

**Anthony Powell's A Dance to the Music of Time with Wesley Stace**

12 monthly sessions on Zoom

Tuesdays, March 9, 2021 – February 8, 2022

6:00–8:00 p.m

Reading all twelve novels of Anthony Powell's *A Dance to the Music of Time* over one year with novelist and musician Wesley Stace.

Participants will receive the Zoom link before the first session.



*A Dance to the Music of Time* by Nicholas Poussin (c.1635)

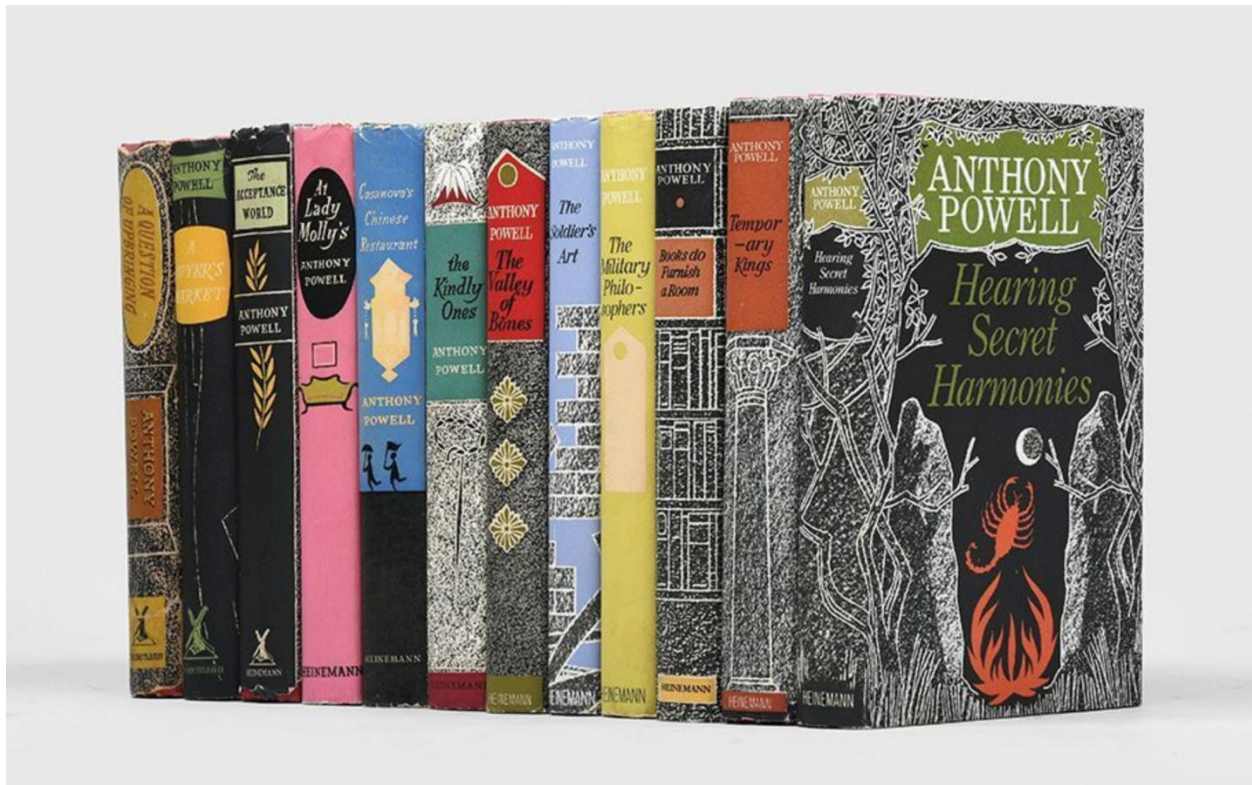
*A Dance to the Music of Time*, a twelve-volume set of novels by Anthony Powell, was published between 1951 and 1975. Powell's own life (1905-2000) spanned the 20th Century and his masterpiece reflects this, examining English political, cultural and military life from 1920.

Clive James thought *Dance* - taken as a whole - the best modern novel since *Ulysses*. *Time* magazine included the novel in its 100 Best English-language Novels from 1923 to 2005. The editors of the Modern Library ranked the work as 43rd-greatest English-language novel of the 20th century, and the BBC ranked the series 36th on its list of the 100 greatest British novels.

Narrated by Powell's stand-in, writer Nicholas Jenkins, *Dance* is a panoramic portrait of a society that was vanishing before Powell's eyes, and of which he was one of the last writing representatives. The arc takes us from Jenkins' schooldays - where he meets the colourful central characters whose lives will weave in and out of his own - to his final days as a literary grandee. By the finale, Widmerpool, once the butt of their schoolboy jokes, has become a memorable villain: the banality of evil incarnate. We have witnessed not only Widmerpool's rise to power and subsequent humiliation, but those of many of the roughly 400 characters. For Evelyn Waugh, the effect was like a visit to an aquarium: "One after another various specimens swim towards us; we see them clearly, then with a barely perceptible flick of fin or a tail they are off into the murk."

