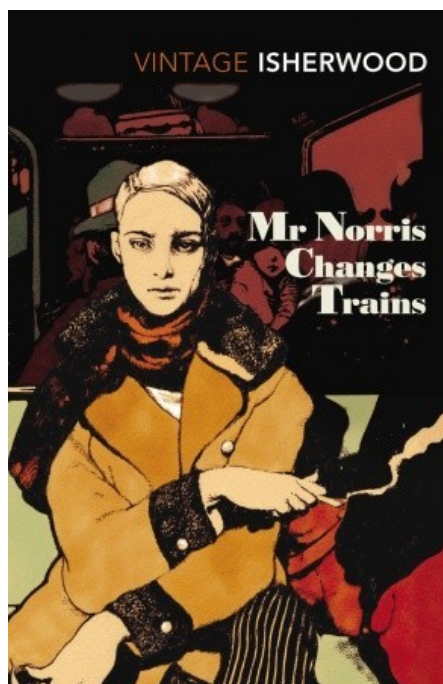




Mr Norris Changes Trains

Christopher Isherwood

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Mr Norris Changes Trains Christopher Isherwood

After a chance encounter on a train the English teacher William Bradshaw starts a close friendship with the mildly sinister Arthur Norris. Norris is a man of contradictions; lavish but heavily in debt, excessively polite but sexually deviant. First published in 1933 *Mr Norris Changes Trains* piquantly evokes the atmosphere of Berlin during the rise of the Nazis.

Mr Norris Changes Trains Details

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From Reader Review Mr Norris Changes Trains for online ebook

Paul says

This is one of Isherwood's Berlin novels; almost an historical novel of the last years of the Weimar Republic and was published in 1935. Isherwood was part of a group of young English writers and poets who found England repressive and sought a form of exile (this is also partly a novel of exile); the group included Auden and Spender as well. Berlin was the choice for Isherwood, mainly because an elderly relative had warned him against it, saying it was the vilest place since Sodom. Of course for gay men, such as Isherwood and Auden Berlin was much more liberal and less repressed than England.

The two main characters are thinly disguised. The narrator is a young man called William Bradshaw (Isherwood's middle names) who is travelling to Berlin to be a private tutor. Because Isherwood wanted to put the main focus on Norris, he makes Bradshaw a voyeur who watches what goes on and provides commentary. This makes Bradshaw seem morally neutral (and sexually neutral). Isherwood later thought this might have been a mistake, making it seem as though he was lying about himself. Bradshaw's moral neutrality also gives the impression that he does not care about what is going on around him.

The main character, Arthur Norris, is a very thinly veiled Gerald Hamilton. Hamilton was a complex character who at various times was imprisoned for theft, bankruptcy, gross indecency (he was gay) and he was interned during the second world war for being a threat to national security. He ran guns for the IRA, shared a flat with Aleister Crowley, was a communist sympathiser and had his hands in numerous other schemes. Hamilton wrote three volumes of autobiography, all three had different biographical details. He called one volume Mr Norris and I (Isherwood wrote the forward). He was a conman and raconteur with a good deal of charm. Norris in the book is exactly that, charming and endearing but always up to something and keeping many secrets. There are some genuinely comic moments; such as the party Norris and Bradshaw attend. Bradshaw hears Norris screaming in a bedroom and bursts in assuming he is being attacked, only to find him being soundly whipped by a dominatrix called Anni. The various rituals surrounding Norris's wig and daily toilette are hilarious. There is also a great supporting cast of minor characters who all add something to the whole.

The real star of the book is the underbelly of Berlin in the early 1930s which is marvellously drawn. The various communists and the rather disorganised party machine contrasting with the well run and rather sinister Nazis, who most people seem to think don't stand a chance of power. This is the tail end of Weimar and a look at the sleazier side of Berlin. It is beautifully written and is a joy to read. The ending outlines the Nazis taking power and the destruction of the communist party.

I read the folio edition with some wonderful illustrations by Beryl Cook.

Barry Pierce says

It's nice to be back with Isherwood. This novel is nice. Well, it's Isherwood nice. Meaning it's all great until something horrible happens and then he stamps on your heart and never looks back. This is a fantastic study of male friendship in the 30s (aka hella gay) and of the rise of Nazism. It odd seeing just how much the people in this novel don't like Hitler or the Nazis even though this was published in 1933, they don't even know what's coming.

I must read more Isherwood and so must you. If you haven't read Isherwood then ugh what are you doing with your life?

Nigeyb says

A captivating novel about a duplicitous friendship set against the backdrop of a country in turmoil

'Mr Norris Changes Trains' was the first book I have read by Christopher Isherwood since my teens, back in the 1970s, and I am delighted to report that Christopher Isherwood is every bit as good as I had remembered.

'Mr Norris Changes Trains' was published in 1933 and (along with 'Goodbye to Berlin') is drawn from Isherwood's experiences as an expatriate living in Berlin during the early 1930s.

