

[Christopher Isherwood](#)

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## Christopher Isherwood

1904-1986; Vedantist Writer/Seeker, An Inner Man of Wit, Warmth and Depth

Forty-five years ago, on a sultry July afternoon, 35-year old Christopher Isherwood met and embraced Ramakrishna Vedanta in downtown Hollywood, California. Aldous Huxley, writer extraordinaire and ardent explorer of Hindu interior consciousness, had just introduced Isherwood to his guru, Swami Prabhavananda, founder of the Hollywood Ramakrishna Mission Vedanta Society.

For Isherwood, by then one of England's hottest young novelists, the encounter turned his psyche and life inside out. Suddenly a whole layer of his mind, a monkish love of Being previously only hinted at, came welling up on the wave of Vedanta philosophy and Swami's artless, God-centered personality. Isherwood's beloved writing, his Hollywood screenplay job, his world seemed tissue thin, a prism of maya that obscured the Reality of Brahman. Like Huxley, he began hungrily meditating, became a vegetarian and underwent a "conversion" to the Ramakrishna sect of Hinduism. He wrote at the time, "I'm tired of strumming on that old harp, the Ego, darling Me," and later reflected, "I couldn't write a line at that time."

Swami Prabhavananda prodded and cajoled Isherwood back into writing - the two of them, both short with boyish grins and faces, like matching East and West bookends, often collaborating. The result was a rich feast of Hindu scriptural translations, Vedanta essays, a biography of Sri Ramakrishna and novels, plays and screenplays, all imbued with themes and characters of Vedanta, karma, reincarnation and the Upanishadic quest.

Swami Prabhavananda died on July 4th, 1976, when Isherwood was traveling abroad, abruptly severing their earthly friendship and guru/disciple ties. On January 4th, 1986, Christopher Isherwood died of cancer at his Santa Monica, California, home. He was 81. Again echoing Huxley in death, he requested no

memorial or service, just a simple cremation.

Two years ago Isherwood completed his final book, *My Guru and His Disciple*, a moving testimony to Swami Prabhavananda and an insightful look back at his own spiritual quest. It was a fitting endeavor for his deep winter years, the time when Hindu men traditionally seek the Self of themselves.

If Christopher Isherwood had been born in Calcutta, Bengal in the 1850's he may have joined Sri Ramakrishna's coterie of bright, young disciples. In the karmic matrix of things though, he was born in August, 1904, at Wyberslegh, England, the eldest son of middle-class nobility.

Against his will he was confirmed into the Anglican Church, which he loathed, regretting that he had let himself be swayed. As a young man there was little inkling of his deep spirituality and pacifism. He traveled widely, wrote incessantly, adopting E.M. Forester as a writing mentor. His homosexuality, never hidden, nudged him into writing gripping portrayals of gay individuals who were also spiritual seekers. By the time he was 30, he was critically acclaimed for his novels set in pre-World War II Berlin, on which the hugely successful 1976 film, "Cabaret" would be based. The novels were intensely human, prophetic as far as the war was concerned and established him as a forceful dialogue-and-scene writer. Hollywood wanted him, he needed the money and his innate pacifism drove him from Europe's impending Armageddon.

Arriving in Hollywood in 1939, his first two months were spent with George Heard, a fiftyish Irishman, mystic-historian who meditated 6-hours a day and founded his own monastery at Trubaco Canyon. It was eventually gifted to the Vedanta Society. Heard was the first to discover Swami Prabhavananda and Vedanta. He had introduced Huxley to the swami. Through Heard, Isherwood joined an extraordinary band of mystic explorers which included Huxley, Bertrand Russel, Chris Wood, John Yale and ex-Theosophist messiah Krishnamurti. Every Tuesday the group would enjoy a vegetarian picnic under olive trees at a faddish Hollywood open market. Through Huxley, Isherwood befriended the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky who recalled that when Isherwood first met him at his home, he fell asleep while listening to a record of Stravinsky's music. Stravinsky said that's when his affection for Isherwood began.

He worked in Hollywood's film factories, a writer for hire, a means of making money. He said of it, "The studio, is just an office I visit in the daytime, a spectacular example of the world of maya, one might say." His love, though, was meditation and talking with Swami (every Wednesday for 35 years he would drive to the Vedanta center to talk with Prabhavananda). These musings became the fodder of his many essays for the Society's "Vedanta in the West" magazine. During this time he abdicated his inherited family estate in favor of his younger brother.

In 1943, Isherwood settled into the Vedanta Society monastery to work with Swami on a translation of the Bhagavad Gita. During these secluded months, he seriously considered undertaking the rigorous 12-year training of the Ramakrishna swamis. His final decision was to continue his "writing dharma." But his subsequent books manifestly carried overtones of monastic life and perspective - the last name of one novel's central character is Monk. He often spent periods of seclusion at the Vedanta monastery.

In between other novels, Isherwood worked on the biography, Ramakrishna and His Disciples, over a period of six years. It began as a labor of gratitude to Swami Prabhavananda, but with monitoring from the Ramakrishna swamis and the constraints of having to write sanctimoniously, it became in the end, "a labor of sheer will power." He privately wished that he "could have sucked some of the sanctity out of it and dimmed the light." He really wanted to write about the Hindu quest with his usual gritty texture of reality.

He finally got that opportunity with his early 70's novel, A Meeting by the River, a story of two brothers, one worldly, one contemplative who becomes a Hindu swami, and their relationship with an elder swami who eventually dies. Isherwood Grafted the book into a play, which was successfully staged, and a screenplay that almost but never made it to film.

Robert Adjemian, a Ramakrishna monk, said of him, "He had a certain inner quality, was warm, solid, a sensitive man with many friends."

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