



Jews Queers Germans

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A breathtaking historical novel that recreates the intimate milieu around Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm from 1907 through the 1930s, a period of great human suffering and destruction and also of enormous freedom and creativity, a time when the remnants and artifices of the old world still mattered, and yet when art and the social sciences were pirouetting with successive revolutions in thought and style.

Set in a time when many men in the upper classes in Europe were gay, but could not be so publicly, *Jews Queers Germans* revolves around three men: Prince Philipp von Eulenburg, Kaiser Wilhelm II's closest friend, who becomes the subject of a notorious 1907 trial for homosexuality; Magnus Hirschfeld, a famed, Jewish sexologist who gives testimony at the trial; and Count Harry Kessler, a leading proponent of modernism, and the keeper of a famous set of diaries which lay out in intimate detail the major social, artistic and political events of the day and allude as well to his own homosexuality. The central theme here is the gay life of a very upper crust intellectual milieu that had a real impact on the major political upheavals that would shape the modern world forever after.

Jews Queers Germans Details

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From Reader Review Jews Queers Germans for online ebook

Damian Serbu says

Well written and profoundly interesting history. But I felt a little tricked by selling it in any way as a novel. It's really not. Yes, he invents some dialogue and tweaks a few things to make it a compelling narrative, but this is otherwise a hardcore history. An important one, and a profoundly essential story we should all know. But those picking it up and expecting a novel will not find one.

Eavan says

This book wasn't exactly what I thought I'd get (like everyone else has said in reviews, there is very little "novel"), but I like nonfiction/history books so it didn't bother me too much. I, unfortunately, found most of the parts with Rathenau dry. I pushed through, and only skimmed like 2 pages, but man does this book give way to being boring easily. I liked the second half of the book more than the first (maybe because I got used to Duberman's style, maybe it was the perilous rise of the right), and the only parts I really lost myself in was the Hirschfeld sections, and I wish there was more of them, no offense to Harry Kessler.

It wasn't bad though, if a bit boring, and I'm really glad I read it. Even if Duberman's prose feels a bit juvenile (which I don't blame him for, coming from decades of history work), I did find myself in the minds of the men and began to understand who they were as people. This is especially true of Magnus Hirschfeld, who I'm so glad I was introduced biographically to by the book (what a cool, cool, modern guy). The transition from traditional history to prose was a bit awkward at times and the prose never really came *alive* for me, but I mean heck — the subject matter is niche and probably the more interesting biographies of these men.

So for that, it's four stars. I wish more books showed history in this capacity to bring it alive for readers and even if this book fell short of it, the passion was there. Depending on my mood, I'd maybe even read it again.

George Ilsley says

It feels strange to classify a book as both fiction and nonfiction but that is what Duberman has concocted here. By the time I reached the end I was back on board but getting there was at times an ordeal. Whenever characters sat down to talk I started groaning. Some of these discussions failed to engage this reader. Sometimes I just longed for more of a straightforward history. Certainly the book is a massive effort and the result can feel laboured. This experiment in form was brave and not altogether successful.

Rj says

I am a big fan of Duberman's work but this book which I really wanted to like, just never came together. He was probably too ambitious trying to marry historical figures with a fictional narrative that just never jelled. I think if it had opted for fiction or an academic study it probably would have worked. But the two together just never gained any traction.

Tim says

At first this book was very difficult to read. It was categorized as historical fiction, but I knew little about the era of Germany from just prior to WWI to the rise of Hitler. Other than the names of Kaiser Wilhelm, Archduke Ferdinand, and Hitler and his retinue, the other German princes and luminaries of the time were unknown to me, so it was difficult to know whether the people in the story were real or fictional. It wasn't until I found the "Author's Note" at the back of the book that explained that the book is really a history, with only the dialog between characters being fictionalized, that I could appreciate the book. Putting the Author's Note up front would have done readers a service.

Ilya says

A+ history
good writing
yet only partly successful at what it tries to be: not a historical novel, but a hybrid of novel and history.

I had the feeling that Duberman, a historian, was unwilling to give himself the freedom to tell a tale, inventing whole scenes in order to convey some essential truths.

Duberman got me very interested in the lives of the men he follows in this book: Magnus Hirschfeld, Harry Kessler, Walther Rathenau - and a few others. In Duberman's account, each of these three tried, in his chosen sphere of life (sexuality, the arts, the economy) to pull Germany into some kind of progressive future.

