

## the press conference with WILL SELF

The front door opens slowly and Will Self glares at me with an oddly surprised, contorted look. My cheerful greeting gets an indecipherable mumble and an automaton handshake. Clearly, the big man with the big words for dark, sheer-face fiction and admired journalism doesn't waste his vocab on piffing pleasantries. "Sorry. Is this a bad time?" "How can it be? Indeed, this is the allocated time." Bloody hell! If getting a "Hello" needs medieval dentistry, the interview will require a colonic via a rusty Victorian drainpipe.

I follow the rainbow weave carpet to Self's top-floor study, a box of no more than 11ft by 10ft. A nice enough room, except for a shocking infestation afflicting every conceivable surface: mini yellow Post-it notes. My guess, there are 2,000-plus, mostly in ordered infantry lines or erratic placings on shelf edges, fireplace, cupboard door — there's even an orphan curled on the window pane. Scribbled upon each piece are thoughts, quotes, descriptions, micro sketches. These fragments of creativity all cling in cryogenic suspension waiting to be plucked free and given literary life by their gangly 6ft 5in master.

Self was infamously sacked by *The Observer* in 1997 for snorting heroin on John Major's campaign jet. He has been happily clean for six years, but clearly these days he's a crazed wall-collage junkie who mainlines Post-it notes by the kilo.

Now 44, Self lives in a four-storey house in Stockwell, south London, with his second wife, *Independent* columnist Deborah Orr and their two children. He has two more kids from his first marriage. We talk at his desk — a wooden work-top slab. He has a slow, gurgling phlegm delivery in a tone that is just short of abject boredom. He's intense, fascinating and, obviously, some key stationery short of a fully stocked Ryman's.

**Will, the decor is pretty incredible. Can you talk me through it?**  
The fiction goes on the wall and different zones will be different bits of a book. Some will be different chapters, metaphors, ideas, character descriptions. A new novel is hidden behind the door. That concentration around the map [above the fireplace] is a collection of short stories. They'll stay up there and paddulate and mature for another year or two, over the course of which I will write that collection. A lot of the latest book — *The Book Of Dave* — is



still up, but some I did not use, so it will stay and I will roll that stuff into another book. Over there [inner wall] are the scene plans for the novel *Domain*. There [front wall by the window] is when I took every epigram that Wilde made in his original [*The Picture of Dorian Gray*] and trans-literated them into a modern version. A lot should come down, but you get very used to having it, the walls look naked without it. If [the collage] goes back to when I moved here in '97, so there are nine-year-old Post-its somewhere. Some may even have come from where I was before. I am a paper retentive and I have a very bad memory, so I have to write everything down. But I do know where it all is.

**You have weekly columns in the *Evening Standard* and *The Independent*, your books and more. Talk me through your writing week?**  
I am multi-tasking — as they say in the modern idiom. I am writing journalism, longer pieces, shorter pieces. I tend to gestate books longer than I actually work on writing them, so, at the moment I am working really on one thing and I am planning four other things. I am working on a play, a short story, a 20,000-word essay and I am planning a new novel that I will not start until the autumn. Mondays and Tuesdays are fiction — proper

**"They asked me to present a show about drugs. I said, Imagine that for 20 years you couldn't stop thinking about chives, then miraculously the obsession with chives was lifted. Would you want to do another fucking piece about chives?"**

writing, as it were. I tend to shoe-horn in my *Indy* column some time in those days. Wednesdays, early morning, I do the *Standard* column. Charlie, who lives across the road, leans on the fence remarking on the world. I just go and lean on the *Evening Standard* — it's an opportunity to get on your saw horse and complain. That takes a couple of hours, then I do my own stuff. Thursdays and Fridays, fiction again. It's not a complex week.

**How have you managed to juggle such diversity between serious fiction and journalism?**  
I built my careers in tandem. I was never trained as a journalist, I am not a creature of Fleet Street. I was barely writing for the press until I published my first work of fiction in '91 [*The Quantity Theory Of Insanity*] which had a terrifying baptism of caresses. I was the coming man, it was short-listed for prizes.