William Bradshaw, an English teacher in Berlin, has a chance encounter on a train with the slightly sinister Arthur Norris. On the surface Norris is a charming, if highly strung and down at heel, English gentleman. As the reader realises, and well before Bradshaw, Norris's charm masks a morally bankrupt personality. The character of Arthur Norris was based on a real life character, who Christopher Isherwood befriended in Berlin, called Gerald Hamilton.

Apparently Gerald Hamilton went through life managing to amass a large number of distinguished and not-so-distinguished friends, despite being a liar, a thief, and completely two-faced. A man guaranteed, in any political situation, to choose the most repellent side, and who fabricated almost every detail of his life. Hamilton would sell a friend down the river for the smallest amount of money. Despite being permanently bankrupt, he frequently managed to live a life filled with five-star hotels, fine wines, and good food, whether in Weimar-era Berlin or London in the swinging sixties. All this and more is, so I understand, contained in 'The Man Who Was Norris: The Life of Gerald Hamilton' by Tom Cullen a book, as the title suggests, devoted to *The Man Who Was Norris* and a book I plan to read soon.

Coincidentally Gerald Hamilton also appeared in another book I recently enjoyed, the stunning 'Rendezvous at the Russian Tea Rooms: The Spyhunter, the Fashion Designer & the Man From Moscow' by Paul Willetts which is also well worth reading.

I heartily recommend 'Mr Norris Changes Trains', it's an engaging tale which is also historically fascinating through its powerful evocation of the atmosphere of Berlin during the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s.

Towards the novel's conclusion, politics dominates the story as the plot strands cleverly come together. Just as William Bradshaw realises that he has been duped, so the German people are also being taken in by their Nazi leader. Unlike Hitler in the 1930s, Norris's own plans never seem to quite work out and, as the tragic ending presages the horrors that were to follow, so it also signals hasty departures from Berlin for both Arthur Norris and William Bradshaw.

I'll leave you to discover Norris's fate for yourselves, it is an entertaining and apt conclusion for one so despicable, depraved and corrupt.

Overall 'Mr Norris Changes Trains' is a captivating novel about a duplicitous friendship set against the backdrop of a country in turmoil.

The next book I will read is 'Christopher and His Kind' an autobiographical account of Christopher Isherwood's life-from 1929, when he left England to spend a week in Berlin and decided to stay there indefinitely, to 1939, when he arrived in America. I hope 'Christopher and His Kind' will give me new insights into both Berlin in the 1930s and also the events related in 'Mr Norris Changes Trains'.

EDIT: I've now finished 'Christopher and His Kind' by Christopher Isherwood: [Click here to read my review](#)

Σωτ?ρης Αδαμαρ?τσος says

Μια ιστορ?α που εξελ?σσεται στο Βερολ?νο λ?γο πριν την ?νοδο των Ναζ? στην εξουσ?α το 1933. Σκην?ς περιθωριακής παρακμ?ς και σεξουαλικού σαδισμού, ομοφιλοφιλικές υπ?νοιες και μικροαπατες ανθρ?πων με μια ιδ?α αριστοκρατ?ας. Ο συγγραφ?ας, που ?ζησε εκείνη την περ?οδο στο Βερολ?νο, χρησιμοποιε? την π?λη, τις συγκρο?σεις Κομμουνιστ?ν Ναζιστών κ το βερολινεζικό περιθ?ριο, ως καμβ? σε μια σχετικ? αδι?φορη ιστορ?α με πρωταγωνιστ?ς Βρετανο?ς... Πολλ?ς υπ?νοιες και κρυψινόια σε ?να βιβλ?ο που γρ?φτηκε το 1935, και αποτ?λεσε μ?ρος μιας ευρ?τερης gay λογοτεχν?ας που μεγαλουργσε στην Αμερικ? του 1940-60! Η πορε?α του συγγραφ?α ε?ναι εντυπωσιακ?.

Jeffrey Keeten says

"What repels me now about Mr Norris is its heartlessness. It is a heartless fairy-story about a real city in which human beings were suffering the miseries of political violence and near-starvation. The "wickedness" of Berlin's night-life was of the most pitiful kind; the kisses and embraces, as always, had price-tags attached to them, but here the prices were drastically reduced in the cut-throat competition of an over-crowded market. ... As for the "monsters", they were quite ordinary human beings prosaically engaged in getting their living through illegal methods. The only genuine monster was the young foreigner who passed gaily through these scenes of desolation, misinterpreting them to suit his childish fantasy." Christopher Isherwood

Christopher Isherwood

Isherwood wrote the above quote in the forward to a book by Gerald Hamilton aptly called *Mr. Norris and I* that was published in 1956. Isherwood based the character of Mr. Norris on his friend Gerald Hamilton. Isherwood was being hard on himself. He originally went to Berlin in the 1930s to experience the deviant sexual lifestyle that was available to a young Englishman in search of expressing his sexual preferences, preferences that may have been considered deviant in the community he grew up in. In 1935 when this book was published very few people knew just how horrible things would become and those that could imagine some of it could not imagine the worst of it.

