then he talks about reading [Down There on a Visit](#), which was published in 1962, where, again, Isherwood left his own sexuality out of the book:

*We cannot forget how hard it was, until well into the 1970s, for gay writers to write about being gay and still be taken seriously. One of the hardest things about researching my project was the endless acid rain of contemptuous, sneering reviews for any book that dared to discuss homosexuality.*

I think that relates back, Doug, to the issue Isherwood had even in that period in the early '70s where his books were out of print. So much about how much he was ignored in the United States had so much to do with later in his career writing about his gay life, particularly in *A Single Man* and in *Christopher and His Kind*. I think that definitely had an impact on whether he was in print or not.

**CF:** We actually wrote a little bit about that in an essay for this book. It's a kind of rewrite of a piece we did for a book about Auden. This piece is called *Fellow Travelers* — it's chapter six in *Isherwood in Transit*. And we talk about how Auden as a poet was able to maybe hide behind the complexity of his poetry and be a little bit protected from homophobic criticism in a way that Isherwood, who wrote in prose and in kind of direct language about homosexuality starting in the 1950s his novel, [The World in the Evening](#). So, we tried to make the case that Isherwood kind of suffered more from the slings and arrows of critical homophobia than Auden did. And that maybe is part of why their reputations in this, in the last third of the 20th

century were not even close to being equivalent. Auden was the star of that relationship. And we try in our essay to sort of level the balance of that a little bit and make the affirmative case for Isherwood. That piece from Chris Bram is such a wonderful introduction to our whole book. He was so great. We asked him to do it; right away, he said he would be thrilled. We had [Armistead Maupin](#) introduce our first book. We had [Stephen McCauley](#) do the second because we were interested in getting writers who were the next generation from Isherwood to talk about how he influenced them. And we also have [Edmund White](#). I'll talk about him in a minute, but we have him in this book as well, talking about some of that same kind of energy and enthusiasm they took from Isherwood. But Bram read the entire manuscript and before he wrote his essay, he was kind of our first reader who told us, "You guys have got a really good book here." And coming from him, having written his book, *Eminent Outlaws*, that felt like a very good shot in the arm that we needed during the process of editing this collection. So, we have in the book a collection of almost all new material written specifically for the occasion of this project. We have 17 pieces, and I want to talk about one or two of my favorite pieces and the ones that I think are adding to the conversation about Isherwood. One of my favorites is by the writer [Barrie Jean Borich](#). It's chapter 13. It's called *Three Quite Different People: Christopher and His Nonfictions*. Barrie is somebody that Jim and I knew in Minneapolis. She was part of the kind of queer writing community in Minneapolis for many, many years. And now she's in Chicago at [DePaul University](#). We asked her to write this piece, meditating on Isherwood and nonfiction. One of his contributions is through his autobiographical writing. And Barrie is a great theorist of that. So, I want to share a couple of passages from what I think is her beautifully written and really innovative piece about that. So this is from page 176. It's a section called *Permanent Foreigner*.

*How many authors, particularly memoirists, have, from book to book, shape-shifted both voice and point of view on the page as dramatically as did Isherwood? For literary writers, style and form are a kind of homeland, as in a residential space of open thought and access to both chosen and foundational expression. Form might be the writer's most significant and hard-won homeland—in which case we can see in Isherwood's story a slowly evolving arrival. From the Herr Issyvoo of his autobiographical documentary fiction in which homosexuality is merely implicit, to the openly queer and multiply voiced narrator of *Christopher and His Kind*, the narrator's body and identity continually shift position, like that of a voyager or pilgrim, perpetually, if only temporarily, making themselves at home.*

And you can see from a passage like that, that Barrie Borich is very tuned in to the metaphor of transit, and she recognizes it as a formal as well as a kind of biographical issue. [A] couple of pages later, she has a section called *Until We Are at Home*. And she relies a little bit on the Chicago writer [Studs Terkel](#), who interviewed Isherwood in 1977, to write this part of her essay:



*Who, then, is this transitory, place-shifting “I” on the memoirist’s and personal essayist’s page, and what geographies made them that way? Studs Terkel asked Christopher about that relationship of location to identity:*

So, this is Terkel:

*Being in a different land, a different culture, you as a writer could know more about your home there than in England, which is why so many writers went to Paris in the 1920s and realized so much about America.*

From there to which Isherwood replies:

*Oh, that’s very true. . . . You see, you go to Berlin, and suddenly you are a “German Studs,” and it’s very interesting to find out what the German Studs is like.*

By that measure, Barrie Borich says:

*By that measure Christopher and His Kind is a peculiar kind of conversion memoir, as the tale it retells is of the time the British Isherwood became the German Christopher, a young man in search of that free place capable of providing, for both his work and his homosexuality, a home that might well have been Berlin if not for the Nazis. Any one of us can change location to become another variation of self, but at the same time the characteristics acquired in any new place exist only against the tension of who we were before we got there. Our place-based identities accrete rather than replace.*

So, this idea of these layerings of cells, these kinds of sediments [of] self, is something that Barrie's essay really adds to our thinking about Isherwood and his work. Jim, do you want to talk about maybe one of your favorite pieces?