The *Dance* begins with a group of workmen gathered around a fire, the sight of which causes Jenkins to reflect on Nicolas Poussin's allegorical painting of the Seasons for which the series is named, and ends as Jenkins tends a bonfire, recalling a passage from Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy* while "the formal measure of the Seasons seem[s] suspended in the wintry silence". In between these two blazes, Jenkins recalls people he has met over the previous half a century and the events, often seemingly insignificant, that reveal their true selves. The slowly developing narrative, said critic Robert L Selig, "centers around life's poignant encounters between friends and lovers who later drift apart and yet keep reencountering each other over numerous unfolding decades as they move through the vicissitudes of marriage, work, aging, and ultimately death."

*A Dance to the Music of Time* is unrivaled in English literature for its architecture, advance planning, scope, and humour. Although Powell has been described as "the English Proust", the novels are essentially comic, if sometimes bleakly so; V. S Pritchett likened the tone to "Proust as translated by P.G. Wodehouse". What's more - while it is reductive to think of the novel as entirely autobiographical - almost everything in the entire sequence, or a version thereof, including many of the characters, was drawn from Powell's own life.



The twelve books were published in the following order:

- 1 *A Question of Upbringing* (1951)
- 2 *A Buyer's Market* (1952)
- 3 *The Acceptance World* (1955)
- 4 *At Lady Molly's* (1957)
- 5 *Casanova's Chinese Restaurant* (1960)
- 6 *The Kindly Ones* (1962)
- 7 *The Valley of Bones* (1964)
- 8 *The Soldier's Art* (1966)
- 9 *The Military Philosophers* (1968)
- 10 *Books Do Furnish a Room* (1971)
- 11 *Temporary Kings* (1973)
- 12 *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975)

Only later were the books collected into four volumes or “movements”, each containing three novels, which is how they are now most frequently found. However, after the excellent four-part TV adaptation in 1997, the books, again reissued in four volumes, were now named for the season that was the title of each of the episodes. (Poussin’s painting was previously referred to as the “Four Seasons”). We will follow this seasonal approach and study one novel a month for an entire year, starting in Spring in March, and ending in Winter the following February.

## **SPRING**

- 1 A Question of Upbringing (1951) – March 9
- 2 A Buyer's Market (1952) – April 13
- 3 The Acceptance World (1955) – May 11

## **SUMMER**

- 4 At Lady Molly's (1957) - June 15
- 5 Casanova's Chinese Restaurant (1960) – July 13
- 6 The Kindly Ones (1962) – August 10

## **AUTUMN**

- 7 The Valley of Bones (1964) – September 14
- 8 The Soldier's Art (1966) – October 12
- 9 The Military Philosophers (1968) – November 9

## **WINTER**

- 10 Books Do Furnish a Room (1971) – December 14
- 11 Temporary Kings (1973) – January 11
- 12 Hearing Secret Harmonies (1975) – February 8

The books themselves are relatively slim, so this won't involve a lot of reading. Instead, and in the leisurely way I think Powell himself would have wanted, we can explore the changing social milieu, the sources of the memorable characters (some composites, others with very specific models), the paintings and other pieces of art so central both to the novel and Powell's technique, his inimitable style, and the way Powell exploits his own autobiography, to bring the *Dance to life*: a world of suicidal composers, femme fatales, occultists, cult leaders, passé authors, promising poets, failed novelists, unreliable uncles, vaudeville entertainers, generals and majors, disreputable antique dealers, and manipulative dons all of whom circle round the narrator in their dance to the music of time.

### **About the Instructor**

Wesley Stace was born in Hastings in 1965. Since 1988, he has released many albums under the name John Wesley Harding - his most recent, 2018's Wesley Stace's John Wesley Harding, with the Jayhawks as his backing band - and recorded duets with, among others, Bruce Springsteen, Lou Reed and Rosanne Cash. He has published four novels, including the international bestseller *Misfortune*, and he co-wrote Mark Morris' 2019 memoir *Out Loud*. He has taught his course Novel Beginnings at Swarthmore and Fairleigh Dickinson; whereas at Princeton he taught a course in song and lyric-writing with the poet Paul Muldoon. He also created John Wesley Harding's Cabinet of Wonders, a monthly show that plays at New York City's City Winery. The New Yorker called it "one of the finest nights of entertainment this city has to offer." He lives in Philadelphia and has recently taught a course on Dickens' *David Copperfield* for The Rosenbach.