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[JOIN TODAY. IT'S FREE!](#)[glbtq Books](#)[Advertising Opportunities](#)[Press Kit](#)[Permissions & Licensing](#)[Terms of Service](#)[Privacy Policy](#)[Copyright](#)**point of view**Claude J. Summers on *A Single Man*

February 1, 2010

***A Single Man*: Ford's Film / Isherwood's Novel**by [Claude J. Summers](#)

Acclaimed fashion designer Tom Ford, former creative director at both Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent fashion houses, has made an auspicious debut as filmmaker with his painstakingly micromanaged, visually stunning, emotionally wrenching adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's 1964 novel, *A Single Man*.

Like the book, the film follows a day, at once ordinary and momentous, in the life of its protagonist, a middle-aged expatriate Briton who teaches English at San Tomas State College in a suburb of Los Angeles. He is paralyzed by grief for his lover of 16 years who died in an automobile accident eight months previously.

Set in 1962, against the background of the Cuban missile crisis, the film traces George's awakening from a dream of his lover to the crushing reality of his loss, through his teaching of a text by Aldous Huxley and his visit to a bank to put his affairs in order, on to a boozey dinner with a friend, and finally to what may be a transformative experience with a flirtatious student.

The film features a brilliant ensemble cast that includes Julianne Moore as George's friend, Charlotte; Matthew Goode as Jim, the deceased lover who appears in flashbacks; Nicholas Hoult as Kenny, the student; and Jon Kortajarena as Carlos, an engaging, strikingly handsome hustler.

But it is Colin Firth as the heartbroken George who gives a performance as authentic as it is unforgettable. His carefully modulated, apparently effortless portrait of a man wracked by grief is profoundly affecting. This Oscar-worthy performance vaults Firth into the very first rank of contemporary actors.

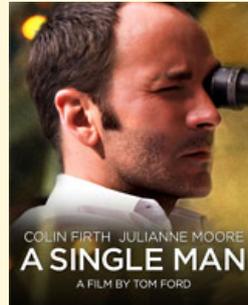
The haunting score by Abel Korzeniowski (abetted by additional music from Shigeru Umebayashi) contributes powerfully to the film's elegiac mood.

Another triumph of the film is its evocation of early 1960s Los Angeles. Ford, aided by his production designer Dan Bishop and his costume designer Arianne Phillips, pays scrupulous attention to replicating the look of the era, including its automobiles, fashions, furniture, and hair styles.

The use of vintage film stock also aids in setting the work in a particular time and place. The controversial employment of enhanced coloring by Ford and his cinematographer Eduard Grau to indicate changes in mood, though sometimes jarring, creates visual interest and energy.

The film succeeds admirably in depicting the depth of love shared by George and Jim, as well as the despair felt by George in the wake of Jim's loss. Wracked by loneliness, and alienated from a society that fears and loathes homosexuals, George is truly a "single man," both in the existential sense that each of us is alone and separate and in the narrower sense that he has lost his lover and partner.

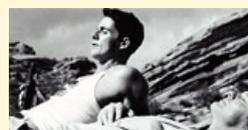
With great economy, the film captures the texture of a gay couple's life together. In its unsensational and unapologetic presentation of the relationship of Jim and George as multilayered, nuanced, and



Tom Ford, Director of *A Single Man*. Image courtesy [asingleman-movie.com](#)



Co-stars Colin Firth and Julianne Moore. Image courtesy [asingleman-movie.com](#)



Jim (Matthew Goode, left) with George (Colin Firth) in a flashback scene. Image courtesy [asingleman-movie.com](#)

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altogether human, the movie must be ranked among the most honest depictions of homosexual domesticity in cinematic history.

Ford develops with clarity and subtlety his related themes of living in the present and of savoring the beauty and joy one finds sometimes in the most unexpected places.

A Deeply Personal Project

The director's choice of Isherwood's landmark gay novel as his first film project was deeply personal. Ford, who knew Isherwood, has spoken of his long and great admiration of the book, and how he saw reflected in it some of his own experience.

The choice was also risky, given the skittishness of film producers and distributors with regard to gay films. Notwithstanding the commercial success of some recent gay-themed movies, most notably Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and Gus Van Sant's *Milk* (2008), film distributors and financiers continue to express skepticism about the interest of mainstream audiences in gay subjects.

In fact, at a critical moment in the development of *A Single Man*, Ford's financial backers withdrew from the project, and the fashion designer made the decision to finance the film himself.

