ALAN SILLITOE

Stephen Maughan

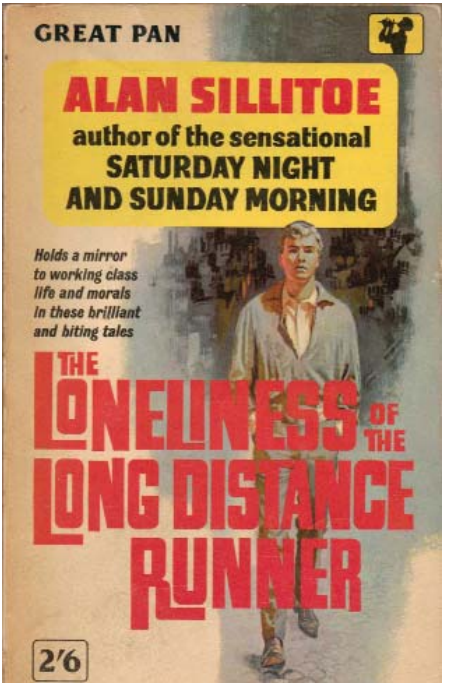
'I do not write what society or editors expect'

— Alan Sillitoe

FOR ME, it all started with Keith Waterhouse. Actually it really began during a lazy sunny afternoon at school when my English teacher, without warning, put on *Billy Liar* for us to watch. We hadn't been studying the book, indeed we were halfway through reading *Hamlet,* and our teacher never explained why he decided to take a break from Shakespeare. We watched it over a week, in three short lessons, and then our class didn't even discuss the film but immediately returned to *Hamlet*, which seemed a million miles away from the tragedy of a working class youth in the Midlands.

I was transfixed by Billy, who, I believed, seemed to sum up everything that was right about British youth (of whatever decade) – he was bright, lazy, rebellious, dreamy, misguided in love, and funny. These same qualities I later found in both Arthur Seaton, the hero of Sillitoe's most celebrated work, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning,* and Colin Smith, the Borstal boy in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner.*

A year on from discovering *Billy Liar*, I noticed the BBC was showing a film with Tom Courtenay playing the lead role. Tom Courtenay was Billy Liar in my mind, and this was the only reason I tuned in to watch *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*. The film, scripted by Alan Sillitoe, absolutely blew me away, with its burning themes of rebellion and mistrust of authority. At the time I knew nothing about Alan Sillitoe, or of the so-called 'angry young men' to whom he had found himself reluctantly attached. The Nottingham working classes meant nothing to me either, and it wasn't until I had left university seven years later, and happened to stumble across a cheap paperback copy of *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, that I started to discover the joys and delights of Sillitoe and realise what a gifted writer he was. On April 25th 2010 we lost one of our greatest writers of the 20th century.



The New Yorker wrote in September 1959, when reviewing Sillitoe's debut novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*: 'For the first time English working life is treated as a normal aspect of the human condition and as a natural subject for a writer … Even if he never writes anything more he has assured himself a place in the history of the English novel.' Altogether Sillitoe wrote 53 volumes –➤

including novels, short stories, children's fiction, poetry, plays, memoirs and criticism – but he never topped the wild success of his first novel. Still, it is wrong to dismiss him as someone who simply had a lucky break, or as just another angry young man. For his intelligence, compassion and anger burn passionately through each one of his books, be it his *Marmalade Jim* series for children, or *Birthday,* his sequel to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* featuring Arthur Seaton, the rebellious youth of old, now in his seventies and looking after a terminally ill wife.

Alan Sillitoe, born in 1928, the son of an illiterate and often unemployed labourer, grew up in a typical working class family in Nottingham. He left school at 14, finding work in the Raleigh bicycle factory. Called up for National Service, he served briefly in the RAF before contracting TB, and was sent to hospital in 1948. His treatment was strict bed rest and a steady diet of meat and vegetables, with beer issued to the patients after breakfast and available throughout the day. He passed the time smoking a regular supply of fine cigars and reading from an excellent library cart which included all the classics – Shakespeare, Tolstoy, Dickens, Dostoevsky. At the age of 21 he bought a Remington portable typewriter and began writing poetry. These poems would go on to become his first published work, *Without Beer or Bread* (albeit in a limited print run of 350 copies). By the time Sillitoe left the sanctuary in July 1949 he had, in his own words, undergone a 'transformation' and started to see himself as a writer.