**JB:** Yeah, thanks. I wanted to talk about [Wendy Moffat, who is a scholar from Dickinson College](#) who wrote a new biography a couple years ago about E.M. Forster called [\[A\] Great Unrecorded History](#). And we asked her to join this project because of Forster's connection to Isherwood, but also because of the way she joined Forster and Isherwood in that book in a way of recuperating queer lives in history. And she's so good in theorizing that project as well. We know and knew that Forster entrusted Isherwood with the publication of his gay novel [Maurice](#) after his death. And this is how Wendy Moffat puts it in chapter four:

*In a satisfying inversion of generations, Isherwood the child became father to Forster the man by shepherding the dream of Maurice’s coming out for forty-seven years. The letters between the writers, many of them in the archive at the Huntington Library, repeat a pattern. In 1938, 1948, again in 1952, Forster demurred, “ashamed at shirking publication” but fearful that coming out by publishing the novel would hurt those he loved—first his mother, then his lover the*

*policeman Bob Buckingham, and Buckingham's wife, May. For his part, Isherwood continually encouraged publication. Eventually, Forster, quite literally imagining an afterlife, agreed to posthumous publication, and arranged for Isherwood to enact his plan. A teenager when Oscar Wilde was sent to prison for "gross indecency," Forster died the year after the Stonewall riots. Maurice was published the following year, in 1971. Isherwood's editorial enterprise in turn contributed to Forster's renewed composition and revision of the Maurice manuscript. These The Archival "I" twinned histories are suspended in dialogic equipoise, like the encircling strands of a double helix. As Philip Gardner demonstrates in his careful textual histories, this tension proved fruitful to the novel. Goaded by Isherwood to rethink Maurice, Forster returned to the manuscript again and again, revising and polishing, inserting new sex scenes, always staying true to the essential structure—that Maurice Hall and his lover, Alec Scudder, would stay together and be happy, in spite of it all. And since its posthumous publication, Maurice has become recognized as the generative seed for so much great gay writing that followed.*

So, that's Wendy Moffatt on Isherwood shepherding *Maurice* into publication. I'll link back to the sort of popular culture and the popular readership. That book has been a very important book for a lot of gay readers around the world. Most people don't understand, I think, I certainly didn't until both Wendy and our other collaborator, [Lois Cucullu](#), had shown it to us, the way that an author can intend publication after their death of something, but then actually arrange for it to happen. You know, as a general reader, one doesn't know that. And then, of course, there is the great [Merchant Ivory film of Maurice](#) that actually sparked my interest in Forster and my dissertation. So, all of that is just so interwoven. And Wendy has been a great collaborator on linking Forster and Isherwood in a way that is just so fascinating and original.

**CF:** And, you know, you get a sense of that from even the title of her piece in *Isherwood in Transit*, the archival "I," and she means the first-person pronoun, Forster, Isherwood and the future of queer biography. So, Moffat is also playing with the idea of time. And as you can see in the excerpt that Jim just read, the way that the mentee becomes the mentor, and going through the process of publishing *Maurice* in 1971, Isherwood revisited his relationship with Forster, and that led very much to how he wrote *Christopher and His Kind* three or four years later, including a lot about their relationship that really sheds light on the publication of *Maurice*. I did my master's thesis on *Maurice* in 1989, and one of the things that I learned from doing that was that for about 20 years, *Maurice* destroyed Forster's reputation. In the 1970s and even early '80s, basically, critics reread the entirety [of] E.M. Forster and reduced him to a minor writer, and he had been in the company of [\[Tom\] Wolfe](#) and [\[Joseph\] Conrad](#) and [\[James\] Joyce](#) before that. And there were always rumors about this novel. But when it came out, it really retroactively reduced Forster.

**DA:** That's a really fascinating point, and I want to underscore something that both of you have said — that when work goes out of print, it's often because it's deemed in some way uncommercial. And that decision to call something uncommercial very often comes out of the sense that it appeals not to the mainstream racial or the gender majority, but that in some way it's minor and classifying something as minor, calling it uncommercial, rendering it out of print is very often how writers like Christopher Isherwood and E.M. Forster gets lost. It's the way that you sort of, you know, create them as uncommercial figures. And that's basically what I think scholars like yourselves work against — and help to champion this work.