Although the budget of *A Single Man* was modest by Hollywood standards, it nevertheless required Ford's investment of several million dollars of his own money in a project about which there was widespread skepticism as to its commercial viability. That alone is a measure not only of the novice director's confidence in his talent, but also of his commitment to the project, though nervousness about the film's commercial prospects may also explain Ford's unseemly and repeated attempts to deny that his movie is a "gay film."

Another measure of his commitment may be found in his obvious identification with the characters in Isherwood's novel, especially the protagonist George, even to the point of modifying them to fit his own life story. In interviews, Ford has described the film as "deeply autobiographical," telling Jeffrey Podolsky in the *Wall Street Journal*, "When you watch it, you are inside my head for an hour and a half."

Notably, Ford introduced a number of intimately personal touches into the film. For instance, he made the protagonist close to his own age (49) rather than the 58-year-old that he is in the novel; he used his beloved fox terrier in the movie; he gave the protagonist, named only George in the novel, the last name Falconer, which was the name of a former lover; he included his longtime partner, fashion editor Richard Buckley, as an extra in a brief scene; and he gave George his own history of bisexuality.

Ford also transformed Isherwood's rumpled professor into a distinctly upscale fashion plate, fastidious in his dress and affectations, who drives a Mercedes and lives in a glass-walled, architect-designed house.

He similarly transmuted George's friend Charlotte from a blowsy earth-mother figure who lives in domestic squalor into a glamorous, aging, high-fashion beauty who lives in a fabulous hilltop aerie stuffed with midcentury modern furniture.

The obvious affluence and fashion-consciousness of Ford's characters owe far more to the director's experience than to Isherwood's depictions.

These personal touches suggest that Ford has not simply adapted Isherwood's novel for the screen. Rather, he has employed the novel as a vehicle for telling or perhaps merely reflecting aspects of his own life story. In the process, he has distorted the source, not merely through the alteration of plot details and by painting the characters with a glossy sheen, but also in the narrower theme and vision that he has imposed on the film.

Departures from the Novel

Some of the departures from the novel reflect the need to open out a story that is mostly internal. Although Isherwood's novel features an omniscient narrator, for much of the book the narrator's vantage point is so closely aligned with the protagonist's that it reads as an extended interior monologue.

As a visual medium, film needs more external action to tell a story than a novel does, hence it is understandable that Ford added some scenes that are not in the novel (while omitting others that are).

Still, there are major differences between the film and the novel that go beyond the exigencies of



Christopher Isherwood in 1950. Photograph by Carl Van Vechten, courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

story telling, and those differences make the film problematic as an adaptation.

Take, for example, Ford's decision to depict George as suicidal. The introduction of the possibility of suicide adds tremendous dramatic tension to the film and creates genuine suspense. The question that haunts the film from beginning to end is whether George will take his own life.

But while this plot innovation works effectively to convey the desperation of George's predicament and to shape the film's narrative, it also represents a major departure from the novel and, ultimately, significantly narrows its scope.

Isherwood's character is anything but suicidal. He is described at the beginning of the novel as "a live dying creature" who "will struggle on and on until it drops. Not because it is heroic. It can imagine no alternative."

In the novel, George proudly counts himself a survivor, and exults in his membership in that "marvelous minority, The Living."

After he visits a dying friend (a scene not included in the film), George thinks, "How good to be in a body—even this old beat-up carcass—that still has warm blood and live semen and rich marrow and wholesome flesh!"

The question in the novel is not whether George will kill himself, but whether he will be able to escape his obsession with the past, and whether his fierce individuality can be incorporated within a larger, spiritual perspective. Isherwood's great theme is the transience of mundane existence when seen from the perspective of eternity while Ford's is the smaller one of apprehending the beauty and joy of mundane life itself.

Ford is clearly aware of a spiritual dimension to George's dilemma, as evidenced by references to the protagonist's spirituality and by the recurrent water motif, which he presents beautifully and meaningfully both in George's stunning dream of Jim and in the exuberant "baptism of the surf" that he experiences with Kenny. Ford also suggests spiritual mystery through images of moonlight on the ocean and by the lingering image of a full moon, reminiscent of shots in David Lean's film of E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*.

But in Ford's work these suggestions of spiritual mystery are frustratingly vague, whereas in Isherwood's novel a spiritual vision is more fully and more consequentially developed. It finally culminates in the recognition that George partakes of the universal consciousness that ultimately subsumes individual differences.

As Isherwood explains in an extended passage that uses rock pools and ocean as analogues for individual identity and impersonal universality, "the waters of the ocean are not really other than the waters of the pool."

In the novel, the burden is to reconcile conflicting needs of tribal identity and individual assertion, as personal identity finally yields to impersonal universality as the waters of the rock pool are eventually merged with the waters of the ocean.