William Bradshaw, names that come from Isherwood's middle names, comes to Berlin in search of adventure. He meets the enigmatic Arthur Norris on the train and despite the best efforts of the subject of his interest to warn him that all was not as it seemed, Bradshaw becomes fast friends with Norris. As Bradshaw learns more about Norris's nefarious affairs, all revolving around Arthur's frivolous use of money when he had some and a penchant for criminal behavior when he needed more, William expects to be kept abreast of the rise and fall of Norris's fortunes. After all Norris and his peculiar behavior are a major form of entertainment for him. When Arthur is called away on "business" in Paris, or actually running away from a problem that has become...well...too problematic, William realizes that he has formed an unnatural attachment to his friend.

"My first reaction was to feel, perhaps unreasonably, angry, I had to admit to myself that my feeling for

Arthur had been largely possessive. He was my discovery, my property. I was as hurt as a spinster who had been deserted by her cat. And yet, after all, how silly of me. Arthur was his own master; he wasn't accountable to me for his actions. I began to look round for excuses for his conduct, and, like an indulgent parent, easily found them. Hadn't he, indeed, behaved with considerable nobility? Threatened from every side, he had face his troubles alone. He had carefully avoided involving me in possible future unpleasantness with the authorities."

Norris is a survivor so despite whatever noble characteristics that Bradshaw wishes to naively attach to Norris, ultimately, if need be, he would trade anyone or anything to avoid pain, unpleasantness, or imprisonment. Now on the other hand Bradshaw is basically a tourist on extended vacation in Berlin, tutoring people to keep himself in pocket money. He can feel some of the thrill of associating with criminals, communists, and people engaging in "perverted" behavior, but at the end of the day when the chips are down he can ring up the embassy and find himself safely back on a train to England. As Norris's friends begin to disappear, some turning up dead, and others providing information that tightens the net around Norris's activities Bradshaw begins to feel uncomfortable. The game has become all too real.

Norris has a predilection to being dominated and beaten. A severe young lady named Anni with long boots and an assortment of whips provides him with the equivalent of sexual release in the form of controlled torture. To Norris, Anni is a beauty beyond earthly compare.

*"Do you think it's an exquisitely beautiful face? Quite perfect in its way. Like a Raphael Madonna. The other day I made an epigram. I said, Anni's beauty is only **sin-deep**. I hope that is original? Is it? Please laugh."*

Isherwood decided not to make Bradshaw gay. He did not want to distract the reader or give the reader a reason not to identify with the character. He basically made him asexual. He is subject to an occasionally pawing or a game of footsy from time to time, but overall he is an observer, a keen observer of the behavior of others. You can almost sense the stories that Isherwood wanted to tell about his experiences in Berlin. They are there in this book just barely off stage. If you listen closely you might even hear an occasional muffled scream or cry of pleasure coming from a back bedroom or sifting through the floorboards from downstairs.

The book did remind me of a class I had in sixth grade. The teacher's first name was Francis which I remember because I had an Aunt named Frances and I couldn't figure out why this guy was named Francis. He decided as a lesson in discrimination to take the most Aryan among us, blond and blue-eyed preferred, and drap construction paper billboards around us graffitied with anti-aryan rhetoric. We also had to wear dunce caps and for the length of the school day, one day only, we had to walk to all our classes wearing these ridiculous raiments. Students continued to scrawl their own thoughts of our unworthiness on us as the day progressed. I of course was an Aryan poster child, a bit gaunt, but you know the artist could have plumped me up a bit to promote a more healthy version of Hitler youth. It was one of the longest days of my life. I will never forget the feeling of being held apart, unable to escape even for a moment that I had been singled out for persecution.

It was horrible.
It scared the crap out of me.
And it made me a better person.

"They were suddenly proud to be blonde. And they thrilled with a furtive, sensual pleasure, like schoolboys,

because the Jews, their business rivals, and the Marxists, a vaguely defined minority of people who didn't concern them, had been satisfactorily found guilty of defeat and the inflation, and were going to catch it."

This was really just an entertainment, a very good one with witty prose, and interesting characters. Mr. Norris in his assortment of vanity wigs and his troubles with an irate butler intent on his destruction will reside in my memory forever. Bradshaw, shadowy though he was, still provided us with a view of events filled with awe and excitement. He was a puppy let loose from his society shackles to explore whatever scent caught his attention. I do wonder what kind of gritty novel this would have been if Isherwood had not been afraid of losing the monetary sponsorship of an indulgent Uncle or of incurring the ire of his friends.

