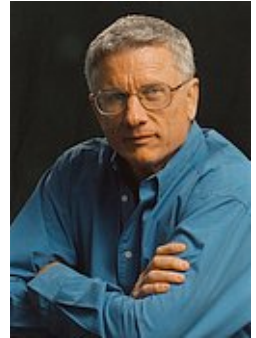




Wilson, John Morgan (b. 1945)

by Ted-Larry Pebworth

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John Morgan Wilson.
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Although John Morgan Wilson has spent much of his adult life as a newspaper reporter, columnist, editor, and a writer of fact-based television scripts, he is best known today as the author of a gay male mystery series featuring a flawed and often exasperating amateur detective named Benjamin Justice.

Wilson was born in 1945 on a Tampa, Florida army base where his doctor father was stationed. Shortly after his birth, the family moved back to southern California, and Wilson grew up and was educated in Manhattan Beach, where he became captain of the wrestling team in Mira Costa High School, from which he graduated in 1963. He attended Michigan State University and San Diego State University, where he continued wrestling, and he graduated from the latter with a B. A. in journalism in 1968.

His journalism career has included stints as a freelance writer, editor, publisher, and staff reporter on several papers and magazines, and from 1985 to 1992 he worked as an assistant editor at the *Los Angeles Times*. For fifteen years he wrote a regular column for *Writer's Digest* and authored two works published by their book division: *The Complete Guide to Magazine Article Writing* (1993) and *A Writer's Guide to Researching the World of Movies and TV* (1997).

In addition, Wilson has written fact-based television scripts for the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, the Learning Channel, and Court TV; he has sold screenplays and options to several movie producers; and for the past twenty-five years, he has taught classes and workshops for the Extension Writers' Program at UCLA.

In 1996, Wilson published *Simple Justice*, the first installment of the Benjamin Justice mystery series. *Simple Justice* won the Edgar Award as the best first mystery of the year, becoming the first novel with a gay detective to win the prestigious award. Five more novels in the Justice series have since appeared: *Revision of Justice* (1997); *Justice at Risk* (1999), *The Limits of Justice* (2000), and *Blind Eye* (2003), all three Lambda Literary Award winners as the best gay male mystery of the year; and *Moth and Flame* (2004). A seventh Justice novel, *Rhapsody in Blood*, is scheduled for publication in 2006.

Wilson has accurately described Justice as "an extremely dark and troubled character." A reporter whose series of articles on AIDS in a Los Angeles newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize, he was fired and forced to relinquish the award when it was discovered that he fabricated many of the interviews quoted in those articles. Deeply despondent over the loss of his job and reputation and the death of his lover from AIDS, Justice has retreated into a self-destructive drunken oblivion as the series opens.

Pushed into activity by an elderly gay couple who are also his landlords and two of his newspaper friends who still have faith in him, Justice gradually turns his investigative talents to the solving of murders, primarily of gay men, an activity that involves him in the seamy, dangerous, and AIDS-ravaged side of the Hollywood subculture and frequently brings him face to face with powerful antagonists, such as a ring of wealthy Hollywood pedophiles in *Limits of Justice* and the Roman Catholic Church in *Blind Eye*.

While these investigations to some degree rehabilitate his life and career, Justice nevertheless frequently reverts to extremely reckless and self-destructive behavior, often directly attributable to alcoholism and guilt. Over the course of the first five novels he puts himself in a position to be beaten, raped (and thereby infected with HIV), and even blinded in one eye. In the sixth Justice novel, *Moth and Flame*, Wilson has emerged somewhat from the darkness that pervades the earlier novels, but his protagonist--now coping by means of Prozac--is still complex, often infuriating, and totally believable. Haunted by a childhood marked by abuse and violence, Justice is wary of commitments and keenly aware that his past mistakes may have stunted the prospects for his future.

Wilson excels at characterization. While they are not as fully developed as Justice, the continuing characters in the series--especially his younger reporter friend Alexandra Templeton and his landlords Maurice and Fred--are deftly drawn, well-rounded individuals; and even the minor characters are often strikingly memorable.

Only the plotting of the Justice novels can be faulted, and that only in places. In some of the novels, the attentive reader can solve the puzzle long before Justice does, and some of the plot lines strain credulity. The most satisfying novels in the series are those that are the most straightforwardly plotted.

Wilson's greatest strength in the Justice series is his distinctive voice. All of the novels are lifted above the ordinary by Wilson's unusual skill with language. He is a careful stylist. He writes with a clarity and grace seldom encountered in any but the very best mystery fiction, and his descriptions of the southern California environs are as evocative as those by Ross MacDonald and Joseph Hansen.

In addition to the Benjamin Justice series, Wilson has co-authored a mainstream mystery series with society bandleader Peter Duchin. So far, two novels have been published in this series: *Blue Moon* (2002) and *Good Morning Heartache* (2003). Set in the 1960s, they feature society bandleader Philip Damon and are considerably lighter in tone, and more romantic and nostalgic, than the Benjamin Justice novels.

With his companion of many years, Pietro Gamino, Wilson lives in West Hollywood, California, where he continues to write and teach. Wilson has described West Hollywood, whose history of activism is key to *Moth and Flame*, as "a special place, warts and all This unique city exists because some determined women and men joined together and made a difference. As much as West Hollywood sometimes makes me crazy, I wish there were more cities like it."

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