

Prater Violet

Ch. Isherwood

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In my parents library there were a lot of Zephyr Books, some with the original color coded dust jackets, most of them, however, denuded. I remember them vividly from the late sixties, when I started to read English books systematically. They were published in Sweden by a Swedish publisher Bonniers, launched in 1942 as a response to the fact that no books in English could be imported to Sweden. The market for them extended to Switzerland, Portugal and Turkey, but also expanded into Hungary, non-occupied France (and occupied Denmark). After the war the ambition was to expand publication further but competition from British and American publishers became too strong and the series was discontinued in 1950.

The present book still survives with its blue dust jacket. I read it many years ago, probably in the 70's, although I do not know whether in the early or late part, whether before or after I realized that Isherwood was a homosexual, an obvious fact maybe to be gleaned from his Berlin stories, but which I was too innocent to surmise at the time. I remember very little from it, apart from its smooth read, and the final admission of the author at the very end of the book, that you do things in life, because they have been suggested to you, just as a waiter suggests dishes. One such thing was 'Love'. It struck me at the time as both cynical and sad, and underwrote the idea that Isherwood was very detached from life.

Isherwood writes very smoothly and artlessly, and it is not so easy to understand what makes it flow so well. The touch is light as is the irony. There are no ponderous asides, no detailed descriptions of faces and clothing and similar traps, and no extended stretches of prose for the purpose of mere transportation. Everything in media res. You skim through the pages quickly without stumbling, one thing effortlessly leading to another. Interest is gained and sustained. It is set in London in the early 30's. Isherwood has just returned from Berlin, with the skill of being fluent in German. Hitler is on the rise and people are fearing a new war. The book was published after the war, and no doubt written not long before that, thus written with the benefit of hindsight, which unfortunately detracts from the potential documentary interest. What did people really think of Hitler at the time. It is easy and cheap to display insight after veils have been lifted.

There is not too much of a plot, but of course that is not really necessary for most novels, whose ultimate purpose is to evoke, and plot provides nothing more than to supply a rack onto which to hang your scenes and vignettes. In this case it is to show the chaos of film making, the miracle that out of this confusion involving a lot of people something will eventually emerge. Isherwood is a young author already of some renown who is sucked into the making of a film - Prater Violet. His purpose, which only gradually dawn upon him, is to provide a support for the brilliant Austrian director - Friedrich Bergmann -, by assisting him in the process of evolving a script and providing him with some natural ease of a native idiom. Bergmann, of course a Jew, is a colorful character, speaking with

a strong accent, when not lapsing into his Native German (and here of course Isherwood is seen to be an asset). Isherwood thinks he can write, that the task is beneath him, but Bergmann soon takes him out of his illusion. He is a mama boy, Bergmann explains to him, cuddled and protected by his comfortable background and the narrow circles in which he moves. He may pretend to be a socialist and a friend of the masses, but what does he know of it after all? Bergmann, the continental intellectual, is of course a different kind of fish. To the English Hitler is merely ridiculous, but Bergmann can see what is in store. Soon the bombs will rain down on England, the continent will be enslaved, and the Nazi forces will expand to consume the world at large. Such talk, vividly produced by an excited Bergmann, merely serves to amuse and comfort Isherwood. The phantasy of it all makes it unreal, and hence so his worries.

The first part of the collaboration concerns the script, which of course is a series of frustrations seemingly to go nowhere, the stupid and vulgar story of the poor flower girl meeting a Balkan prince at the Vienna Prater, seems to become only more and more stupid and vulgar. But the pay is good. And so suddenly there will be shooting in the studio. Everything that went on before seems to have been a pointless prelude, except possibly to acquaint Bergmann and Isherwood with each other. As a director Bergmann is on his own, masterly, dictatorial and exceedingly funny with all his antics and imitations. But there is grumbling, the shooting is behind schedule, and the head of the studio resorts to a stratagem planting the idea that a rival director has been shown the rushes and is groomed to take over. Bergmann is aghast, resigns in disgust, only to be masterly cajoled back to take responsibility (such things are shown to be so easy in fiction, in real life it is quite another matter, but this is of course the very point of fiction). In spite of the terrible political situation and the personal worries for the safety of his own family, making the filming of such a frivolous movie seem almost obscene, Bergmann is seized with a new enthusiasm for the task at hand, and a desire to get it right this time, and with a sure hand he redirects the film, more or less from scratch one surmises, making everybody happy, and Isherwood reduced to an amused onlooker. Happy Ending. To the delight of his family, Isherwood's name is listed on the credits, the movie makes money and attracts publicity and Bergmann gets an offer to move to Hollywood. And then in the end Isherwood gets into a philosophical mood, wondering what it is all about, what makes people tick and go on with life, instead of being overwhelmed by it and committing suicide. And he will find some comfort in 'Love', how he will go to southern France with his new lover J. and never mind that K., L. and M. surely will follow, the object of the desire matters little compared to the desire itself. A kind of pointless add-on, but nevertheless as my own reading experience revealed, yet capable of making a point, long after the ostensible story has sunk into a comfortable oblivion.

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