William receives a message from Arthur that may just sum up the whole novel. *"Tell me, William, his last letter concluded, what have I done to deserve all this?"*

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I also have a Facebook blogger page at: <https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

Emily says

Καθ'ος ο Ναζισμ'ος ανατ'λλει στο Βερολ'νο, μια τυχα'α γνωριμ'α σε 'να τρ'νο εξελ'σσεται σε μ'α ιδι'τυπη φιλ'α, της οπο'ας παρακολουθο'με την πορε'α στα χρ'νια που 'πονται. Ο νεαρ'ος 'γγλος Ου'λιαμ 'ρχεται για πρ'τη φορ' σε επαφ' με τα ελαφρ'ς τρομαγμ'να γαλαν' μ'τια του κυρ'ου Ν'ρις σε 'να τρ'νο με προορισμ' το Βερολ'νο. "Ήταν τα 'κκληκτα μ'τια εν'ς σχολειαρ'παιδου που το πι'νεις στα πρ'σα εν' παραβα'νει 'ναν απ' τους καν'νες". Ο Ου'λιαμ αδυνατε' να λ'βει αποστ'σεις απ' αυτ' τη φιλ'α, εντυπωσιασμ'νος απ' την προσωπικ'τητα του κ. Ν'ρις, που ε'ναι εξ'σου αντιφατικ' και γοητευτικ'. Μια φιλ'α που αποκαλ'πτει πρ'σωπα και καταστ'σεις μ'σα απ' μισ'λογα και συνεχε'ς αποσιωπ'σεις που σκοπ' 'χουν να συμπληρ'σει η φαντασ'α 'λα 'σα δεν ομολογο'νται. Ο κ. Ν'ρις προσπαθε' να επιβι'σει κακ'ν κακ'ς μ'σα στο πολιτικ' κλ'μα της εποχ'ς που κλυδων'ζεται. Σαφ'ς προσκολημ'νος στις αν'σεις μιας ζω'ς που ε'χε συνηθ'σει να απολαμβ'νει αλλ' μοι'ζει ανεπιστρεπτ' χαμ'νη, καταβ'λλει 'οκνες προσπ'θειες να διατηρ'σει 'να προφ'λ bon viveur χρησιμοπο'ντας θεμιτ' και αθ'μιτα μ'σα. Ο αναγν'στης 'χει το ρ'λο του μ'ντη σχεδ'ν σε 'λο το βιβλ'ο, προσπαθ'ντας να παρεισφρ'σει στα μισ'λογα και στην κρυψ'νοια του 'ρωα για να συν'γει τα συμπερ'σματα του. 'σως αυτ' ε'ναι και η κ'ρια χ'ρη του βιβλ'ου. Το κλ'μα της εποχ'ς, 'τσι 'πως αναδ'εται απ' την π'να του συγγραφ'α, περιγρ'φεται εξαιρετικ'. Και ο κ. Ν'ρις, 'νας φτωχοδι'βολος ντυμ'νος στα μεταξωτ', κερδ'ζει τη συμπ'θεια ομο' με τη συμπ'νια. 3.5/5. Θα διαβ'σω οπωσδ'ποτε και το "Αντ'ο Βερολ'νο" του 'διου συγγραφ'α, το δε'τερο βιβλ'ο της 'τυπης βερολιν'ζικης διλογ'ας του.

Susan says

This novel begins with William Bradshaw, a young English tutor, meeting the slightly ridiculous Mr Arthur Norris on a train to Berlin. Mr Norris is nervous at having to present his passport, elusive about what he does and, with his rather obvious wig and odd habits, does not seem as though he is a character to take seriously at

first. However, this chance meeting results in a firm friendship and, fairly soon, William is visiting his new friend frequently and becomes involved in his disreputable life and associates; including his bullying secretary Herr Schmidt.

Mr Norris is a man who lives well, despite his soon obvious lifestyle of debts, despair and dodgy dealings. The novel is set in 1930's Berlin and so it is impossible to ignore the political situation unfolding there. Mr Norris is keen to shine at the local Communist Party meetings, but these activities also lead to him being questioned by the authorities.

I have never read Christopher Isherwood before, but I liked the way that the author allowed us to interpret events for ourselves. He trusted the reader to keep up and so it is enough to infer certain things, or show us glimpses, so that we can make our own assumptions. The style of the novel seems deceptively slight, but this is a very clever book – beautifully written, it flows wonderfully and is filled with great characters and has an excellent setting.

Jim says

Mr Norris Changes Trains was written in that twilight period of the 1930s when it did not pay to admit that one was gay. Consequently, there is a lot of shuffling around of characters who are made to appear moderately, if not actively heterosexual -- very much like Marcel Proust earlier on, whose Albertine was actually his Italian chauffeur Alfred Agostinelli.

I am convinced that Christopher Isherwood would have livened up even an edition of Bradshaw -- a regularly published columnar railroad timetable that curiously bore the same name as the narrator of **Mr Norris Changes Trains**, one William Bradshaw, who stands in for Isherwood.

The novel takes place in the last days of Weimar Germany and, in fact, ends after the Reichstag fire that marked Hitler's official ascension to the post of Der Fuehrer. He describes the era thus:

Berlin was in a state of civil war. Hate exploded suddenly, without warning, out of nowhere; at street corners, in restaurants, cinemas, dance halls, swimming baths; at midnight, after breakfast, in the middle of the afternoon. Knives were whipped out, blows were dealt with spiked rings, beer-mugs, chair-legs, or leaded clubs; bullets slashed the advertisements on the poster-columns, rebounded from the iron roofs of latrines. In the middle of a crowded street a young man would be attacked, stripped, thrashed, and left bleeding on the pavement; in fifteen seconds it was all over and the assailants had disappeared.