But Duberman's choice to take this view has the unfortunate effect of flattening each man, they almost fuse into one noble guy who is misunderstood by his society. When Ernst Röhm finally appears late in the book, I found myself hoping to hear more about this baddie. But no.

There is almost no sex in the book, and scarcely any sexuality. Every time it seems to come close, Duberman inexplicably retreats.

There is also not nearly enough effort made to bring to life in German society, before, during, and after World War I. Take me into a military barracks, or a bar in Weimar Berlin.

The most novelistic element is invented dialogue. This is good enough, but serve mainly to illustrate the figures' views on the issues of the day, rather than to give richness to their characters and motivations. A missed opportunity.

I found myself wishing that Thomas Mallon or Gore Vidal had tried to write the lives of some of these fascinating men.

Nevertheless, I feel obliged to say that I'm *very* glad I read this book. These are important, intriguing lives.

Bill Hsu says

I'm enjoying this so far, despite how chatty and gossipy it is. (Guess it's more "novel" than "history".) That period is one that I find fascinating; Duberman handles nicely the interweaving of multiple political threads and conflicted characters.

Interesting how the blurb above is a bit different from the one on my paperback. For instance, the trio of main characters expanded to five, with the addition of Rathenau and Rohm. So far it's mostly centered around Kessler, whom I consider the most interesting of the bunch. When Germany jumped into WW I, it's horrifying how an intelligent and politically left-leaning man like Kessler was quickly caught up in the fervor, and eager to participate in the slaughter. Parallels with recent events? Sigh.

Paul says

I liked this concept - a large portion of the books is historical, based on research, etc, and then there will be conversations that the author creates. Interesting choice of characters to follow, and of course, these were fascinating times. But of course, I really only read it because of the title...

Bryan Schwartz says

This book should have been right up my alley.

In graduate school, I spent numerous hours researching Magnus Hirschfeld, the members of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee, and the Institute for Sexual Science. Unfortunately, at the time, the number of books on these subjects was hopelessly limited. As is so often the case with LGBTQ historical figures, Magnus Hirschfeld and his fellow Weimar era thinkers were often ignored or intentionally stripped from the historical record. Their stories are, only now, finally returning to public (and academic) memory.

That being said, I was excited to see Martin Duberman's *Jews Queers Germans*. I have respected Duberman's narrative flair ever since I picked up a frayed copy of his 1993 monograph on the Stonewall riots.* ...And that "flair" is on full display in *Jews Queers Germans*.

But therein lies the problem. This book is a clear example of form over function. Duberman's flair suffocates a fascinating story that deserves a clearly articulated academic monograph. What he has produced instead is an amalgamation, which he defines as "novel/history." In practice, this resulted in a series of imagined (and painfully artificial) conversations between some of the era's most important LGBTQ voices. These conversations are hung, like isolated set pieces, on Duberman's larger (and better) narrative history. On more than one occasion, I found myself dreading the syntactically dull conversations and longing to return to wider narrative.

While I can appreciate that Duberman wanted to bring an exciting new approach to the standard historical monograph, his execution left a lot to be desired.

*I should probably note that David Carter's 2005 monograph *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* benefited from more thorough research.

Andrei says

slow moving, and a bit daunting, but dense and illuminating and captivating. it took me most of this year to read but I'm so glad I found it. an amazing introduction to the lives of these people of this time and place, I now want to read more books about queer Jewish folks in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Bill says

It tells an important story of the pre-World War 1 to the mid 1930's period in Europe, primarily in Germany. The title accurately reflects the predominate theme of the interaction of people of one or more of those groups. It is primarily a historical account, with the "novel" component consisting of dialogue that the author feels is within keeping of what the figures could have said in their specific circumstances, other than that, he sticks to the facts compiled through his research. The three identities are major factors, even pivotal in the turn of events in the period. There is also the fourth identity of political party affiliation with also plays a major role. I give it five stars for including the major impact that queer politics had in shaping the events.

Bruce Edelstein says

Once again, I find myself regretting that we can't choose half stars in rating books here. This was more of a 3 1/2 star book to me than a 4 star one, but 3 seemed excessively miserly. The subjects of the book are fascinating and the intertwined biographies make for an effective telling of a fundamental moment in the definition of modern society. My difficulty with the book stems largely from its desire to be considered a novel, and not an "historical novel." It is, ultimately, neither. It is a history book for enthusiasts and so it lacks the scholarly apparatus of footnotes. But its wish to be considered fiction is not equally repaid by its style, which is at times a bit pedantic. Still, the protagonists are fascinating and fleshed out with great sympathy. I do recommend the book, just do not consider it to be a Weimar "Wolf Hall," as the author seems to want us to believe he has created.

