



## A Moment's Self-Reflection

*In Conversation:* Local author Sophie Coulombeau talks to literary heavyweight Will Self

INTERVIEWING WILL SELF IS SOMETHING OF AN INTIMIDATING PROSPECT. MY FRIENDS' REACTIONS WHEN I TELL THEM WHAT I'VE DONE GIVE A GOOD IDEA OF THE REASONS WHY. "DID YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT HE SAID?" ONE ASKS, WHILE ANOTHER QUIPS, "LEARN ANY NEW WORDS?"

Over the last three decades, Self – novelist, journalist, annihilator of spluttering right-wingers on TV panel shows – has become a household name, partly thanks to his gargantuan intellect and matching vocabulary. His unofficial status as a public intellectual seemed likely to be formalised recently when there were media reports that he had been asked to

BBC Radio 4's inaugural writer-in-residence. But this never came to pass. He has a subversive streak, a dislike of institutional discipline, which led him to reject the position: "They were describing another middle aged white wonk talking arse. I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't subject myself to that kind of editorial control."

Yorkshire residents will have a chance to hear Self speaking - free from the shackles of editorial control - on 20 March, as part of the York Literature Festival. It's a safe bet that he'll talk about his latest novel *Umbrella*, a dazzlingly ambitious narrative exploring themes of psychiatric disorder and technological development over the Twentieth Century. It's been described by critics as a homage to modernism, though something about this categorisation rang false when I read it. It is driven more insistently than the works of Woolf and Joyce by a compelling, generally linear narrative; it's grittier and more savage; strewn with startling lexical fireworks. So I'm pleased that, when

I ask him about the 'modernist' label, he's ambivalent: "You're right to suspect that for me, in many ways, it's a conventional novel. Character-driven." He attributes the critical obsession with

pigeonholing to the fact that "critics tend to be boys and girls who loved critical theory... they are pre-occupied by intertextual questions, in a way that I'm not." Still, this doesn't really matter; he tells me bluntly, because "the reading public no longer trust critics or feel that critics are important."

It's not just criticism that Self sees as decreasingly important in the public's view, but fiction itself. "The novel has steadily declined in its cultural status throughout my career. If you can quantify it I would say that it's about 60% as important as it was thirty years ago." I ask him how he feels about that. There's a long pause, then a snort of laughter. "Pretty negative!" Nonetheless, he's unflinchingly insistent that this is the case, citing his own leisure activities: "I don't read novels, I watch HBO series." I can't help laughing. "Well, I do!" he protests. I ask which ones. He's lukewarm about *Dexter*; rapturous about *Breaking Bad*.

I wonder whether his pessimism about literary culture is related to the fact that recently *Umbrella* narrowly lost the Man Booker Prize to Hilary Man-

66

**The reading public no longer trust critics or feel that critics are important**

99

tel's *Bring Up The Bodies*. It turns out that it is, but not in the way one might expect. Self seems utterly unruffled by the fact *Umbrella* didn't win, but profoundly disturbed by the fact that it came so close. When I ask him how it felt to be shortlisted, he pauses at length, eventually replying: "Pretty uncomfortable actually." Pressed on why, he delivers a sharp indictment of what he calls "the arbitrary quality of cultural value", which is highlighted by prizes like the Booker. "So, the voting went to the wire and was decided by the Chairman. Much as I respect Peter Stothard... I don't consider his judgment to be the last word on any text, let alone my own. So in Peter's decision to award the prize to Hilary lay 700,000 sales. Right? So the connection of Peter's judgment to the vast number of sales – Hilary would have earned at least a million pounds – seems to me – um, how can I put it? - Might we say wrong? It just seems to me that cultural value has become National Lotteryised." >



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As a new novelist myself, I ask for advice. "Prepare yourself for twenty years of solitary confinement." Anything else? "If you want to be any good, you'll have to sacrifice your personal relationships." Contemplation of a friendless future temporarily deflates me, but I rally: Surely it's worth it to know that you've written something good? Another pause. "I don't know. The wind changed such a long time ago that it's just not been about that for me for a very long time. It's just been my operating system."

Self's eulogy for the cultural prestige of his craft, though often sobering, never seems whiny or self-indulgent. Undercutting his pessimism is a wry stoicism, a

realisation that all the problems he refers to are "perennial" or "the middle classes getting their knickers in a twist", and a determination to persist with what he wants to write anyway.

He tells me enthusiastically about Shark, the forthcoming sequel to Umbrella, in which the reader once again looks through the eyes of psychiatrist Zack Busner. "There's an acid trip that he takes on the fourth of May 1970. We'll be back inside his head, under the influence of LSD."

If Self sees the novel as a sinking ship, I get the impression he'll go down with it. And that he'll do it with the irreverent, self-mocking humour that has characterised the interview, often expressed

in ripe slang that provides a pleasing counterpoint to his eloquence. We finish with him urging me to get the "brass front" to give him a "complete slagging" if I want to impress him.

I put the phone down regretful that I can't do so in good conscience; if the conversation was anything to go by, the event on March 20 promises a heady mix of acerbic wit, unusual frankness and uncomfortable truths.

Oh, and: 'numinous', 'gestalt', 'hieratic'. Three new words. Not as bad as I'd feared. ☒



# A Taste of India

If you've a taste for adventure and want to impress in the kitchen, take a trip to Rafi's Spicebox on Goodramgate to sample their famous Curry Packs.

With generations of recipes and family expertise Rafi's offer us a glimpse into their flavoursome world with their custom made spice packs. For

inspiration, join them online at [www.spicebox.co.uk](http://www.spicebox.co.uk) where you'll find authentic recipes and expert tips on how to cook mouthwatering Indian and Far East dishes in only 25 minutes.

What's more, they're now offering free postage on all orders to the UK over £40!



## Pasanda Masala

RECIPE

To get you started on your culinary journey, here's a recipe for a Pasanda Masala. Concocted by the Mogul Empire over 500 years ago, the dish has evolved from its origins as a kebab into a popular curry. It can be made with a handpicked Rafi's mix of ingredients priced at £4.25.

### INGREDIENTS:

- 1 Rafi's Pasanda Curry Pack
- 1 kg diced lamb
- 4 fresh tomatoes
- 200ml white wine
- 200ml water
- 25g almond flakes toasted
- Double cream to garnish

### METHOD:

Soak the lamb in the wine for 2 hours. Simmer the spice pack with the water for 10 minutes then add the lamb and the wine and cook till the lamb is tender. Add the tomatoes and cook for a further 10 minutes. Garnish with the almonds and a drizzle of double cream.