Portrait  
Phil Adams

### WILL'S NEWS SCHEDULE

#### Newspapers

Two or three days a week I at least scan all the broadsheets and a couple of the tabloids. You've got to read the *Mail* to know how the bulk of Little England is thinking, or being told what to think. And I always pick up a *Standard*. The only paper I read regularly is *The Indy*. Since 9/11, it has been the only conviction-edited paper. Simon Keiner ran up his flag over Iraq early and has kept it there, as he has with global warming and environment issues. We don't get the *Sundays*, it's a day off. I do get the *Sindy* and the *Obs* occasionally. It is David Aaronovitch-lite now, of course, which helps.

#### Magazines

I take the *London Review of Books*. I take *The Week*. It's a good little digest, perfectly handy, but I take that for the property section largely — I just like dreaming of having one of those country houses. *New Statesman*, obviously. *Prospect*. *Private Eye*. I used to take the *New Yorker*, but I don't really bother any more. It got awfully flat and un-adventurous post 9/11. I think a lot of American media drew its horns in.

That soon changed, I'm glad to say. I found that editors would answer my phone calls, but journalism wasn't something I set out to do.

There tends to be around Fleet Street a feeling that if you write fiction, particularly literary fiction, then you must consider yourself to be of a higher order. I just don't and I hope I am not up my own nose. It is just a different thing that I do. I have done a few good pieces over the years, but I don't look at myself as one of the really good journalists at all. Too much of what I do is what my late friend Elizabeth Young called cultural bubble wrap, stuff that people sit around popping.

It cuts the other way — in that the literary crowd slightly look down on me and see me as this sort of populist. I don't know, you get paranoid, don't you? Especially if they are after you!

#### How do you feel when the 'drug story' is brought up now?

Year on year it actually dies down. In early sobriety, it was a very uncomfortable and prickly issue because, of course, the anxiety is that you are somehow conjuring up the demons and you are going to pick up again. But it has now been more than six years [clean]. I am not saying that there is no eventuality under which that [picking up] would happen, but I feel pretty secure and don't feel those kind of anxieties around it.

People still ask me to write on the subject a great deal and, frankly, I get bored with it. I get a myriad of requests the whole time. Channel 4 had this reality TV junkie show with addicts withdrawing in a room. They asked me to present that. I said, Imagine that for 20 years you couldn't stop thinking about chives, then miraculously the obsession with chives was lifted. Would you want to do another fucking piece about chives? It is a great relief not to have to be chivo-centric.

#### How do you feel looking back, particularly about your boss at the time, Alan Rusbridger, who sacked you, and the treatment by the press generally?

I have said interperate things about Alan in the past, but I am more temperate now. Obviously, I am still not happy with what happened. It was very grisly, but the truth of the matter is, I was a roaring fucking junkie well out of control on an assignment. I would probably fire me, but I might not have done it in quite the precipitate or, to some extent, politically useful way in which he did it — both for the paper and, interestingly, for New Labour.

It was the lack of sympathy. There are a lot of problems with understanding the pathological nature of addiction and alcoholism. I think it is getting better in our society, but you might have expected at the hardcore of the liberal Establishment that there would have been more understanding. I was very

#### Television and Radio

I watch *Newsnight*. For some perverse reason everyone seems to think Sky rolling news is better, but we tend to watch BBC News 24. We have just got into the furniture of it as a channel. I am fond of *Today*, but I don't listen much because I prefer to talk to my children in the morning. I would vaguely like to get my broadband together so I can get some of the podcasts later in the day.

#### Web

[We look at a sadly discoloured PC of unrecognisable breeding, with a *Power Rangers* screensaver and a grimy keyboard.] The PC is for journalism and is an antique. I have not up-graded since 1996. I hate computers. I write my books on manual typewriters. Olivettis. 1961. I've got three. I like kinetic machines, things where energy is directly transferred into something. There is something about the profligacy of technology that I find increasingly upsetting. The idea that some stoner teenager downloading the *Beatle Boys* has more computing power at his finger tips than NASA did in 1970 — I find it offensive. It seems so decadent that we have computers.

much sold as a kind of pseudo Hunter Thompson writer, a guy who is extreme, does all this shit. There was a problem at *The Observer* that it had kind of traded off that.

#### However, clearly the whole episode made you famous and, consequently, elevated your career. Can you now view it in a positive light?

I just don't know, it is such a miserable fucking malaise, addiction. So many people die from it, especially if you are an injecting heroin addict. It is so random, you may drop dead any day. It is hard to say... placing myself in the vagaries of chance... but, in one narrative of my life, arguably it was a good thing. Denial is the key thing and that whole imbroglio of '97 took me to the point where I was really the only person in the country who didn't know I was a drug addict. Eventually, it became much easier for my denial, so from that point of view maybe it was a good thing. I am philosophic.

