

## Reading Group Guide for *Will Starling* by Ian Weir

- 1.) The author has chosen to tell the story primarily in the voice of Will Starling, who admits from the start that he has pre-judged Dionysus Atherton. Is Will a reliable narrator? How would the novel have differed had it been narrated in the third person?
- 2.) Over the course of the novel Will passes severe judgment on himself. To what extent is his judgment fair? Does he judge himself more harshly than the reader does? If so, why might this be the case?
- 3.) How is your opinion of Will affected by the letter that Janet Friendly writes to Mr Comrie? How is it affected by the perspective of Comrie himself?
- 4.) What function is served by the newspaper and broadsheet reports that are inserted into the novel? Are these more or less reliable than the first-person narration of Will himself, and why?
- 5.) Are there ways in which the nineteenth century broadsheets can be likened to modern newspapers? To social media?
- 6.) The newspapers – and several important characters in the novel – appear to believe that the “Boggle-Eyed Bob” phenomenon could be genuine. Given the state of medical knowledge at the time, do you believe that a surgeon such as Dionysus Atherton could reanimate a man who was actually dead? How might a Regency surgeon’s understanding of death differ from our own?
- 7.) Will clearly wants to believe that Flitty Deakins’s tale may be true, even though he repeatedly discounts her reliability. How reliable *is* Flitty Deakins as a witness to events she claims to have seen in Dionysus Atherton’s house? Why do you feel she gravitates toward Meg Nancarrow, and does this make her testimony seem more or less trustworthy?

- 8.) Will is haunted by the possibility that he may be going mad. Do you believe his obsession with Atherton may indeed be considered a form of madness? And what do the scenes at Dr Paxton's private asylum suggest to you about Regency attitudes towards mental illness and its possible treatment?
- 9.) Will is clearly searching for a father figure. To what extent does he find this in his relationship with Mr Comrie? And how much do you think he gains – or loses – in his deeply conflicted relationship with Atherton?
- 10.) Alec Comrie takes the view that a surgical patient has no right to decide whether or not to proceed with an operation. To what extent is this view justified by the surgical realities of the early nineteenth century? Would you consent to a surgical procedure in 1816? And based on the evidence of the novel, what personal characteristics could be considered essential in a surgeon of that era?
- 11.) Edmund Kean was considered by his contemporaries to be a great realistic actor. Based on descriptions of his performances in the novel, how realistic might Kean's acting seem to a modern audience? Why might this be so?
- 12.) Dionysus Atherton insists that his research is justified, and that he is serving the greater good of humankind. Is there any extent to which you agree with him? Did your opinion change over the course of the novel? What other motives may be driving him, beyond simple self-aggrandizement?
- 13.) Dionysus Atherton's research into the mechanism of death takes place in the context of an ongoing debate between the so-called Hunterians (who believed in the existence of a Life-Force) and the Materialists (who rejected this utterly). In what ways might this be seen to prefigure the Mind/Brain debate in our own era? In what ways do you think it differs?

## A Conversation with Ian Weir, author of

### *WILL STARLING: A NOVEL*

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**You were born in North Carolina and raised in Canada, but both of your novels have been set in nineteenth century London. What keeps drawing you back?**

I fell in love with London as a graduate student at King's College in the early 1980s. It's a city in which the past is very much present – start walking and you stumble into nooks and crannies of earlier centuries that still exist, virtually unchanged. And the nineteenth century is an extraordinary mirror for our own era. It's the birth of the modern world in many ways, and people were wrestling with the issues and dilemmas that continue to perplex us. In particular the pace of scientific discovery exploded during the Romantic period, totally outstripping the old ethical framework. Men (and women) of science could suddenly work wonders – but *should* they? Meanwhile, there was almost no lawful access to the human cadavers that were essential for anatomical research, which forced the surgeons and anatomists into a marriage of convenience with organized gangs of grave-robbers – the infamous Resurrectionists, or Doomsday Men – who might as well have stepped straight out of the pages of a penny-blood thriller.

