

## The Isherwood Century: Essays on the Life and Work of Christopher Isherwood

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Respected for his work and admired for his personality, Isherwood has always been considered both a literary and a gay pioneer. Compiled by scholars Berg and Freeman, *The Isherwood Century* contains twenty-four essays and interviews that have been selected to present the life and work of this literary icon.

The book is divided into four sections with Part 1, "Meeting Isherwood," containing the words of people who knew him—colleagues, students and fans. It is quite apparent that Isherwood was thought of as a kind, thoughtful and complex man. He encouraged those he came in contact with whether it was with their writing, a spiritual journey or a struggle with sexuality.

Isherwood became a role model for younger gay men, and was revered for providing a successful model of a long-term relationship with Don Bachardy. "Artist and Companion" is the second section of the book where the importance of this over thirty-year relationship is uncovered.

"The Writer in Context" provides a "wider view of Isherwood's work than is commonly found in criticism of twentieth-century British and American literature. Isherwood is perhaps best known for *Goodbye to Berlin*, the inspiration for the award-winning musical *Cabaret*.

His credits also include developing a new form of documentary fiction as well as collaborating with and advising other noted authors including W.H. Auden and E.M. Forster.

The final section covers Isherwood's spiritual journey and its influence on his work. Much of his life was dedicated to the study of Vedanta, a "branch of Hinduism based on the ancient teachings of the Vedas and focused on the nineteenth century avatar, Ramakrishna.

Berg and Freeman have done an excellent job in presenting material that provides a sense of what Isherwood's life was like. A few of the essays are a bit stuffy, but for the most part the contributors have written with the passion that Isherwood stirred in them either through his personal relationship or through his written words.

In 1964, Isherwood penned the book *A Single Man*. The novel was one of the first to present a central character that was clearly gay from the outset of the narrative. Unique to Isherwood's character portrayal was that his single man's homosexuality was exhibited in a "natural and life-affirming way."

Through this collection, the reader will find that Isherwood was a genuine man whose energy and encouraging nature was quite life-affirming. *The Isherwood Century* will appeal to admirers of this literary legend as well as inspire a new generation of writers and readers.

PAUL J. WILLIS (May / June 2000)

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