It was almost as if the rise of Hitler were associated with the simultaneous settlement of thousands of scores that had festered over decades.

One must not forget the character of the fey Arthur Norris, who succeeds only in getting himself into messes under the watchful eye of his young English friend Bradshaw. He may have changed trains, but they never take him anyplace where he is not in the soup.

J. says

Our voices sounded so absurd that I could have laughed out loud. We were like two unimportant characters in the first act of a play, put there to make conversation until it is time for the chief actor to appear.

A sweetly nostalgic look backwards at what unexpectedly becomes nostalgia-- the half-understood, the loony, the unexplained and the senseless-- as they begin to morph into the storyline of what we remember. And into what we end up calling human nature, once we have some perspective on the past.

At this point it goes without saying that this author was writing about life that wasn't mainstream, and yet reflected the era in a kind of funhouse mirror version. Isherwood was able to contrast his unusual cast of characters, contrary and unmanageably compulsive, against the backdrop of the burgeoning National Socialist regime in Germany's thirties, a larger frame that makes individual failings or eccentricity seem minor.

Our impressionable and yet worldly narrator makes his polite way amongst the international flotsam and near-society types that comprise certain circles in Berlin, 1935. Rather than savagely giving us a wicked parody of everyone he meets and all he sees, he opts for a kind of quiet empathy in the hopes of understanding the larger things. As much as this helps the story, since he gets far more out of the proceedings than he might with a more judgmental approach-- in the end he gets no further in his larger quest, due no doubt to the precarious uncertainty of the era.

Isherwood has a kind of opposite number here to Hamilton's *The Slaves Of Solitude*, but with characters who are the inverse of quiet bed-sit desperation; they are criminals, bolsheviks, secret homosexuals, dominatrixes and jaded, perverse aristocracy, harboring various kinds of intents. It's a Reader's Digest "Most Unforgettable Character" with candidates who would truly horrify that staid family publication.

(..there is one ridiculous Baron whose proclivity for young boys is aided by his reading list in one particular genre: it is the Boy's-Castaway-Island scenario that fascinates him. Whenever we encounter the Baron, he's likely to be asking if a current escort reminds the narrator of one of his desert-island idylls. Grown men. Some wearing monocles. Boy castaways. Berlin. Nazis. Isherwood makes it impossible not to laugh, and yet...)

Mr. Norris Changes Trains is by turns silly, antic, then not-silly, and threatening, unpredictable. The introductory scene in the train embodies this nicely. Detail flies by in dense clouds, but a small item here or there may prove consequentially deadly. Perhaps. Kind of like life, but life in a highly-fraught, delirious era, that will never happen quite the same way again.

Fabian says

Impressive & rich in the anecdotal department... I wholly agree that the book lacks a true plot. It is more of a character study, of the flamboyant & unpredictable Arthur Norris whose nature embodies the joie de vivre of the true bohemian--his mishaps with the stirrings up of the Nazi party (relevant as much today as EVER) are part of true history, and another plus for the short novel. As part of "The Berlin Tales" of which I am henceforth bewitched (I mean, we yet have to meet Sally Bowles, ain't we!), it is a nod to the writer's authentic experience of a crucial point in time. That it is all laced delicately with gay wisdom & wit makes it truly worthwhile!

Greg says

Absolutely five stars. What a gem. I loved it. A classic. More to say later.

I'm keen to know who the Helen Pratt character is based on.

Jillwilson says

I first read Mr Norris Changes Trains in 1984. God knows what I made of it then. I wanted to read some Isherwood after reading Eric Larson's book about Berlin in the 1930s. I wanted to see what a fictional representation of this era looked like. It's a strange and slight novel. The narrator presents as being gullible and naïve. The Mr Norris of the title is entirely untrustworthy. In a way, these three qualities echo some key elements of the times but despite this overlay, the author doesn't do much with the narrative.

Of the novel, Wikipedia says "Although Mr Norris Changes Trains was a critical and popular success, Isherwood later condemned it, believing that he had lied about himself through the characterization of the narrator and that he did not truly understand the suffering of the people he had depicted. In an introduction to a 1956 edition of Gerald Hamilton's memoir Mr Norris and I, Isherwood wrote:

What repels me now about Mr Norris is its heartlessness. It is a heartless fairy-story about a real city in which human beings were suffering the miseries of political violence and near-starvation. The "wickedness" of Berlin's night-life was of the most pitiful kind; the kisses and embraces, as always, had price-tags attached to them, but here the prices were drastically reduced in the cut-throat competition of an over-crowded market....As for the "monsters", they were quite ordinary human beings prosiacally engaged in getting their living through illegal methods. The only genuine monster was the young foreigner who passed gaily through these scenes of desolation, misinterpreting them to suit his childish fantasy."

