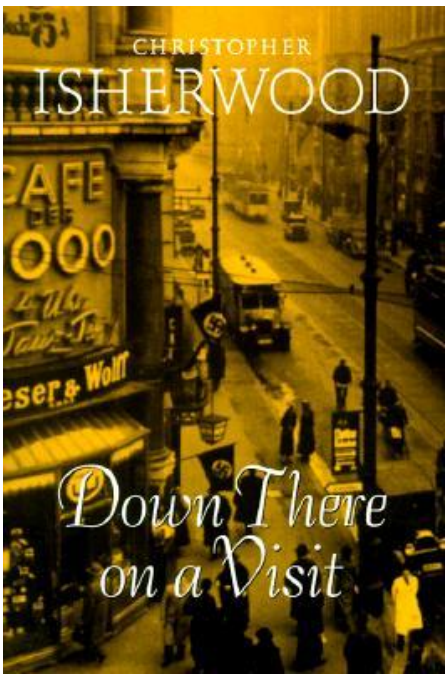

Down There on a Visit

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Christopher Isherwood originally intended Down There on a Visit to be part of The Lost, the unfinished epic novel that would also incorporate his famous Berlin Stories. Tracing many of the same themes as that earlier work, this novel is a bemused, sometimes acid portrait of people caught in private sexual hells of their own making. Its four episodes are connected by four narrators. All are called "Christopher Isherwood, " but each is a different character inhabiting a new setting: Berlin in 1928, the Greek Isles in 1933, London in 1938, and California in 1940. Down There on a Visit is a major work that shows Isherwood at the height of his literary powers.

Down There on a Visit Details

Date	:	Published March 1st 1999 by Univ Of Minnesota Press (first published 1962)
ISBN	:	9780816633678
Author	:	Christopher Isherwood
Format	:	Paperback 320 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Lgbt, Gay, Glbt, Queer, Classics

From Reader Review Down There on a Visit for online ebook

Mia says

So, I picked up this book a year or two ago and absolutely loved its first story. Then, for some reason unknown to me, I set it aside and only got back to it a month ago as I was heading to Berlin because, what else would one read there, right?

Right. I re-read the beginning and was even more enthralled by Isherwood's amazing ability to say complex things in a very simple yet elegant manner, he reminded me of reading Hemingway's Moveable Feast in some ways (a book I also regard as one of my all-time favorites). The style was certainly lacking in no way, and I found myself re-reading some passages over and over, discussing them with friends and being generally stunned by his command of the English language. As far as the plot goes, the different stories had somewhat different effects as they are, for the most part, not as related to one another except for some of the recurring characters. I did wish by the end to have learned more about say, Ambrose or the Greek gang and there were some parts I found more intriguing than others (loved Mr. Lancaster's story, Paul as well, the Augustus part of it not so much), but in the end it all worked as a whole and gave me, as the reader, an insight into Christopher's evolution which seemed natural, so I didn't find the book disjointed.

All in all, I think this is a book I'll probably return to at some point as I always do to Hemingway - a book that has a lot to offer a person at any stage in life they might find themselves in. Can't wait to read more from Isherwood is all I have to say.

Jackie says

11/12/16:
I was already rereading this for a paper when it gained unfortunate relevance. Still too good.

3/31/13:
It's a rare memoir that grows with its author. The minutely shifting styles across "Mr. Lancaster," "Ambrose," "Waldemar," and "Paul" mirror Isherwood--or Christopher's--own development. Early on, Isherwood looks back on young Christopher, setting out for Germany (and not even Berlin) for the first time:

> I think about him and I marvel, but I must beware of romanticizing him. I must remember that much of what looks like courage is nothing but brute ignorance. I keep forgetting that he is as blind to his own future as the dullest of the animals. As blind as I am to mine. His is an extraordinary future in many ways--far happier, luckier, and more interesting than most. And yet, if I were he and could see it ahead of me, I'm sure I should exclaim in dismay that it was more than I could possibly cope with.

