



Fry, Stephen (b. 1957)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Tall, heavy, gay, and witty, British actor Stephen Fry was told for many years that he reminded people of Oscar Wilde. It is apt, then, that he was cast in the lead role in the film *Wilde* (1997), in which he seemed to embody perfectly the great playwright and victim of intolerance.

Yet there is much more to the versatile Fry than this one role; he is also an accomplished comic, novelist, memoirist, and philanthropist.

Stephen John Fry was born August 24, 1957, in Hampstead, London, to an affluent family. His father Alan is a physicist and inventor; his mother Marianne was born in Austria, and her Jewish family immigrated to England to escape Nazi persecution. A bright, inquisitive child, he was educated in private boarding schools.

Fry began to rebel in his teens, after first suspecting that he was gay. By the time he was fifteen, he had been expelled from three schools, and, at sixteen, he attempted suicide. At seventeen, he was arrested for credit card fraud and sentenced to three months in prison, an experience that proved a turning point for the troubled young man. Consequently, he applied himself to his studies, so much so that he won a scholarship to Queens College, Cambridge University.

At Cambridge, he became active in various university drama clubs and performances, and his friends included fellow students Kenneth Branagh, Emma Thompson, and Hugh Laurie, all of whom would be his future professional collaborators. In 1982, he graduated from Cambridge with High Honours and a degree in English literature.

His career blossomed almost immediately thereafter, beginning with the television comedy *Al Fresco*, which also featured Thompson and Laurie. His revised libretto for the 1930s Noel Gay musical *Me and My Girl* was adopted for the hit Broadway revival, making him a millionaire and winning him a Tony Award (1987).

Throughout the 1980s, Fry maintained an almost constant presence in the British media, appearing in stage plays, on radio, and, most extensively, on television, where he was featured in the popular series *Blackadder*, a spoof on British history, and as Jeeves the butler in *Jeeves and Wooster*, a series based on the P. G. Wodehouse novels.

During the late 1980s, Fry began a film career as well, appearing in supporting roles in such films as *A Fish Called Wanda* (1988) and *A Handful of Dust* (1988). His first major film part was that of the eponymous Peter in *Peter's Friends* (1992), which also starred Branagh and Thompson in a tale of a reunion of Cambridge school friends ten years after they had left school.

During this period Fry embarked on yet another career, that of novelist. His novels, which display his wit and his ability to balance literary astuteness with utter vulgarity, so far include *The Liar* (1991), *The Hippopotamus* (1994), and *Making History* (1996).



Stephen Fry.
Photograph by *Happy Birthday to GNU* film crew, especially Matt Lee and Andrew Sampson.

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Despite all of his successes, not all was well for Fry by the mid-1990s. Well-publicized personal insecurities had long kept him out of relationships, and a 1995 nervous breakdown brought much unsought media attention. His struggles, however, drew support from members of the public who are likewise afflicted with depression, and thus he was subsequently credited with drawing positive social attention to this greatly misunderstood illness.

The sympathy and empathy that his breakdown elicited were qualities with which Fry endowed his compassionate and very human portrayal of Oscar Wilde. The part, though often witty, allowed the actor to go beyond the comic portrayals with which he was most identified. Fry's complexly layered depiction captured the complexity and contradictions of Wilde himself.

Fry's amusing yet emotionally honest autobiography, *Moab Is My Washpot* (1997), was published at the time *Wilde* was released, and gives the public an intimate portrait of the highly complex actor. Settled in a relationship at last, he lives with his partner in London and in his country home in Norfolk.

Most recently, he has starred in *The Discovery of Heaven* (2001) and was featured in *Gosforth Park* (2001). He made an auspicious directorial debut with *Bright Young Things* (2003), based on his own adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies*.

Bibliography

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About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.