Isherwood felt unable to fully write about his sexuality in this novel which explains some deadened undercurrents. The plot circles around secrets, betrayals, politics and identity without ever really going anywhere with any of these themes. It is slight.

The Telegraph commented: "While Isherwood was attracted to Berlin by the ready availability of homosexual partners there, he always had a keen journalist's instinct for being in the right place at the right time. "Here was the seething brew of history in the making," he wrote, "a brew which would test the truth of all the political theories, just as actual cooking tests the cookery books. The Berlin brew seethed with unemployment, malnutrition, stock market panic, hatred of the Versailles Treaty and other potent ingredients." "

(<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/tv...>)

Both the homosexuality and the seething brew of Berlin are faint shadows in the novel which is set in 1931-32. You get a taste "Berlin was in a state of civil war. Hate exploded suddenly, without warning, out of nowhere: at street corners, in restaurants, cinemas, dance halls, swimming baths: at midnight, after breakfast, in the middle of the afternoon. Knives were whipped out, blows were dealt with spiked rings, beer-mugs, chair-legs or leaded clubs; bullets slashed the advertisements on the poster-columns, rebounded from the iron roofs of latrines. In the middle of a crowded street a young man would be attacked, stripped, thrashed and left bleeding on the pavement; in fifteen seconds it was all over and the assailants had disappeared." (p90) I wanted more of this reality. It was to have been called 'The Lost' which is a good description of what

happened to the idea.

Tfitoby says

An entertainment set during the growth of the Nazi party? It actually works too. Published before things went horribly wrong in Europe this collection of events chronicling the friendship of Mr Norris and Mr Bradshaw stands the test of time and history remarkably well.

As Isherwood himself said of this novel much later in his life, it is shallow and it is filled with frivolity whilst being set during a dark time in world history, but that doesn't change the fact that it is an enjoyable read perhaps akin to the entertainments of Graham Greene or Evelyn Waugh. Much like Mr Norris looking back at his youthful enthusiasms with regret I believe Isherwood's disowning of this book has to be put down to growing old and the looming spectre of death. I am of the opinion that you should never have regrets over your youthful art, but who knows perhaps one day I will look upon my published works with the same disdain?

As far as the novel itself goes, I was expecting something more. I imagined that there would be a much closer look at the debauched lifestyles being led in Berlin by the Bright Young Things of this period, something closer to a Vile Bodies in Berlin than I found but that aside the characters are wonderfully drawn (most notably the fabulous titular character of Mr Norris) and the relationship between Bradshaw and Norris is terribly entertaining.

Despite not really containing itself within a conventional plot structure the intrigue grows and grows as you become quite certain that Mr Norris is up to no good and you're wondering when and how things are going to go wrong for the hapless young Bradshaw as Germany begins to disintegrate in the background.

KatieMc says

There is so much subtext behind the extremely polite veneer put forth by the anti-hero Mr. Norris. While the actual plot line was quite thin, I found myself wanting to start the next chapter. This was not the moving experience I had reading A Single Man. I honestly don't know what to make of the fact that the story was farcical yet the historical setting and circumstances were rather grave.

2018 reading challenge checks the box for 20. *A book by a local author*. This seems to be a bit of a stretch, but Christopher Isherwood lived over 30 years in Santa Monica. Not only that, but a woman in my bookclub used to speak with him. So I am claiming him as a local author.

Agnieszka says

William Bradshaw, an Englishman living in Berlin, meets on the train Mr Norris. He is remarkable and I may even say sophisticated person; by turns charming and crafty, narcissistic and vain, his manners and attire are elegant and impeccable and his approach to life may be summed up in his own words: *I only wish to have three sorts of people as my friends, those who are very rich, those who are very witty, and those who are very beautiful*. No wonder that from the first moment William is fascinated by Arthur Norris and

accidental meeting right away turns into friendship.

William, in good faith and due to innate gullibility (I show him a little mercy not naming it stupidity), attends new friend's life. He accompanies Arthur to Berlin's underworld, engages in political activity and, convinced about his financial problems, let himself get entangled in spy affair. His interest and friendship to Norris does not falter despite warnings from other friends and Arthur's opaque explanations about his finances, dubious activities and disreputable acquaintances.

Mr Norris changes trains is very well written novel, with great evocation of prewar Berlin , its inhabitants and decadent atmosphere. And though we can sense overwhelming presence of coming Nazis, novel has ironic touch and abounds in hilarious incidents. Isherwood focuses predominantly on Norris but also introduces distinctive and memorable supporting characters, like Baron Pregnitz (indulging himself with peculiar likings), Olga, rather resourceful woman (*she was a procuress, a cocaine-seller, and a receiver of stolen goods; she also let lodgings, took in washing and, when in mood, did exquisite fancy needlework*) , dominatrix Anni or devious Arthur's assistant, Schmidt of whom Arthur used to say *those who are foolish enough to keep snakes as pets usually have cause to regret it, sooner or later* .

