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Auden And Isherwood: The Berlin Years



Synopsis

Like Paris in the '20s, Berlin in the early thirties was one of the most exciting cities in the world. As the Weimar Republic sputtered to a close and war loomed on the horizon, the city was a magnet for talented writers and artists. It was in this now-vanished time and place that W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood lived, wrote and slept together. Norman Page tells the story of how these years shaped these important writers and, in doing so, illuminates a bygone era.

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Customer Reviews

Books of fiction and nonfiction, films, paintings, and museums abound in the ongoing ceaseless inspection of the atrocity and madness wrought by Hitler in Nazi Germany. It is an unfortunate fact that such turmoil gives rise to some of the best art in the years after the strife. Norman Page, in his brilliantly researched and written AUDEN AND ISHERWOOD: THE BERLIN YEARS, has selected two men of great significance in literature and poetry as his points of entry into studying the Berlin that seduced the world before it jolted nearly to an end. These portraits of Auden and Isherwood are really an examination of an historical time that altered the art world as inevitably as it altered our sense of the dangers of dictatorship. Initially drawn to Berlin from the hallowed halls of English academe because of the rowdy free sex/hedonistic atmosphere that had become Berlin, "Berlin meant Boys" and both our artists fled the England that sacrificed Oscar Wilde to find the open sexual freedom of the City of Sodom. Author Page gives us such a rich, fascinating ride through the places and faces of pre-war Berlin that we are finally allowed to see why Modernism started, why

cinema became important, how artists such as Grosz and Dix and composers such as Weill and Stravinsky, scientists (Hirschfeld) and writers (Brecht) found such acrid colors for their creativity. Page is not confined to his title characters, though we learn more personal characteristics than any writer has dared to date: we are informed about Marlene Dietrich, Stephen Spender, Benjamin Britten, as well as a constellation of other characters encountered by them.

I essentially agree with the Publisher's Weekly review of this volume, but feel that perhaps the reading public would be better served if the book were called *Berlin: The Auden and Isherwood Years.* It is a portrait of the city found in Isherwood's writings, not a biographical work or portrait of the authors. The bulk of the book involves a painstaking painting of Berlin, as obsessively detailed as a Civil War reenactor's map-poring. The chapter titles convey the author's approach: Berlin Faces (biographical sketches of sex researcher Magnus Hirschfeld, archeologist and bon vivant Francis Turville-Petre, anthropologist John Layard, critic Gerald Hamilton and others); Berlin Places (which compulsively recreates the architecture of Weimar era streets and buildings); Weimar Cinema (film in Berlin); Writing (where Page examines the works of the titular authors). It can be seen that there is little biographical coverage of Auden and Isherwood here. These four chapters are prefaced by a strange, conflicted review of Auden's and Isherwood's sex lives in the city. This would be the most biographical material in the volume, except that Page can't decide what attitude to take as author. He wants to poo-poo the conservatives who disapprove of either discussions of the men's homosexuality or the sexual orientation itself. Yet Page writes with judgmental though entranced language recalling Maggie Smith's best stiff-upper-lip line readings (copulatory pinewoods, soldiers' trousers stretched tight over chubby buttocks, exploration of low-life, irresponsibility, prudence, lurid etc). He comes off as neither credible academic nor gay history buff but rather pained outsider. It's interesting that the Acknowledgements don't contain a nod to an editor.

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