**You've chosen to tell the tale from the first-person perspective of a nineteen-year-old surgeon's assistant. Tell us about Will Starling, the character.**

In actual fact Will didn't even exist until I'd taken two abortive runs at the first hundred pages of the novel, and he didn't emerge as the narrative voice until the third draft. But as soon as I let him start speaking, I discovered that his own journey as a character – a foundling embarking on an increasingly obsessive quest for the truth – pulled together the themes and preoccupations of the novel. Will isn't a classic unreliable narrator, except in the sense that we're *all* the unreliable tellers of our own life-stories. He admits from the start that he's biased, and that he'll be recreating certain crucial scenes that he never witnessed. He's also a keeper of secrets: there are truths he's not ready to admit even to himself, let alone to the reader. And of course *Will Starling* is on one level a gothic mystery, with the enigma of Dionysus Atherton at its heart.

**How faithful is the novel to the historical record?**

The characters are largely fictional, although there are cameo appearances by historical figures – for example, John Keats really was a surgical student at Guy's Hospital in 1816. But the medical and scientific elements are absolutely genuine. A generation of military surgeons made extraordinary advances in craft and technique during the Napoleonic Wars. There was still no anaesthetic or any concept of germ theory, but they had developed a great facility within a limited range of procedures. And the best of them were amazingly quick – without anaesthetic, speed was the only mercy. A good surgeon could have your leg off in two minutes flat, and you had two chances in three of surviving.

**And attempts to raise the dead?**

Again, absolutely genuine. There had been a series of attempts to reanimate corpses, mainly using electrical current. Those experiments were well-documented and notorious – Mary Shelley began

writing *Frankenstein* in the summer of 1816, the same year the central events of *Will Starling* take place. And the experimentation was ultimately rooted in the fundamental human questions that we're still trying to answer: what *is* death, and what can we do about it? Is there a ghost in the machine – a life-force that exists independently of biological function – or is this nothing but a consoling fiction? The Big Questions that nag at us at three in the morning – and nag all the more insistently with each year that passes.

***Will Starling* – the novel itself, as well as the character – is also very much fascinated with the world of Regency theatre. Is that also an interest of your own?**

More like a lifelong passion. I started out as a playwright before falling more or less accidentally into a career as a screenwriter and TV showrunner. My love of the theatre, and the theatrical, has never gone away. Writing for me is in essence performance – I can't start to understand a character until I can hear him talking. And of course Will Starling is very aware of himself as a *performer*, as a self-created character in a gothic narrative of his own devising: the foundling searching for a father figure, the relentless seeker of truth, the champion of the innocent. The question – and Will is grimly aware of this, too – is whether his self-told tale is about to become a Revenge Tragedy.

**You note in an afterword that your father was a surgeon. How much did that have to do with the genesis of *Will Starling*?**

When I was a boy, we had a family cottage at Shuswap Lake, in the interior of British Columbia. And one summer evening – I would have been ten or eleven at the time – one of the local teenagers rode a mini-bike at considerable speed into a barbed wire fence. The nearest clinic was an hour away, and so the family carried him to our cottage, amidst much blood and shouting. My father unfolded himself from his deck chair, sent my mother to fetch his medical bag, and calmly stitched the poor kid back up on the picnic table. That image has been in my mind ever since, and it dawned on me while writing the novel that I had embarked upon a kind of wistful tribute to my dad – though none of the surgeons in the novel is any kind of biographical sketch. Certainly not Dionysus Atherton. But Alec Comrie, Will's mentor, has a dogged determination that's reminiscent, not to mention my paternal grandmother's maiden surname. My dad never talked much about his work, but it was something I was acutely aware of growing up. The phone would ring with an emergency call in the middle of the night, followed a few moments later by footsteps trudging down the stairs and the car pulling out of the driveway. He always hoped that one of his sons might go into medicine, but he bore the disappointment manfully.

**You never considered following in his footsteps?**

Not even for half a second. I'm about as squeamish as it gets.

**A disadvantage, surely, when it comes to writing a novel about Regency surgeons?**

Actually it turned out to be an advantage, especially in terms of deciding where to draw the line with descriptions of surgical procedures. I figured: if I can write this paragraph without fainting, the reader will be fine.

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