We can observe born of the fascism, participate in communist rally and drunken orgy as well and our pockets are empty due to galloping inflation. But in the turn of events, step by step, we're coming to the truth of the real Arthur's face and in the end, despite his ridiculous excuses and attempts to justify himself, we can even, oddly enough, pity him though we can't deny that he got exactly what he deserved. And I may assure you that it was not Anni's whip at all.

notgettingenough says

When I read *Goodbye to Berlin*, I innocently thought that the anti-semitism in it belonged to the characters. Now, reading *Mr Norris Changes Trains*, I see that isn't so. The anti-semitic comments are gratuitously those of the author. Still, I wondered. If he were living in Germany, was it that he felt it made him safe throwing in just a few words in a few places to prove his credentials?

But now I see that his private words have always been littered with this abhorrent attitude, the more so since he lived in Berlin and must have known what was happening.

rest here: <https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress...>

Sketchbook says

"He had an animal innocence," Isherwood sums up Mr Norris -- no, I mean Gerald Hamilton (1890-1970), the flamboyant and flabby rogue who inspired Mr Norris. The 2 met, presumably, in Berlin where Issyvoo lived fr 1929-33. This may be the coolest and finest book Isherwood wrote. If he groused about it years later, it's because he was probably ashamed of his own political naivete.

I don't think Gerald Hamilton had any innocence at all. But his bewigged and painted self gave birth to a wonderful "fictional" character -- the scheming Mr Norris who lacks any positive qualities, but is still an unforgettable person. I read this book a long time ago and, now, thanks to Google, I reread anew after sleuthing Hamilton.

Gerald Hamilton was a gun-runner for the IRA, a con-man caught in embezzlement plots, a Commie sympathizer and then, turning far, far right, he was against war with Germany, espousing the views of fascist Oswald Mosley. Facing arrest in the UK, he tried to escape to Ireland dressed as a nun. Isherwood published this book in 1935 while the wayward Gerald Hamilton was spinning left and right. How could Isherwood resist using Hamilton as an amusing character?

Sally Bowles & Co came later, c 1939, when our author "got the political pitch." Although the musical "Cabaret" is a rouser with everyone singing that life is a cabaret ole chun, Isherwood focused on the lost and rejected. He caught the tormented, self-destructive spirit of Berlin which Broadway excised. He'd gone to Berlin because of the favorable money-exchange. And, coming from a strangulating UK environment where you faced jail if caught in the bushes with a boy, he read that anything went in Berlin. As Gerald Hamilton said, "We live in stirring times. Tea-stirring times."

Isherwood wasn't known in the US until 1951 when John Van Druten took a couple of his Berlin stories and wrote the play "I Am a Camera," later a musical. He told an interviewer, "I've never had a great success at first with anything I've written." He may have been the earliest to write about Berlin in the 30s, but the forgotten and slighted Robert McAlmon caught the nether-scene, steeped in drugs and unzipped frolics, ten years earlier in "Miss Knight and Others," which, for years, was unpublished here.

Isherwood's writing style in Mr Norris is quietly dry in a way that may remind you of Graham Greene. It's very effective. You feel Berlin as a reckless, scary crossroads. Mr Norris is last spotted in Rio. Gerald Hamilton expired while living above a Chinese restaurant in Chelsea called The Good Earth.

Lorenzo Berardi says

When a friend of mine heard that I was reading a book titled "Mr Norris Changes Trains", the first thing he said was "Chuck, I suppose?".

Poor Christopher Isherwood! Had he known about the main badass character of Walker Texas Ranger kicking his Arthur Norris out of common knowledge, I'm sure he would have chosen to call him differently. By the way, popular culture betrayed Isherwood twice here. Just tell a female friend of yours what given name the surname "Bradshaw" (the main narrator of this novel) brings to her mind and there you are: Carrie.

Does this ring a bell? I sincerely hope it doesn't.
But I'm afraid it does. Now, don't deny it!

Anyways, let's put first and second names aside for a moment. And let's forget that - Chuck or not Chuck - "Mr Norris Changes Trains" is a very unfortunate title. If I could rechristen this book, I would call it "The Fairy Godfather" (sorry Daniel Pennac) or, on a more silly note, "The Wig and the Moustache". But Mr

Isherwood thought it otherwise.

This is an odd novel. Here we have a book which is at the same time a relic from the past and something modern.

Whereas Arthur Norris' look, speech and manners wouldn't displease Thackeray, the little Isherwood tells us about the foreign correspondent Helen Pratt is enough to make a Orianna Fallaci or a Katie Adie out of her.

This contrast is just the effect Isherwood wants.

For "Mr Norris Changes Trains" is set in a very well-defined place and moment of recent history: Berlin in the mid-thirties. That is precisely when Hitler seized power tightening his grip on a whole nation and - quite soon - changing for worse Europe as we knew it.

