

Definition: **Frayn** from *The Macquarie Dictionary*

1.

born 1933, British playwright and novelist; works include the play *Copenhagen* (1998).

Summary Article: **Frayn, Michael**

From *Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Literature: The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Michael Frayn is a man of letters best known as a playwright and a novelist. He began his writing career, though, as a much admired author of topical satirical essays and was credited as one of the fathers of the “satire boom” of the 1960s; he has won fame as a translator, particularly of Anton Chekhov, and two of his books, including one published in 2006, are works of philosophy.

Frayn was born on September 8, 1933, in Mill Hill, a northern suburb of London, in a family he places somewhere between lower-middle and middle-middle class. He received his secondary education first in a fee-paying school and then at the Kingston Grammar School. There he wrote poetry, edited a school magazine, and was, like many writers of his generation, a youthful communist. He earned a state scholarship to study at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, but deferred his entry to do his required national service, which proved a boon, since he was taught Russian as a military translator (a study which prepared him for his translations of Chekhov).

Entering Cambridge in 1954, he studied moral sciences, or philosophy. He wrote for the literary magazine and for *Footlights!*, the annual Cambridge student review. Upon graduation in 1957 he began to write for the *Guardian*, first reporting and soon writing humorous columns. He ceased to write a regular column in 1968, though he has since returned to it occasionally. By that time he had begun to publish fiction, his first novel, *The Tin Men* (1965), being followed quickly by *The Russian Interpreter* (1966), *Towards the End of the Morning* (1967), and *A Very Private Life* (1968).

His first plays were performed in 1970 and for several years he wrote steadily and successfully for the theater, his first really sensational hit coming in 1982 with *Noises Off*. There were translations of Chekhov and his first philosophical work, *Constructions* (1974), during the late 1970s and 1980s; then, in 1989, he returned to fiction with *The Trick of It*. He has continued this versatile career. “Late” Frayn would include his play *Copenhagen* (1998), which won the US Tony Award for best play, and the novels *Headlong* (1999), shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, and *Spies* (2002), the Whitbread Novel of the Year.

Frayn's novels cannot be easily or neatly summed up, as they differ so strongly from one another, though they are usually inventive, intelligent, and predominantly comic, and they show a continuing interest in how ordinary people do their work. *The Tin Men* is a farcical treatment of advertising and market research, casting an early sardonic look at cybernetics; a misunderstood visit by the queen triggers the hectic action. It won the Somerset Maugham Award and the Hawthornden Prize. *The Russian Interpreter*, a thriller about an Englishman over his head in Russia, obviously relies on Frayn's Russian language skills and his disillusioning Russian visits. Paul Manning, the innocent abroad, is easily manipulated both by Russians and by an amoral Englishman who claims to be his old university friend.

Towards the End of the Morning (published in the US as *Against Entropy*) takes a gently jaundiced look at the newspaper business, revealing an office full of idle and not very competent journalists, getting through their day, and the disruption that ensues when a new man arrives and works with ambition and drive. *A Very Private Life* begins strikingly: "Once upon a time there will be a little girl called Uncumber." Frayn goes on to depict a dystopian future of human alienation in which the privileged people live hermetically sealed lives, connected by something like the Internet, and shows that efforts to make contact with a wider world, like Uncumber's, are doomed. *Sweet Dreams* is a fantasy about the afterlife, suggesting that heaven is a modest improvement on the earthly life – the departed character Howard Baker can now speak foreign languages and revise embarrassing moments of his life – but is otherwise like New York except populated by earnest social liberals of the sort Howard has known in England.

The Trick of It (1989), published after a long fictional hiatus mostly devoted to the theater, is a darkening campus comedy about a literary critic who marries the author who has been his subject. Far from helping his research program, his marriage disrupts it, produces marital rivalry in which he tries to become a novelist, and ends in career disaster. *A Landing on the Sun* (1991) is an engrossing and touching exploration of the mysterious death of a civil servant. An investigator assigned to learn the truth about a civil servant's suicide learns of a secret love affair and his own relationship to the dead man's family and their sadness. *Now You Know* (1992) is more political than most of Frayn's books. It turns on a campaign for transparency in public life waged by a brash man, uncouth but irresistible, called Terry Little, and the complications that sexual desire, with its privacy and secrecy, introduces into a demand that everything be publicly known.

Headlong is the richest of Frayn's novels. It was criticized by some as "difficult," because it includes much art history and Flemish history; it focuses on a lost Brueghel painting and the machinations of an academic who believes he has found it. The farcical account of how he attempts to acquire it includes the vortex of lying, then lying more to cover the original lies, that Frayn sees in most farce. *Spies* is simultaneously a nostalgic study of youth in a London suburb during World War II, a thriller about suspected spies and multiple forms of betrayal, and a subtle investigation of identity.

Frayn's newspaper columns have been published in five collections. His book *The Human Touch: Our Part in the Creation of the Universe* (2006) is philosophy. But most of his output is in the form of stories – many for the theater, but including 10 of the sharpest and most satisfying novels of the past 40 years.

SEE ALSO: Campus Novel (BIF); Fantasy Fiction (BIF); Utopian and Dystopian Fiction (BIF); World War II in Fiction (BIF)

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