In addition, although the question of suicide powerfully generates suspense in the film, it does so at the expense of flattening the character of George, rendering him less interesting because less multidimensional than he is in the novel.

In Isherwood's work, George is an everyman figure, but also a highly idiosyncratic, even comic one. The comedy in Isherwood's novel, achieved through campy asides, over-the-top fantasies, and the narrator's regard of him as a beleaguered, occasionally ludicrous, specimen of humanity, who arouses (sometimes simultaneously) pathos, humor, concern, admiration, dismay, and affection, is largely absent from the film, where George is mostly somber, buttoned-down, and tight-lipped.

There is humor in the film, but it is distinctly different from that in the novel, stemming largely from George's fastidiousness, as when after considering several positions in which he might shoot himself, he decides to do it in a sleeping bag to spare the messiness that would otherwise result; or when, choosing the clothes in which he wishes to be buried, he specifies a particular kind of knot for his tie.

Relatedly, the film pays relatively short shrift to the anger George feels as a gay man in a homophobic society. In the chilling flashback in which George receives the news of Jim's death but is informed that the funeral will be for "family only," Ford follows Isherwood in illustrating the casual cruelties inflicted on gay men and lesbians. He also acknowledges George's minority consciousness through his coded digression in the classroom scene about invisible minorities who are feared by the majority. Yet his protagonist evinces little of the rage that consumes Isherwood's character in the novel.

In the book George works himself up into a frenzy of hatred for three-quarters of the population of America, whom he defines as "The

Enemy." He blames them collectively for the loss of Jim. "All are, in the last analysis, responsible for Jim's death," he concludes, "their words, their thoughts, their whole way of life willed it, even though they never knew he existed."

Indeed, for all the film's self-consciousness of its period setting, it actually conveys little of the early 1960s homophobia that Isherwood exposes so vividly. To downplay this aspect of the novel is to betray ignorance of its historical and political significance in portraying homosexuals as an oppressed minority. This is particularly so, since, unlike the novel, the film features very few visible minorities of any kind, and therefore blunts Isherwood's important point that everyone is a member of some kind of minority group.

Ford also alters George's relationship with his neighbors. In the novel, George's neighbors, the Strunks, embarrassed at having a homosexual as a neighbor, pointedly do not invite him to a party, whereas in the film they do. This alteration has the effect of making George appear more accepted (and acceptable) in the conformist society he despises and thereby undermines the sense of alienation he feels in the novel.

In a powerful indictment of his neighbors' attitudes toward him, Isherwood's George contrasts the open hostility of Mr. Strunk, who would, he thinks, "nail him down with a word. *Queer*, he doubtless growls," with that of Mrs. Strunk, "who is trained in the new tolerance, the technique of annihilation by blandness. Out comes her psychology book—bell and candle are no longer necessary. Reading from it in sweet singsong, she proceeds to exorcise the unspeakable out of George. No reason for disgust, she intones, no cause for condemnation. . . . Here we have a misfit, debarred forever from the best things of life, to be pitied not blamed."

In his reply to Mrs. Strunk in his imaginary dialogue, George firmly rejects both her condescension and her psychology: "But your book is wrong . . . when it tells you that Jim is the substitute I found for a real son, a real kid brother, a real husband, a real wife. Jim wasn't a substitute for anything. And there is no substitute for Jim, if you'll forgive my saying so, anywhere."

In the film, however, it is not Mrs. Strunk who recites the pop psychology that denies the authenticity of George's relationship with Jim, but Charley, who is altered from a supportive friend into a former lover intent on reigniting George's heterosexuality. Her regard of his relationship with Jim as not "real" may be seen as a ploy in her attempt to seduce George rather than a societal judgment as it is in the novel.

Ford's downplaying of the homophobia of the era may be a marketing strategy, but it may also reflect a crucial misunderstanding of the novel and of Isherwood. In an interview with Kevin Sessums, in which Ford denied the significance of his own homosexuality, he astoundingly said that homosexuality is not an issue in Isherwood's work. If he really believes that, then it is no wonder that he fails to understand the historical significance of the novel he has filmed.

Moreover, Ford's making George and Charley former lovers completely changes both the characters and their relationship as presented by Isherwood. In the novel, not only does George have no sexual interest in women, but he thinks of women as "The Enemy" and as "Bitch-Mother Nature," the female prerogative for which the Church, the Law, and the State exist and before which he is expected to bow and hide "his unnatural head in shame."

His genuine affection for Charley in the novel serves to lessen his misogyny, for he recognizes that, despite her self-absorption and self-pity, she is able to create a peculiarly feminine kind of happiness.