And that Berlin was caught between the carefree hedonism of its cabarets (heirloom of the 1920s) and an economic and political crisis which quite helped the Nazis to kidnap Germany and throw it to the dogs.

Isherwood is masterful in writing: no doubt about this. And where he excels is in Mr Norris himself. This affected Barry Lyndonesque man with more than a touch of effeminacy and seeking for masochistic pleasures is a marvelous creation.

Far less successful is how the British author writes about Mr Norris' business between Paris and Berlin: plotting and intrigues are definitely something Graham Greene is more apt to work on than his compatriot. Isherwood tries to tell us more about German communists but he somehow fails to be very convincing in that respect.

Nevertheless, this is a good and enjoyable novel, if only for Arthur Norris' antics.

I would have liked Isherwood saying more about Berlin in the 1930s but the German capital stands pretty much in the background here with the exception of a chapter or two. I guess how I should pick up "Goodbye Berlin" by the same author or try the earlier "Berlin Stories" cooked up by Robert Walser to get more of what I want.

Kinga says

Berlin in the 30s, the political unrest grows but the demimonde parties on.

The narrator, William Bradshaw, lives there nicely as an expat giving English classes and enjoying life. This is pretty much all that we know about him, he doesn't even explicitly reveal his sexual orientation. In fact, this first person narrative tells us very little about narrator and focuses entirely on the person of Mr Norris, a perfect English gentlemen, a charming scoundrel.

William meets Mr Norris on the train in the first chapter, and, sadly, there aren't that many trains afterwards. Sadly, as I love reading about what happens on the trains. Mr Norris, while keeping up the appearances of a refined Englishman of delicate sensibilities, seems rather murky.

William's favourite pastime becomes watching Mr Norris, and, gosh, is that boy observant! He notices everything, every furtive glance, every twitch of the mouth, every tense muscle.

"Do you know what time we arrive at the frontier?"

Looking back on the conversation, this question does not seem to me to have been particularly unusual. It is true that I had no interest in the answer; I wanted merely to ask something which might start us chatting, and which wasn't, at the same time, inquisitive or impertinent. Its effect on the stranger was remarkable. I had certainly succeeded in arousing his interest. He gave me a long, odd glance, his features seemed to stiffen a

little. It was the glance of a poker-player who guesses suddenly that his opponent hold a straight flush and that he had better be careful. At length he answered, speaking slowly and with caution:

‘I’m afraid I couldn’t tell you exactly. In about an hour’s time, I believe. ‘

His glance, now vacant for a moment, was clouded again. An unpleasant thought seemed to tease him like a wasp; he moved his head slightly to avoid it."

I told you; nothing goes past this boy. But you get used to it and become equally obsessed about every change in Mr Norris’ body language, trying to read what he’s not telling you (and that’s quite a lot.). Isherwood has created a rich and fascinating character (apparently he didn’t create him from scratch, as Mr Norris was modeled on Gerald Hamilton) whom we can’t help but cut a lot of slack, despite the fact he is obviously a total scumbag. As a reader, I found myself just as gullible as William while believing (like him) that I had it all under control and saw Mr Norris through.

I liked this book a lot but maybe I’m wrong to like it. Isherwood himself ended up hating it saying it was dishonest and shallow. I think he is being too hard on himself. Literally on himself, because the narrator, William Bradshaw, is more than just an alter-ego; it’s the author himself. Isherwood came to the conclusion that it was William who was the villain of the novel, insensitive to the misery and horror that was surrounding him in the prewar Germany.

If I were Chris, I wouldn’t beat myself about it so much. His descriptions of the state of the decaying German society were powerful. And I felt the sense of impending doom. (Although it was maybe because I knew how it all escalated). Anyway, he wouldn’t be the only one to dismiss the seriousness of the situation. How do you think Chamberlain felt?

There is so much more awesomeness in this book like dominatrix scenes, a sleazy homosexual baron playing footsie under the table, a Communist pimp, but I think you should read it all for yourself.

Connie says

Christopher Isherwood wrote the fictional "Mr Norris Changes Trains" based on his experiences in Berlin in the early 1930s. He left England to work in Berlin as an English tutor since Berlin was much more liberal toward homosexuals. The character William Bradshaw (named after Isherwood's middle names) acts as a narrator and an observer in the book.

Mr Norris, based on Isherwood's friend, Gerald Hamilton, is a charming, nervous, middle-aged man whose lifestyle is supported by conning people, selling secrets, and other criminal activities. He's a bit of a comical, prissy figure with a wig that has a tendency to sit off-center. He has regular appointments with Anni, a woman with tall boots and a whip.

William meets Mr Norris on the train to Berlin, and they become good friends. Mr Norris introduces William to a group of people who engage in drunken, sexual partying. He also involves William with the Communist party leaders in Berlin. This was a difficult economic time in Germany. The Nazis were gaining power with their efficient brutal organization. The political scene is viewed through the eyes of the young, politically naive William.

The book is engaging with its entertaining, well-drawn characters. It is also a historical look at a changing Germany as the Weimar republic was ending.

