



## A Bottle in the Smoke

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A.N. Wilson has produced a number of award-winning novels and biographies. With *INCLINE OUR HEARTS* (1988), he introduced protagonist and narrator Julian Ramsay. Besides offering a wonderful comedic slice of English life, Ramsay's comments dwell on the nature of biography. Ramsay even goes so far as to say that biographers are nothing more than arrogant liars. Since Wilson is a highly respected biographer, it is provocative to see him taking swipes at the very genre at which he excels. *A BOTTLE IN THE SMOKE* continues these reflections on biography as Ramsay grows into manhood.

In the 1950's, Ramsay breaks out of the caged environment of his childhood and resolves to become both a writer and actor. After moving to London to get away from the world of his guardian, Uncle Roy, he takes a job as a bartender in a bar that caters to the bohemian crowd. He takes up residence in a boardinghouse patronized by other struggling artists, hoping to break the shackles of class-conscious English gentry life and make a name for himself based solely on talent. Wilson is adept at poking fun at the English way of doing things, as Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis have done to perfection in the past.

Ramsay marries Anne Starling, and his good luck seems to be his strong suit. Before long, though, outside forces begin to intrude on his happy home. With great wit, Wilson is able to dissect the complexities of life and reveal the dark side of personalities. Before a year passes, Ramsay's marriage to Anne is in ruins and the novel he has published does not sell. Ramsay also has to deal with family matters that are the stuff of which melodramas are made. He must take stock of his own situation and give up the grand delusions that have been preoccupying him for far too long. Wilson is always intelligent and on many occasions rises to poignancy. His narrator, Julian Ramsay, is a wonderful mouthpiece for Wilson's comic touches and observations concerning the blurred line between fiction and biography. The third and last installment of this series can only be eagerly awaited.

## Sources for Further Study

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## A Bottle in the Smoke: A Bottle in the Smoke

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