

Alan Sillitoe

Alan Sillitoe was born in Nottingham to working-class parents, Christopher Sillitoe and Sabina Like Arthur Seaton, the anti-hero of his first novel, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, his father worked at the Raleigh Bicycle Company's factory in the town. His father was illiterate, violent, and unsteady with his jobs, and the family was often on the brink of starvation.

Sillitoe left school at the age of 14, having failed the entrance examination to grammar school. He worked at the Raleigh factory for the next four years, spending his free time reading prodigiously and being a "serial lover of local girls". He joined the Air Training Corps in 1942, then the Royal Air Force, albeit too late to serve in the Second World War. He served as a wireless operator in Malaya during the Emergency. After returning to Britain he was planning to enlist in the Royal Canadian Air Force when it was discovered that he had tuberculosis. He spent 16 months in an RAF hospital.

Pensioned off at the age of 21 on 45 shillings a week, he lived in France and Spain for seven years in an attempt to recover. In 1955, while living in Mallorca with the American poet Ruth Fainlight, whom he married in 1959, and in contact with the poet Robert Graves, Sillitoe started work on *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which was published in 1958. Influenced in part by the stripped-down prose of Ernest Hemingway, the book conveys the attitudes and situation of a young factory worker faced with the inevitable end of his youthful philandering. As with John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and John Braine's *Room at the Top*, the novel's real subject was the disillusionment of post-war Britain and the lack of opportunities for the working class. It was adapted as a film by Karel Reisz in 1960, with Albert Finney as Arthur Seaton; the screenplay was written by Sillitoe. Sillitoe's story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, which concerns the rebellion of a borstal boy with a talent for running, won the Hawthornden Prize in 1959. It was also adapted into a film, in 1962, directed by Tony Richardson and starring Tom Courtenay. Sillitoe again wrote the screenplay.

With Fainlight he had a child, David. They later adopted another, Susan. Sillitoe lived at various times in Kent, London and Montpellier. In London he was friendly with the bookseller Bernard Stone (who had been born in Nottingham a few years before Sillitoe) and became one of the bohemian crowd that congregated at Stone's Turret Bookshop on Kensington Church Walk. In the 1960s Sillitoe was celebrated in the Soviet Union as a spokesman for the "oppressed worker" in the West. Invited to tour the country, he visited several times in the 1960s and in 1968 he was asked to address the Congress of Soviet Writers' Unions, where he denounced Soviet human rights abuses, many of which he had witnessed.

In 1990 Sillitoe was awarded an honorary degree by Nottingham Polytechnic, now Nottingham Trent University. The city's older Russell Group university, the University of Nottingham, also awarded him an honorary D.Litt. in 1994. In 2006 his best-known play was staged at the university's Lakeside Arts theatre in an in-house production.

Sillitoe wrote many novels and several volumes of poems. His autobiography, *Life Without Armour*, which was critically acclaimed on publication in 1995, offers a view of his squalid childhood. In an interview Sillitoe claimed that "A writer, if he manages to earn a living at what he's doing, even if it's a very poor living, acquires some of the attributes of the old-fashioned gentleman (if I can be so silly)." *Gadfly in Russia*, an account of his travels in Russia spanning 40 years, was published in 2007. In 2008 London Books republished *A Start in Life* in its London Classics series to mark the author's 80th birthday. Sillitoe appeared on *Desert Island Discs* on BBC Radio 4 on 25 January 2009.

Sillitoe's long-held desire for *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* to be remade for a contemporary filmgoing audience was never achieved, despite strong efforts. Danny Brocklehurst was to adapt the book and Sillitoe gave his blessing to the project, but Tony Richardson's estate and Woodfall Films prevented it from going ahead. Sillitoe was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1997. or his debut novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and his early short story "The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner", both of which were adapted into films.