#### Do you mind telling me what quantities of heroin were you doing?

[Light laughter] What you are asking is what I call a *drug porn* question. I think it is interesting, for your interview, because it is something to do with the way that the press perceives drugs. I think there is a very strong element in what you can call straight society — by that I mean people who haven't been deeply into the drug scene or alcoholism... there is always a great fascination for the idea of excess. Sexual excess: "The Primrose Hill Set"... men galore... I went down on her in the shower... great headlines. The same with drugs... Daniella Westbrook: "My nose fell out. I was doing this much gear. There is interest... a kind of salaciousness. The truth of the

#### Will Self's FANTASY FLIERS

**What would be the Fantasy Headline of the story you would most like to read?**  
"Queen Revealed As The Fifth Man", I'd love that. I can't abide the monarchy and I think her as the Communist mole, that would finally put paid to them, wouldn't it?

**What would be the Fantasy Headline involving yourself?**  
"Self Wins Nobel Prize... For Physics". I am completely innumerate. My eight-year-old said the other day, "Dad, would you be surprised if you won the Nobel Prize For Literature?" and I said, "Yeah — very!"

**What would be the headline you most dread?**  
There was a one year ago in *The Times* — "Enormous Hole Discovered In Space". I would dread it if I read that again.

**Who would you most like to interview and what question would you ask?**  
I am thinking about doing some interviews again. I would

**No interview would be complete without some discreet product placement. We aim to be a bit more up front, so feel free to pull The Blatant Plug...**  
Self's new novel, *The Book Of Dave*, will be published by Penguin in June, priced £17.99.

matter is, it's not the quantity, it's how you use something that determines the problem. It's a mental illness, a disease.

#### Are you saying that my fascination is indicative of the way the press report drug addiction?

I am not condemning you for asking it. I think you are representative of our times, in having that intrigue, that frisson around it. It is provoked by me being in the public eye. A lot of deals go down in that alley [points across the street]. I can watch four or five crack deals go down each day, but you are not interested in asking the guy in the alley how much he uses.

There's certainly a tendency to play to the straight readers' desire to vicariously experience the abyss of addiction. Both in terms of what they perceive as its thrills — total abandonment, excess, intoxication — and also by embracing it through a newspaper story to also feel themselves cosy and safe and on the other side of the river from it. Contrary impulses are bound in it, but, look, they are bound up reading about murder, extreme sex, a lot of things.

Your question is also within the confessional rubric. The person you are asking is being shirren by admitting that they did this — I was that bad that I smoked my own leg, I scraped my brain out with a teaspoon and fed it into the crack pipe. I don't need to be shirren, particularly in a public forum. I go elsewhere for that, off tape recorder. And nor do I wish to satisfy a drug porn market.

#### What was it like being at the centre of the feeding frenzy of the pack?

It was mercifully brief. It lasted about a week, two weeks at its peak. It was an extremely upsetting experience. But I really just blame myself — not the press. It was shit I had brought on myself, so I am not in a position to say, Oh the press are dreadful. And, of course, I am a journalist. I suppose there was some legitimate public interest, but it was blown out of proportion. Even then, in the thick of it, I was still using drugs and my face was on the front of every newspaper. I was incredibly paranoid. At a petrol station I thought I couldn't even get out of the car. We were sort of on the run. My wife [Deborah] said, "If you don't get out now you are going to be living under paranoia for the rest of your life." I don't know if that was exaggeration, but there was some truth in it. I really did have to get out and face it and carry on facing it.

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quite like to interview David Lynch, the film director. I am interested in his oeuvre, but I only want to interview someone who is likely to answer my questions. [But I agree. Like, How much smack did you do?] Toxic! mon brave! But one of my reasons for not answering that question actually went above and beyond that rubric...

**What question would you never answer?**  
I would not answer any questions about my life that really affects what is private. So, nothing that relates to my emotional life.

**What headline would you like on your obituary?**  
Err... umm... It is a rather creepy question that, isn't it? Death is always a career move for a writer. I think I would like to be remembered as somebody who took seriously the idea of writers being completely outside of any of the vested controlling power systems. So I suppose, "Anarchist, Contrarian, Maverick" — that would do it, I suppose.



by Rob McGibbon