A year later, in a Nottingham bookshop, he met, and subsequently married, the American poet and playwright Ruth Fainlight. He continued with his writing, winning the Nottingham Writers' Club short story competition in July 1950 with 'The General's Dilemma' (later extended into his 1960 novel, *The General*). In 1953 the couple moved to Majorca where, encouraged by the poet Robert Graves, he started to write a novel about Nottingham. This was *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

In 1957 the couple returned to England, and in 1958 *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* was published. The novel is more than just a slice of social realism or purely a working class novel, it's a landmark book in Sillitoe's career, a spectacular semi-autobiographical tale of the struggles of Arthur Seaton, a young and dissatisfied factory worker with a constant desire to seek enjoyment as the 'best and bingiest glad-time of the week'. Seaton's existence centres on getting paid, on sexual adventures and wild, hazy weekends at a local pub. His rebellious outlook on life, and his refusal to be dragged down by an unfair system, ultimately save him from such a self-destructive lifestyle.

What really sets it apart from other provincial novels of the time is that Seaton is a working class man. The media were quick to point out that Sillitoe himself was working class. He suddenly found himself a spokesman for the restless working class youth of post-war Britain and journalists added Sillitoe to the 'angry young men' group of political and critical writers which included Kingsley Amis, Keith Waterhouse and, of course, John Osborne.

Being called an angry young man and working class horrified Sillitoe. In his uncompromising autobiography, *life without armour*, he claims he hardly knew the other 'angry young men'; he thought the term itself 'just didn't mean anything'. And his class, he felt, was irrelevant: 'I never thought of myself as being of the so-called "working class" or any class at all.'

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning was quickly followed by the short story 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner', which to my mind is Sillitoe's masterpiece. It is the fast-paced tale of Colin Smith, a borstal boy, and his rebellion against authority. Colin rants about his desire to 'stick them up against a wall and let them have it'. By 'them' he means 'all the cops, governors, posh whores, pen pushers, army officers, Members of Parliament'. Sillitoe himself claims his story 'had all the influences of my life before the age of 30 coming out from the subconscious. Because even though it's about a young man in borstal, you could say it was about a writer and his attitude to pressure from the media and society.'

Richard Bradford, in his vivid biography of Sillitoe, *The Life of a Long-Distance Writer*, argues that 'his achievement, and it is a magnificent achievement, is to become a self-contained literary presence who pays no heed to the conventions of literary writing'. Indeed the theme of a Sillitoe – the writer rebelling against society – is also picked up by Jeffrey

Simmons, the commissioning editor of W.H. Allen: 'the story, far more than the novel [*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*] came straight from Alan. Reading Colin was like listening to Alan.'

For the next fifty years Sillitoe would continue to write gritty realism. He was a truly masterful storyteller of our times, giving a distinctive voice to the outsider and the alienated. In his 1982 novel *Her Victory* he focused on a forty-year-old woman trapped in a loveless marriage who escapes to London, where her newfound freedom sends her into a deep depression where 'even love was something to be endured'.

The newspaper obituaries following Sillitoe's death in April focused, perhaps rightly, on his early work, and discussed both his radical political views and the impact of Nottingham on his work. Despite this, very little has been said about his poetry, which was often misunderstood by critics. I believe it deserves another look.

His 1960 collection *Rats and Other Poems* to my eye still seems to be of a very high standard fifty years on. At the time critics were puzzled, or indifferent to its release, and Sillitoe himself wrote, 'It has had bad reviews nearly everywhere: nobody likes the book at all, which doesn't surprise me.'

The Times Literary Supplement claimed in one of the better reviews that it was 'loose and coarse in its rhetorical structure and texture', and seemed somewhat alarmed that the writer would 'perhaps like to cut our throats', so hostile and disgusted did he seem to be with 'the rats' (thought to mean the establishment).

> You shall love the rats who take the hours
> from your clumsy hands, who guide you
> over roads
> and traffic islands, take the heavy loads
> from lighter brains, and give you paper
> flowers
> of happiness…

Sillitoe said he wrote poems to 'express emotions that can't be expressed in any other medium', but the complaint of the critics is that it's filled with abstractions that can only be understood in the poet's own mind. I disagree. For me *not understanding* is the joy of poetry. What really stands out in Sillitoe's poems is not simply his ability to expresses his emotions, but the beauty and power of each emotion lurking behind the lines. He published eight volumes of verse yet never wrote anything better than his *Rats* collection.

Sillitoe continued to write. His recent works include *Birthday* (2001) the semi-autobiographical sequel to *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, where the Seaton brothers meet for a 70th birthday in Nottingham, and *The German Numbers Woman* (1999), the tale of Howard, a blinded RAF man who spends his time picking up Morse code (Sillitoe himself admitted to listening to Morse code for relaxation).

Reflecting on his career at the age of 80, Sillitoe said: 'There must have been a point in my life when I had to choose between living and writing, and I chose writing. Of course, that doesn't mean you aren't attached to life through troubles, possible tragedies, and so on. But you have to know in which direction your spirit wants to go, and never lose sight of that.' He was an honest man and forthright author who candidly stated, 'I am a writer, and fuck you, I'll write what I like.' ■