

Santa Monica

READS CITYWIDE

JOIN A
**CITYWIDE
BOOK CLUB**

APRIL 17
THROUGH
MAY 1
2004

For free public
book discussion
groups and
other events,
check the Santa
Monica Citywide
Reads Web site

www.smpl.org/cwr
or call 310.458.8646



THE BERLIN STORIES
CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD



A New Directions Paperback



A New Directions paperback
available at libraries and bookstores



WELCOME

On behalf of the City of Santa Monica, I invite you to participate in the second CITYWIDE READS program. This program encourages residents and visitors to read the same book concurrently to create a “citywide” book club.

This year’s featured book is *The Berlin Stories* by Christopher Isherwood. Comprised of two related novels, “The Last of Mr. Norris” and “Goodbye to Berlin,” *The Berlin Stories* is Isherwood’s fictionalized account of his experiences as a young man in Berlin during the freewheeling, tumultuous Weimar period that led up to World War II. A prolific and diverse writer, Isherwood’s tales of Berlin are his best-known work and were the basis for the musical “Cabaret.”

Isherwood was born in England and moved to Santa Monica in 1939 where he lived until his death in 1986. The year 2004 marks the centennial of his birth and is being marked by commemorative events and a major exhibition at The Huntington in San Marino. What better way for Santa Monicans to celebrate one of our own acclaimed literary figures than by reading Isherwood during CITYWIDE READS?

The Berlin Stories is available from the Santa Monica Public Library or your local bookstore. Please plan on attending one of the many public CITYWIDE READS book discussions or related events being held April 17 through May 1. I also hope you will make time to discuss the book informally with a friend or neighbor.

I hope that your participation in Santa Monica CITYWIDE READS is a rewarding experience that brings you together with your community through literature.



Richard Bloom, Mayor
City of Santa Monica

BOOK DISCUSSIONS

CITYWIDE READS discussions and events are free and open to the public. Discussion leaders are on hand to moderate these book clubs. For up-to-date program information, check our Web site www.smpl.org/cwr

Monday, April 19 – 7:00 pm



Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Montana Store
1426 Montana Avenue #5

Tuesday, April 20 – 1:30 pm

Ken Edwards Center,* 1527 4th Street, Room 100

Thursday, April 22 – 7:00 pm



Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, 2nd Street Promenade Store
200 Santa Monica Boulevard

Monday, April 26 – 7:00 pm



Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Ocean Park Store
3150 Ocean Park Boulevard

Tuesday, April 27 – 7:00 pm

Borders, 1415 3rd Street Promenade

Wednesday, April 28 – 7:00 pm



Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Main Street Store
2901 Main Street

Thursday, April 29 – 7:00 pm

Montana Ave. Branch Library,* 1704 Montana Avenue

Saturday, May 1 – 11:00 am

Fairview Branch Library,* 2101 Ocean Park Boulevard

SPECIAL CITYWIDE READS EVENTS

Isherwood in Context

Saturday, April 17 – 2:30 to 4:00 pm

A panel presentation by experts on Isherwood and Weimar Germany. Montana Ave. Branch Library, 1704 Montana Ave.

Cabaret Night at the Pier

Friday, April 30 – 7:00 to 10:00 pm

Film screening of *Cabaret* (1972) introduced by Isherwood scholar Chris Freeman. The Arcadia, 250 Santa Monica Pier.

Jazz in the World between the Wars

Santa Monica Festival, Saturday, May 1 – noon to 6:00 pm

MOONDANCE performs a jazz tribute to this era on the main Ocean Stage, from 2:05 to 2:45pm, Clover Park,* 2600 Ocean Park Boulevard.

Isherwood Exhibition

The Huntington, 1151 Oxford Road, San Marino, CA

April 6 through May 9

Christopher Isherwood's The Berlin Stories

June 12 through October 3

Christopher Isherwood: A Writer and His World

Archival items related to *The Berlin Stories* are displayed in the Exhibition Hall's East Foyer, April 6 – May 9. This display offers a preview of *Christopher Isherwood: A Writer and His World*, a major exhibition drawn from his complete literary archive at The Huntington, June 12 – October 3. For info; www.huntington.org

*City of Santa Monica facilities are wheelchair accessible. To request a disability-related accommodation, call Library Volunteer Services 458-8646 (TDD 395-8499) at least 3 working days (Monday-Friday) in advance.