She was the first person he told of Jim's death. Though he worried that he may have "made Jim into a sob story for a skirt," once he realized that "you can't betray . . . a Jim, or a life with a Jim, even if you try to," he was able to accept her comfort. The two are presented not as former or potential lovers but as dogged survivors dependent on each other for support and the "magic" that allows them to pursue quite separate dreams while pretending that they are identical.

Ford's change in the relationship between George and Charley may be intended to make the protagonist somehow more sympathetic—or at least more interesting and engaging—to a heterosexual audience, or it may simply be an instance in which Ford imposes on Isherwood's creation his own history.

The prominence of the relationship between George and Charley in some of the trailers for the movie suggests that the distributors, at any rate, see a commercial advantage in highlighting the bond between Firth and Moore rather than that between George and Jim.

Another departure from the novel is the sexualizing of the relationship between George and Kenny. In Isherwood's work, Kenny is flirtatious, even provocative, but he looks to George as a surrogate father not as a potential lover. Moreover, he seeks out George not

because he is sexually confused or wants a gay role-model, as suggested in the film, but because his girlfriend Lois Yagamuchi, a Nisei whose family was interned during World War II (in the film morphed into a bored-looking, cigarette-smoking blonde), has refused to accompany him to a seedy motel.

In the novel, Kenny is depicted as a rather prudish young man. When George offers him the use of his home one night a week to sleep with Lois, he is shocked and silently labels George "a dirty old man."

In the film, however, Ford presents Kenny as a potential lover, a kind of angelic figure who may both save George from his desire to kill himself and change his life altogether.

Nicholas Hoult, who plays Kenny, bears a certain resemblance to Don Bachardy's appearance when he was 18 and fell in love with the 48-year-old Isherwood, so Ford may intend his presentation of the relationship between Kenny and George as a kind of homage to the bond between Isherwood and Bachardy.

But Isherwood repeatedly denied that *A Single Man* was autobiographical, and if any character in the novel was based on Bachardy, it would be Jim not Kenny.

Most significantly, in the novel, Kenny functions not as a lover but as a participant in a symbolic dialogue in which he represents youth and the future, and George age and experience.

As a result of this dialogue and the rejuvenation he feels after the "baptism in the surf," George in the novel is transformed. He becomes an "oracular George" who rejects the "dreary categories" that separate human beings and comes to realize that the purpose of life is to communicate some kind of signal, however garbled, before it is too late.

This realization in turn leads him to cede the past to Charley and the future to Kenny and cling to the present: "It is Now that he must find another Jim. Now that he must love. Now that he must live. . . ."

Ford's conception of Kenny as the lover who might rescue George from his suicidal impulse is not only contrary to the novel, but it also renders his ending—seriously miscalculated and also not justified by the novel—cruelly ironic.

Conclusion

To say that Ford's *A Single Man* is not as great an achievement as Isherwood's groundbreaking novel is not to denigrate the film, which is a considerable achievement in its own right.

Ford has created a powerful account of love between gay men and has rendered that account in universal terms without denying its particularity. Moreover, he has told his story with arrestingly beautiful images, as in the haunting dream sequence in which George sinks in water only to confront his dead lover. The beautiful cinematography and high production values, along with the impeccable acting, make Ford's film riveting.

If the film lacks the political edge and spiritual profundity of Isherwood's novel, it compensates to some extent for these failings by its intense feeling, as well as its sensual and elegant style.

Moreover, Ford's emphasis on living in the present and apprehending the beauty of the world is both grounded in the novel and compellingly developed.

In addition, the movie's vivid illustration of the devastating effects of societal hostility to gay relationships is, alas, as politically relevant today as it was in 1964. Even now, almost fifty years after the novel was published, most parts of this country still stubbornly refuse to recognize our families.

A Single Man is directed by Tom Ford and written by Tom Ford and David Scarce; the director of photography is Eduard Grau; the film editor is Joan Sobel; the music is provided by Abel Korzeniowski and Shigeru Umubayashi; the production designer is Dan Bishop; the costume designer is Arianne Phillips; the producers are Tom Ford, Chris Weitz, Andrew Miano and Robert Salerno; the film is distributed by the Weinstein Company.

Christopher Isherwood's novels are available from the University of Minnesota Press.

Related Encyclopedia Entries

[Bachardy, Don](#)

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[Isherwood, Christopher](#)

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Claude J. Summers is the General Editor of [glbtq.com](http://www.glbtc.com) and the author of *Christopher Isherwood* (1980, Ungar), a book-length study of the author and his work; and *Gay Fictions: Wilde to Stonewall* (1990, Continuum), which charts an evolving tradition of gay male literature. He is a recipient of a Lambda Literary Award and of a Monette-Horwitz Award.

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