How lucky we are that he *couldn't* see into his future. *Down There on a Visit* tells incredibly specific stories that are nonetheless widely (and wildly) relevant. There's Geoffrey, the straight, white, British guy who goes to an island where he is the minority and still finds a world catered to him. There's Waldemar, who hates what's happening to his country, and yet can't help but be drawn back, because it's his home. And there's

Christopher:

> When I got a good look at myself in the mirror at the hotel in Chalkis, I was quite startled to see what these last few months had done to me. My hair was long and matted, my beard had started to grow, I was sunburned nearly black, my face was puffy with drinking and my eyes were red. All that, of course, could soon be tidied up. But there was also a look in my eyes which hadn't been there before. By the time I got back to England, no one could have had any difficulty in recognizing me as my familiar self. Only I caught glimpses of that look now and then while shaving.
> And every so often, at a loud party or while listening to bad news on the wireless or on waking up to find myself in bed with someone I scarcely knew, I would think of Ambrose out there alone. He was right, I would say to myself; I didn't belong on his island.
> But now I knew that I didn't belong here, either.
> Or anywhere.

First, he was almost synonymous with Berlin. Then he had to leave, and wandered to Greece and the above transformation. In London, he got caught up in the prewar anxiety, and the inside knowledge he had only made it worse. He finds pacifism because his friend Waldemar is somewhere in Germany and, given the chance to end the war by blowing the entire country sky-high, he knows he wouldn't do it. In America, even farther removed from the war, he goes on camping trips, situating his readers in time with literally parenthetical asides like this: "(It was the day the Nazis invaded Crete.)"

Is it that he doesn't belong anywhere, or that he belongs in too many places? The latter, I would say. There's the place he wants to be, the place he should be, and the place he ought to be. Sometimes, these places intersect, but other times he's torn between them and nothing feels right. Toward the end of the book, he claims he doesn't want a family. He doesn't want to be anyone's uncle. It strikes me that what he's been describing throughout the entire book is a kind of family (the kind Mona and Michael glorify in *Tales of the City*). Perhaps he's selling himself short, remaining purposefully aloof from these people. Perhaps not. Perhaps it's just self-preservation.

I've said before that Isherwood presents his own life remarkably insightfully. Perhaps it's the light fictionalization and the distance he imposes between himself and "Christopher." Visiting Berlin again, this time after the war, he wanders through the wreckage. "In the morning light it was all as raw and frank as the voice of history which tells you not to fool yourself; this can happen to any city; to anyone; to you."

Is his conclusion that it's better not to belong anywhere, or to anyone? That certainly seems to be his take on himself, and Paul sums the view up pretty damningly. (He's talking about smoking opium, but it's easy to make the leap.)

> "You're exactly like a tourist who thinks he can take in the whole of Rome in one day. You know, you really are a tourist, to your bones. I bet you're always sending post cards with 'Down here on a visit' on them. That's the story of your life...I'll tell you what'd happen if you smoked one pipe: nothing! Nothing would happen! It's absolutely no use fooling around with this, unless you really want to know what's *inside* of it, what it's all *about*. And to do that, you have to let yourself get hooked. Deliberately. Not fighting it. Not getting scared. Not setting any time limits."

Christopher gives these words to Paul, but he doesn't bother offering a rebuttal. Between this and "I am a

camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking," from *Berlin Stories* I am starting to think he protests too much. After all, why else write about these people and places with such love and such detail? Isherwood knows that Christopher is full of hot air. Thank goodness.

Richard says

I loved most of this book. The build up to WWII, as in his other more famous writing, is fantastic, and the characters - especially Waldermar - are empathetically but clearly drawn, as are their individual private hells.

I have trouble with the final section though - and I'm still not sure what to think about it. I can't help read it as Christopher falling prey first to spiritual guff (which is fine, just a bit boring) and then to a manipulative narcissistic child-abuser, Paul, to the point where he and his (spiritual guff emitting) friends enable and cover up for that abuse.

The trouble is that if the narrator wasn't called Christopher Isherwood, there's enough information here for me to see it as deliberately unreliable narrating. For example, other people warn him about Paul, and - I think - you're invited to contrast Christopher's refusal to help the far more deserving but needy Waldermar out of Communist East Berlin, with his easy supply of money to fund Paul's Opium addiction.

On the other hand, I'm not convinced the author - because of the world he lived in - would see Paul's abuse for what it was, and so it's the author that's unreliable. At one point Paul tells Christopher he reduced a mother to tears for objecting to his seduction of her prepubescent daughter (he actually said she seduced him), by saying 'people like you want sexual liberation for everyone except your own children'.

Anyway, I'd be interested to hear what people think. I can't see it discussed anywhere, and all references to Paul (irl Denham Fouts) just glamorise him as a playboy who died young. Am I supposed to sympathise with this tortured soul, or see him as an exploitative monster, or both?