THE BERLIN STORIES

The cabaret may be the metaphor for Berlin, but all is not entertainment in Christopher Isherwood's vivid interpretation of pre-Hitler Germany in *The Berlin Stories*. Originally published as separate works, *The Last of Mr. Norris* (1935) and *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939) can be read and appreciated independently. Pulled together, they present a cohesive unit of much greater significance. Our narrator, a young Englishman earning his living teaching English, transports the reader back in time to a city in the midst of upheaval. On one level, it can be read as a coming-of-age tale. But what resonates with the reader is Berlin's climate of despair, unrest, and chaos. Isherwood's prescient observations are startling, especially in light of what we know follows.

The Last of Mr. Norris entertains and dismays us with its cast of characters – crooks, young political activists, expatriates, decadents, and spies – especially Arthur Norris who so intrigues the young protagonist. Just as the narrator seems mystified through much of the novel, so is the reader kept in suspense. In contrast, *Goodbye to Berlin's* six narrative short stories form a political novel, considered by critics to be one of the most important of the 20th century. Its elegiac tone absorbs the reader's attention as the narrator documents the many contrasts of early 1930's Berlin: the nightclubs, the countryside, the slums, the rich. The stark contrast between the Nowaks and the Landauers could alone symbolize much of what lies ahead for the troubled country. Isherwood's chronological arrangement accentuates the anti-Semitic tension growing stronger as the years pass from 1930 to 1933. With his precise English and cinematic technique, Isherwood provides the reader much upon which to reflect.

The Berlin Stories offers several themes to appreciate: humor, entertainment, a sense of place, coming-of-age, political tension. Those who have read Gunter Grass' *The Tin Drum* or Ursula Hegi's *Stones from the River*, will want to further their understanding of this cataclysmic period by reading *The Berlin Stories*.

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

Born in 1904 to a venerable British family, Isherwood preferred travel overseas to English country life. After studying at Oxford and befriending fellow students, and future fellow writers, W.H. Auden and Stephen Spender, he spent many years traveling in Europe, northern Africa, the Americas and Asia.



In January 1939, he and Auden arrived in New York City. Although Auden was immediately caught up in the artistic and intellectual ferment of that city, Isherwood's wanderlust propelled him onward. Within months, he had found his way to Southern California, where he would stay for the remaining four decades of his life, residing mainly in the Santa Monica Canyon area. He became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1946.

During his years in Santa Monica, Isherwood continued to write novels and screenplays and to teach English in the state university system. In 1953, he met the artist Don Bachardy, who became the love of his life and his lifelong companion. While in California, Isherwood cultivated a passion for Indian mysticism, and he devoted much energy to furthering the work of the Vedanta Society, based in Hollywood.

Isherwood also befriended Evelyn Hooker, whose revolutionary sociological studies of well-adjusted gay men helped lay the groundwork for the American Psychiatric Association's 1973 decision to stop defining homosexuality as a mental disorder. In his later years, Isherwood spoke out frequently as an advocate for gays and lesbians. In a 1983 article in the *Santa Monica Evening Outlook* he said "I just wouldn't have wanted to be heterosexual. It wouldn't have suited me. My first way of dealing with the matter was going to live in a place where it was much more usual, i.e. Germany [circa 1929], but I'm very glad I did."

His decision to go to Berlin ultimately led to the creation of what would become his best-known work, *The Berlin Stories*. Portions of them were twice adapted as stage plays: *I Am a Camera* and *Cabaret*. In 1972, Bob Fosse directed and choreographed a film version of *Cabaret* that won numerous Oscars® and is widely acknowledged as a cinema classic.

The Christopher Isherwood Foundation was founded in 2000. It is dedicated both to preserving the author's literary legacy and to providing grant support to American writers and researchers.

ISHERWOOD'S BERLIN

Germany during the Weimar Republic (1918-1933) was a center for innovation in the visual, applied, and performing arts as seen in Expressionist film, Political Theater and at the Bauhaus. Becoming Europe's largest metropolis in 1920, Berlin attracted literati and cosmopolitan figures, much as Paris had a generation earlier. At Auden's urging, Isherwood moved to Berlin in 1929. During the 1920's, Berlin was also noted for its social experimentation and sexual freedom, exemplified by cabarets and a gay nightlife scene that figured prominently in Isherwood's own life and in his Berlin stories.

Berlin between the two World Wars was also a city marked by economic and political instability. Economic dislocation caused by war, reparations, inflation, unemployment, and the Crash of 1929, coupled with struggles among monarchist, republican, socialist, communist, and fascist factions undermined the Weimar Republic. British film director John Boorman later characterized his friend Isherwood's famous 'I am a camera' line from *Goodbye to Berlin* as "the cry of a prophet, the shutter of doom." The author moved away from Berlin in May 1933, a few months after Hitler had come to power, and Germany began its inexorable path to another disastrous war. Isherwood's semi-autobiographical writing about the legendary city stands as some of the best fictional descriptions of Weimar Berlin's waning years.

When Isherwood relocated to Southern California in 1939, he joined a number of other notable émigrés, like composer Arnold Schoenberg and novelist Aldous Huxley, who had already made the area their new home. Like these expatriates, Isherwood's production during his American period would leave a lasting imprint on his adopted city and country's literary and cultural life.

PHOTO: Christopher Isherwood Collection (CI 3145)
The Huntington Library, San Marino, California

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The Berlin Stories

1. What do you like about the structure of *The Berlin Stories*? Would it have been a stronger work if the two halves had been re-written as one novel?
2. What do you think Isherwood is referring to when he writes about the “indestructible something” that he comes back to Berlin to look for in the early 1950’s? (p.xii)
3. Does Fr. Schroeder represent more than just a friend in this work?
4. Which characters did you recognize from both books? Did they take on different characteristics depending on which story you are reading?

The Last of Mr. Norris

1. The desperate economic climate influences the political leanings of the young population: “And morning after morning, all over the immense, damp, dreary town . . . young men were waking up to another workless empty day to be spent as they could best contrive . . .” (p. 87) Within this context, compare the pull of the Communist Party versus the National Socialists (Nazis) for the characters.
2. “You’re young. Your standards are so severe. When you get to my age, you’ll see things differently, perhaps. It’s very easy to condemn when one isn’t tempted.” (p.161) Describe William Bradshaw and Arthur Norris’ friendship. Does Bradshaw judge Norris too harshly? What do you think of Norris’ morality?
3. Stylistically, is Isherwood deliberately setting up a comic novel? Were you surprised by the suspense element?
4. What does Isherwood think of the media’s role in the unsettled climate of Berlin?

Goodbye to Berlin

1. “I am a camera with its shutter open . . .” is among the opening lines of the work. (p.1) Do you think the narrator succeeds as an impartial recorder? Would you have preferred the narrator to take more of a political stance? Why do you think he chose this style?
2. Compare and contrast some of the narrator’s English pupils. Why do so many people give the Englishman such respect?
3. How does the fictional Sally Bowles compare to her dramatized versions?
4. Frau Nowak’s anti-Semitic views are inconsistent when she’s reminded of Jewish people she likes or needs (p.117). How does the writer succeed in illustrating Germany’s attitudes through individual characters?
5. How has the author’s tone changed from *A Berlin Diary (Autumn 1930)* to *A Berlin Diary (Winter 1932-3)*?

Select Works by Isherwood

The Berlin Stories (1945)
New Directions, 1954

Christopher and His Kind (1976)
Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001

Diaries, Vol. 1: 1939-60
K. Bucknell (ed.)
HarperCollins, 1997

My Guru and His Disciple (1980)
Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001

Prater Violet (1945)
Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001

A Single Man (1964)
Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001

The World in the Evening (1954)
Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1999

For Further Reading

*Auden and Isherwood:
The Berlin Years*
N. Page, St. Martin’s Press, 1998

Christopher Isherwood
C. Summers, Ungar, 1980

The Isherwood Century
J. Berg & C. Freeman (eds.)
Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2000
www.theisherwoodcentury.org

Web Resources

Christopher Isherwood Foundation
isherwoodfoundation.org

Isherwood at the Huntington
huntington.org/LibraryDiv/Isherwood.html

NovelList
smpl.org/research/novelist.html

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