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)?

For Further Reading
Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years
Christopher Isherwood
C. Summers, Ungar, 1980
The Isherwood Century
L. Irving & C. Freeman (eds.) Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2000
www.theisherwoodcentury.org

Web Resources
Christopher Isherwood Foundation
isherwoodfoundation.org
Isherwood at the Huntington
huntington.org/Library/Div/Isherwood.html
NoveList
smpl.org/research/novelist.html

Select Works by Isherwood
The Berlin Stories (1945)
New Directions, 1954
Christopher and His Kind (1976)
Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001
Diaries, Vol. I: 1939-60
K. Rushdie (ed.)
HarperCollins, 1997
My Guru and His Disciple (1980)
Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001
Postcard 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, 1997

THANKS TO THE FRIENDS OF THE SANTA MONICA PUBLIC LIBRARY FOR THEIR SUPPORT FOR THE PRINTING OF THIS RESOURCE GUIDE
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 cabinet may be the metaphor for Berlin, but all is not entertain-
ment 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 story. But what resonates with the reader is Berlin’s 
clinical of despair, unrest, and chaos. Isherwood’s prescient observa-
tions are startling, especially in light of what we know now.

The Last of Mr. Norris entertains and dismays us with its cast of 
characters – crooks, young political activists, exponents, 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 
eclectic tone abets the reader’s attention as the narrator documents 
the many contrasts of early 1930s Berlin: the nightlife, the coun-
tyside, the clubs, the rich. The stark contrast between the Nowak’s 
and the Janoschews creates a theme symbolic 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 tech-
nique, 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 
Stories 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 wandered 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 1941, 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 want 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 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 cinematic classic.

The Christopher Isherwood Foundation was founded in 2000. It 
is dedicated both to preserving the author’s literary legacy and to 
giving 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 literary and 
cosmopolitan figures, much as Paris had a generation earlier. At Auer’s 
urging, Isherwood moved to Berlin in 1929. During the 1920s, 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 city of a prophet, the shutters of dawn.” 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 leg-
endary 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 Aldus Huxley, who had already made the 
aera 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.
**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

**The Berlin Stories**
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- *Poster Violet* (1945) Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2001

**For Further Reading**
- *Auden and Isherwood: The Berlin Years* W. Rapp, St. Martin’s Press, 1998
- *Christopher Isherwood* C. Sanders, Uper, 1980
- *The Isherwood Century* J. Berg & C. Freeman (eds.) Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 2000
- [www.theisherwoodcentury.org](http://www.theisherwoodcentury.org)

**Web Resources**
- Christopher Isherwood Foundation
  [isherwoodfoundation.org](http://isherwoodfoundation.org)
- Isherwood at the Huntington
  [huntington.org/Library/Uni/Isherwood.html](http://huntington.org/Library/Uni/Isherwood.html)
- [Novelist](http://www.smpl.org/research/novelist.html)

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**THE BERLIN STORIES**
**CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD**

**APRIL 17 THROUGH MAY 1 2004**

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**Christopher Isherwood**

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[www.smpl.org/cwr](http://www.smpl.org/cwr) or call 310.458.8646