Sketchbook says

Herr Isyvoo's best is "The Last of Mr. Norris" aka "Mr Norris Changes Trains," 1935. But he can thank playwright John van Druten for giving him a goldmine that steadily enriches his estate. Pretty much unknown here, his name became familiar w the play "I Am a Camera" (1951), based on his Berlin Stories by van Druten. In 1966, it became the smash musical (and soon movie) "Cabaret" -- and, lo, gold rained down on Adelaide Drive in Santa Monica Canyon where Ish lived.

You see, for some writers, most of whom face obscurity : there is a God. The author was a nice fella, so why not ? His vaguerie fr 1961 is bad, lifeless writing and belongs in the discard bin. These dreary memories roam from London to Greece to the swamis swarming Hollywood and push you into Snoozia. (Denham Fouts, the candy of Kings and queens, here called Paul, was apparently a ditzy bore). Van Druten ? He wrote many smart stage hits including The Voice of the Turtle, Bell, Book & Candle and I Remember Mama. And Julie Harris became a star in his play, "I Am a Camera."

Isherwood never had to worry about money again. Plus, he was suddenly *famous.*

Rüveyda says

"Gelecek. Bugünlerde o sözcükle beraber sürekli belli belirsiz bir korku ürpertisi al?yor beni. Ve o Balzac'a ait un jour sans lendemain -yar?n? olmayan bir gün- deyi?ini hat?rlay?p duruyorum. ?u aralar içinden geçti?imiz zamanlar, feci bir ak?bete gebe bu yaz mevsimi, un jour sans lendemain olmaktad?r, ya da içimdeki korku bana öyle olabilece?ini söylüyor; insan?n yap?p etti?i her ?ey özünde bir yar?ns?zl?k niteli?i bar?nd?r?yor gibi."

Katy says

only gave it 2 stars cause the writing is not bad and i was interested in the WWII stuff (tho of course disgusted by the reactions of the characters to the war) ;here i was thinking I was going to read a book by an early liberatory gay icon and its just as racist and sexist as any other book by a rich europe-hopping white guy

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Scot says

I found this book on a table of throwaways, brought it home, and read it. I lack the insight to understand why some people choose to keep some of the things they do and throw away things like this. If it was left with the hope that someone would come and enjoy it then I say “thank you”; I appreciate the gift.

Anyone who liked Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories* will probably appreciate parts of this collection that blends memoir with *roman a clef*, though I suspect that different people will be drawn to different parts and aspects of the book, which flushes out Isherwood’s life experience before and after those Cabaret days in Weinmar Germany we all tend to first think of when hearing his name. The book has four sections, each dedicated to a different (and distinctive) strong personality that impacts his life.

First is Mr. Lancaster, who opens up new experiences to Isherwood by inviting him to Germany for the first time—to Hamburg, in 1928. Mr. Lancaster also represents an older generation’s dedication to social mores and the Empire, and the personal sacrifices such dedication demands. Ambrose is the focus of the second section, an odd eccentric who sets up his own little world on a Greek isle and provides the narrator the place and space to ponder if and how he could or should fit in, and just where that might be and on what terms. This is as war draws ever near in Europe, and Waldemar, the German youth the narrator met through Mr. Lancaster and with whom he went to visit Ambrose’s island, gets his own section that relates the numbing of the British class system against those who would ignore it as day by day the inevitability of the coming war affects life in London. The most precocious of the four personalities is, without a doubt, Paul, who enters Isherwood’s life when he has become a screenwriter in L.A., escaping the travails of war in Europe and lunching with folks in the film industry. Once there, Isherwood made a conscientious commitment to try to follow a path of vedic self-examination laid out by a philosophical mystic the book refers to Augustus Parr (and who is based on, for those interested, real life Gerald Heard). How Paul comes into his life, joins his life, and leaves a major lasting impact is the purpose of this section. I think it is the most revealing of the four sections, for while Mr. Lancaster might come across as pathetic, Ambrose as resolute in his hermetic determination, and Waldemar as a naïve beefcake whose openness of what he wants makes him easily

manipulated, it is Paul who has the most power and influence over Isherwood in the end. I am not clear whom he specifically represents in Isherwood’s real life during the WW II years, or if he is a composite character, but he certainly is memorable.

Fans of Isherwood for his elegance of language, his sometimes cutting psychological appraisals, and his dark humor used as a tool to cope in a world that can be so unjust will find elements of all three here.

Paul Gaya Ochieng Simeon Juma says

Christopher Isherwood is not a household name. