

Harry Bernstein, 101; found success as author at age 96

June 06, 2011 | By Verena Dobnik, Associated Press

NEW YORK — Harry Bernstein, whose acclaimed memoir of an English childhood haunted by anti-Semitism, “The Invisible Wall,” was published when he was 96, has died at 101.

Mr. Bernstein died Friday at his daughter’s Brooklyn home, said Bruce Frankel, a friend and author.

Critics have compared Mr. Bernstein’s world of pain and prejudice to those of D.H. Lawrence and Isaac Bashevis Singer — and especially to Frank McCourt’s “Angela’s Ashes,” which details McCourt’s Irish upbringing.

Mr. Bernstein had written 40 other books but destroyed most of the manuscripts after they were rejected by publishers. His eventual success quickly became an inspiration for other struggling authors, and in 2008 — at age 98 — he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to pursue his writing.

After “The Invisible Wall,” Mr. Bernstein wrote three more books, including one to be published next year in Italy, where he has a following.

Italian admirers have traveled to the United States to meet him in recent years, said Frankel.

Mr. Bernstein’s books have also been translated and published in England, Sweden, Germany, Finland, Norway, Denmark, and Brazil.

In “The Invisible Wall,” Mr. Bernstein wrote about his bleak childhood in an English mill town, with Christians and Jews coexisting uneasily. For eight years he served as a messenger between his sister and the Christian youth she was dating, who lived across the street from their house in Stockport, near Manchester. The two had to keep their love secret because of religious prejudice.

His second book, “The Dream,” came out in 2008 and centers on the family’s move to Chicago and his teenage years in New York during the Great Depression.

In 2009, he published his third memoir, “The Golden Willow,” about his married life; the title refers to a tree in Central Park under which he and his wife, Ruby, consummated their love.

Mr. Bernstein earned a living as an MGM movie script reader and as editor of a construction trade magazine. It wasn't until he was 93, grieving his wife of seven decades, that he produced his first published works. He wrote alone at night, with the memories of his rough childhood spent battling an alcoholic father and anti-Semitism.

For years, Mr. Bernstein lived in Brick, N.J., near the Atlantic shore, but he was staying at his daughter's home recently.

"When you get into your 90s like I am, there's nowhere else to think except the past. There's no future to think about. There's very little present," Mr. Bernstein told the Associated Press in 2007, when "The Invisible Wall" was published.

After his wife's death, "it all came back," he said. "So I began to write, and I was occupied, and it was really the best therapy I could have had."

Mr. Bernstein sent the finished manuscript to the London office of Random House. The book sat there for about a year until it was noticed by Kate Elton, who described it as "unputdownable."

"I think he's a most fantastic writer," Elton said in 2007. "He creates the characters of his family so vividly and tells such a moving story."

RESOURCE:

http://articles.boston.com/2011-06-06/bostonglobe/29686446_1_anti-semitism-semitism-mgm-movie-script-reader