**CF:** Scholars and teachers. Right. Because as you say, Doug, these writers have been marginalized. And so, our job is to bring them back into the middle of the page in a way, to pay attention to them.

**DA:** Yeah, the teaching element of this is absolutely critical. Having the books available for the classroom. That was the subject of Jim's and my first conversation about Isherwood — people want to teach these. And it's so great that these are available. And at that point, we had a few out and there were more coming. And it was good to hear that because that is a way that work works its way into the mainstream, that younger readers, people in college, the people that they speak to, rediscover these works and that's absolutely critical for continuing to move the culture forward as a whole, not just as a majority voice.

**CF:** So, I want to talk about one or two other pieces before we finish our conversation today. Edmund White, who is one of the most important of especially the gay American novelists and autobiographical writers of the last 50 years, really. He gave a talk at the Huntington, which we asked him if we could use in the book because it fit in so well. And the piece is called *Becoming Coming Gay in the '60s Reading A Single Man*. So, as usual with Edmund White, it's this wonderful kind of breezy essay about his own life, his own struggles. He was in therapy for many years as a young man; Edmund White was born in the mid-1940s, maybe even in 1940. And he spent a lot of years trying to come to terms with his sexuality and reading Isherwood in the '60s and reading *[A] Single Man* helped him with that. And I want to just share the ending of his essay, chapter 12, *Becoming Gay in the '60s*. He says:

*As a self-doubting homosexual adolescent and young man, I suffered terribly. I not only sought to go straight, but I also tried to extinguish all desire through Buddhism. I would meditate for hours and attempt to control my breathing. I was convinced I even levitated once about a foot off the bed. Gay desire wasn't the problem; all desire was to be extirpated. Like Isherwood, I found comfort in the calm acceptance of homosexuality in both Vedanta and Buddhism. Like Isherwood, I had a great need for sexual expression, which I regarded as a block to enlightenment. A Single Man, as the work of a sophisticated but pious writer, endlessly alert to self-irony and comic possibility, driven by sexual desire, spoke to me fervently, intimately.*

And I love the way White ends that piece, the ferventness of it and the intimacy of it. Isherwood is one of those rare writers who's able, you almost feel like he's talking just to you. I remember the first time I read *A Single Man*. It was from my qualifying exams at Vanderbilt in the early '90s, and I called friends of mine and read paragraphs out loud. My mind was blown by the brilliance of the book and by the insights that I had never seen before. The last thing I want to talk about is the final piece in the book, which came to us late in the game almost by accident. Our friends, [Tina Mascara and Guido Santi](#) — you'll note the book is dedicated to them — made a beautiful documentary called [Chris and Don: A Love Story](#). They started working on it in 2005. It was released by [Zeitgeist Films](#) in 2008 or so. And it's a wonderful documentary. Jim and I were both involved in the making of that documentary. And at some point, toward the end of putting together *Isherwood in Transit*, I got an email from Guido about an interview with this guy named [Dennis D.J. Bartel](#), who was kind of a radio personality in Los Angeles. He had interviewed Isherwood in 1979, and it was published in a small magazine and almost no one saw it. And then it disappeared. In fact, when Jim and I put together *Conversations with Christopher Isherwood* in 2000, we didn't even come across this. It was so obscure. So, I got in touch with Dennis Bartel. He was very happy to let us use the interview. And we liked so much the idea of ending the book with Isherwood, talking for himself, speaking for himself. We had done that with Carola Kaplan's unpublished interview from 1973 with Isherwood and *The Isherwood Century*. And we were so happy to be able to do that again. And what's important about this interview is that it took place in 1979. Isherwood has finished writing [My Guru and His Disciple](#), which is his last completed book, and it's before he was diagnosed with prostate cancer, which would ultimately result in his death in 1986. So, he's in his mid-70s, but he's still at the peak of his creative and his physical game. So, I wanted to share a couple of things from this interview, and then we will wrap up this very enjoyable conversation. So, this is from conversation with Isherwood toward the end of the interview. He asked him about his relationship with Auden and about coming to America. So, the question is:

*After Auden and you left Europe, the critical opinion was that the two of you were taking a large chunk of literature with you. Also, there was a good deal of concern that you might not be able to write in America. Whether or not that was a valid concern, the fact is, it took you several years before another novel arrived, even though you were writing other things. There appear to be several reasons, or at least public reasons, for the absence of any fiction. Certainly one of them was your increasing involvement with the teachings of Ramakrishna. Did you find that as a fiction writer you were starting over again because of your move toward Vedanta?*

So, before I give you Isherwood's reply, I want to say two things about that. One is this is the transit we're talking about. This is the transition. And when Kate Bucknell wrote her introduction to the republished 1940s, '50s diaries of Isherwood called *The Lost Years*, she also talked about this period where he was really trying to find his American voice and his American self. So, this is how Isherwood responded:

*in a way that certainly was a great big distraction from writing. Also, Swami Prabhavananda. It all made a difference to me. Writing was complicated by the fact that I was also a pacifist, a conscientious objector, and therefore, something had to be done about that. What was done was that I got myself involved with the Quakers in a social project in the East.*

So, all of this became a novel that he wrote in the 1950s called *The World in the Evening*. "For me," he says:

*For me, it was absolutely necessary, if I was going to live in this country, to become acclimatized before I could write anything meaningful. I wasn't about to come here and make the kind of remarks of a total outsider in the manner of somebody just visiting a country. I didn't realize when I came that it would become my home, in a far more profound sense than anywhere else in my life. We traveled around so much when I was young. I've never lived nearly as long anywhere else as I have in this house. I've lived more than half my life in the United States, and of that life, I spent the great majority of the years almost exclusively in the Los Angeles area and mostly in this very canyon, in which I think I've lived in about twelve different buildings under different circumstances.*

So, you can see that he found his place and it was from that place that he was able to write. Another thing he talks about with Bartel, coming out of his conversation about religion, is the whole idea of consciousness. And here's an interesting comment he makes about that. He says:

*What we fundamentally know about is consciousness. Where you see a very good example of that is in some Oriental art where people take one single theme, like the bamboo, and paint it over and over and over again. Never shall I forget going to stay with Georgia O'Keeffe. One evening we spent about an hour and a half looking at these bamboo paintings that she had, and no two were absolutely alike. When I got into the mood, which of course was highly induced by her, I really began to find them interesting. And then I understood how extraordinarily little material you need. The whole point is to get the perception opened wide enough. That's all that matters.*

So, you can see he's thinking about scale and scope and what makes something significant. And then to conclude a couple of comments about this sort of gay liberation movement and how Isherwood fit into that as well in the 1970s, he says how different things became:

*I can get up on a platform now and I'll be asked about being gay. I'll be asked about literature, and what I am writing, but it always ends up with religion. There are always people who want to know. I was on the radio on "Stonewall Day" for gay pride. People could call in to the station and talk to me on the air, and in all cases the questions asked were fundamentally religious, and in all the cases I had*

to say, “This is too complicated, I’ve only got five minutes. Will you call me at home later?”

By the way, Ishherwood's phone number was always listed, and these people did call him. He said it was extraordinary.

*That’s something that’s really happened since I’ve lived in this country, this enormous interest in the religious experience. I don’t mean that I’m always running up against creeds, particular rituals, or attitudes. On the contrary, I find that it’s often not even necessary to discuss any of that, but they really want to know. “Whatever it is you do, does it work for you at all? You’re an old man now, you’re going to die,” as they always say with charming frankness. And I say, “Well, I’ll tell you, I’m certainly quite shaken by the winds of life and couldn’t hold myself up as a rock, but it does mean something, and furthermore it’s the only thing that means something and that’s it as far as I’m concerned.” The other thing I say is that I believe one can arrive at the truth—by the truth I mean the truth for oneself.*

And then he ends the interview this way:

*You might say, following the idea of individualism, that my relationship with Prabhavananda as described in My Guru and His Disciple is my religion. That is to say, what I was left with as a result of this relationship is all that I have, because it is the only thing predicated entirely on my own observation. At least I know what he said to me. At least I know how he strikes me. And that is enough. It wasn’t for one moment that I thought he was the only person in creation who could have been like that. He was the only person I’d met who was like that, and therefore he was my religion, and very individual as such.*

And this focus on the individual, Jim and I write about that in our introduction. It's the point from which Isherwood knew anything, and that for me continues to fascinate me.

**JB:** Yeah, I think we should end by thanking the University of Minnesota Press, especially you, Doug, who've given Isherwood such a wonderful home in your catalog. And we're honored to be part of that scholarship that you have enabled and shared with the world.

**DA:** Absolutely happy to be involved for your sort of work, and you know, bringing Isherwood out of that time when no one really paid attention, you know, when he wasn't a subject. You've done great work.

**CF:** It's been a very rewarding quarter-century to work on Christopher Isherwood. Thanks, everybody.

**JB:** Buh-bye.

**Host:** Thank you for listening to this conversation today. For more information about the book, including book events, please visit [z.umn.edu/intransit](https://z.umn.edu/intransit).

*This interview has been lightly edited and condensed for clarity.*