Alex says

This book is a deliberate blending of traditional history and novel forms - it follows a biographical type of plot, though encompassing about four main subjects, while imparted a great deal of the background information that informs and shapes the people in question. It reads like an incredibly engaging popular history book with interludes of dialogue. Duberman quotes heavily from diaries, and there are a few notable scenes where he presents precious little of the small details, in a way that feels very respectful of feelings that were not and could not be recorded, and thus cannot be reconstructed in narrative form. Though this leaves the reader somewhat detached from crucial moments, it also reminds one of the realness of the people involved, and prevents the complete novelisation of the events in question.

The topic and time period are also fascinating and I'm glad to have learned so much about it.

Carlos Mock says

Jews Queers Germans by Martin Duberman

Germany 1890 to 1930 -- a period that encompasses the end of the German Empire, ruled by the Kaiser Wilhelm II; the Weimar Republic; and the beginning of the Nazi movement.

The book is mainly about Prince Philipp von Eulenburg, Kaiser Wilhelm II's closest friend, who becomes the subject of a notorious 1907 trial for homosexuality; Magnus Hirschfeld, a famed, Jewish sexologist who gives testimony at the trial; and Count Harry Kessler, a leading proponent of modernism, and the keeper of a famous set of diaries which layout in intimate detail the major social, artistic and political events of the day and allude as well to his own homosexuality. But it does not stop there. It basically reads like a gossip column of all the homosexuals of the era. There is no point of view, no plot. It's a slow tedious read and other than the historical significance, I see no reason to read it.

Not recommended!

Jose says

This book's main motivation is novelizing the fate of a Dr Hirschfield and some pioneers of sexology up WWII. The author's interest clearly lies there and the rest is incidental, including the presence of Harry Kessler, a gay and enlightened aristocrat that cruises through this pages thanks to his access to higher circles but without consequence. Had the author just written a history book about sexology developments during the Weimar Republic, it would have been a worthy effort.

Unfortunately, the much wider and seismic historic developments in Germany are also part of the book and are used as the backdrop. At some point the reader has to start wondering why we are still concerned about the finer points of homosexual identity while the SA is tearing down the library. The author fails to make a connection between the dysfunction of social morality and the disintegration of society and economics. Why did the Jews and the homosexuals become the scapegoats? How did the fascist manipulate these forces to rouse the country against not only the Left but a wide spectrum of more moderate positions? There are hints thrown in but besides speculating on the sexual proclivities of everyone, there is little understanding of the social sickness present and it all gets chalked down to inflation anyway.

In conclusion: This book is a poor mix of novelization, actual history and a sort of authors' indulgence. It doesn't work. Sometimes we jump from reading a paragraph that belongs on Wikipedia to a theatrical and forced dialogue to present day events that the author can't resist to offer as contrast, current vocabulary included. These many streams yank the reader completely out of the story. Wrapping it all under the blanket of "postmodern history" makes it even worse. Saying that history is biased by definition does not excuse embracing bias as academically desirable. The author lacks the literary chops to create a good novel anyway but a novel it is even if a historical one. As a novel it lacks internal drama, the main characters are not shown doing much but they do expose a lot. Granted it is hard to bring future developments that belong in a lecture into a historical fiction but many authors solve this problem in codas and other out-of-text devices.

The subject is immensely interesting but this book falls flat, becomes preachy, distorts the importance of some events. A circle of intellectuals arguing about fine points of science or art or race was quite irrelevant in retrospect compared to the wars that shattered Europe due to much broader problems. Nevertheless, I finished the book with some will power and got interested in googling a lot of the characters and events described as well as looking for similarities with present day circumstances. I believe our very own Weimar Republic is happening now and unlike the author, I do not believe today's ideas about sex are now set in

stone -through science- or that morality is just a question of social habits. Sex might still be demonized and used to promote political agendas. Morality might have roots beyond habits and might consist on rejecting hypocrisy, for example. I find it contradictory to use science as the last word on social interaction norms and argue for a morality with no bounds.
