

## Topic Page: [Powell, Anthony, 1905–2000](#)

Definition: **Powell, Anthony Dymoke** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

English novelist. He is best known for *A Dance to The Music of Time*, a series of 12 novels that portrays the snobbish world of the English upper classes after World War 1, beginning with *A Question of Upbringing* (1951) and ending with *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975). His later work includes the novel *The Fisher King* (1986) and four volumes of autobiography.

### Summary Article: **Powell, Anthony**

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

Anthony Dymoke Powell was born December 21, 1905 in London. His father was a military officer of Welsh and English ancestry, his mother a descendant of Lincolnshire landowners. Powell attended the New Beacon School, a preparatory school in Sussex, and then Eton and Oxford. Though his family had enough money to send him to institutions associated with the upper class, he was not himself of the aristocracy. Powell went to London to work at the Duckworth publishing firm, which produced his first novel, *Afternoon Men* (1931), a chronicle of jaded, disaffected young Londoners which served as a drily inconclusive generational manifesto for a cohort born in the twentieth century and inured to its disillusionments. *Venusberg* (1932), his second novel, is set in an unnamed Baltic country, while *From a View to a Death* (1933), his third, is set among the English landowning class and concerns hunting, transvestism, and social aspiration.

Powell's next novel, *Agents and Patients* (1936), set in Berlin and England, involves a pair of swindlers and the innocent young man who becomes involved with them. It achieved a new level of perceptive, philosophical comedy. *What's Become of Waring?* (1939) is the first novel in which Powell used a first-person narrator. This mystery story about literary forgery set the tone for his mature idiom.

But this idiom was not to flower until after World War II, during which Powell served in a variety of administrative and military intelligence positions. Powell resumed producing fiction in 1951 with *A Question of Upbringing*. Whereas his five prewar novels had been short, standalone works heavily reliant on dialogue and without long, meditative passages, this novel announced itself as part of an extended *Music of Time* sequence (1951–75), later amended to *A Dance to the Music of Time*. This sequence followed the fortunes of the narrator character Nicholas Jenkins, a man much like Powell himself, through school, university, work, love, and the army. Yet, unlike C. P. Snow's contemporaneous sequence *Strangers and Brothers* and Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, after which Powell's novel sequence is in some ways patterned, Jenkins does not take a major role in the action and is far more intent on observing the behavior of others. Jenkins's story nonetheless coalesces into one continuous narrative, with a huge array of characters major and minor who pass through the chronicle, often reappearing in situations and places where we least expect them. Three of the figures who reappear most often are Jenkins's principal acquaintances at school: the sensitive, vulnerable Charles Stringham, the hearty, self-confident Peter Templer, and the ambitious, opportunistic Widmerpool. Widmerpool is the antihero of the series, who pops up incongruously in various circumstances (in France, at debutante balls, as the fiancé of a much older woman), and who represents the values despised in the novels. Widmerpool, who begins as a social outsider, has a need to be on the winning side socially and politically. This leads him to make opportunistic, short-term calculations

that often hurt him in the long run. However, Widmerpool is more than an unattractive go-getter; he emerges as a moral monster who will not relinquish his sense for vengeance on Stringham for condescending to him at school. He carries his vengeance even to the point of marrying Stringham's tempestuous and promiscuous niece, Pamela Flitton, partly to get back at Stringham.

Stringham succumbs to alcoholism (although he revives to die heroically in the Japanese camp at Singapore) and Templer goes to his death, perhaps arranged by Widmerpool, on an anti-Nazi military mission in the Balkans. Though Jenkins is personally happy – after an exciting affair with Templer's sister Jean, he marries Lady Isobel Tolland – Widmerpool, who advances rapidly in the army and, later, politics, seems to be presiding over a society where his values increasingly hold sway. Jenkins, though, finds new sustenance in the charming composer Hugh Moreland and the painter Ralph Barnby, whose aphorisms about women pepper the text. Although Moreland and Barnby also die prematurely, the values they represent – a passive, non-assertive trust in art and good character – finally prevail over Widmerpool's.

*A Dance to the Music of Time*, which ended with *Hearing Secret Harmonies* in 1975, is notable for the vast reach of its literary and cultural allusions, including not only literature but history, politics, and the visual and performing arts. It has been attacked for covering only one, upper-class, and/ or bohemian stratum of society, although the seventh book, *The Valley of Bones* (1964), is set largely among middle-class bank clerks who join a Welsh regiment during the war. The accusation of class bias was often a cover for attacks on Powell's anti-communist viewpoint, which is evident in his work. Even now, some decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Powell's reputation remains too embroiled in left-right clashes to be impartially judged.

Powell's *Journals*, written in his seventies and eighties, further consolidate his reputation as having perhaps the most complete career of any British novelist in the twentieth century, having written novels, criticism (he was a respected regular reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*), and memoir. Powell died on March 28, 2000 at his home, The Chantry, in Somerset.

**SEE ALSO:** Modernist Fiction (BIF); Politics and the Novel (BIF); World War II in Fiction (BIF)

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## MLA

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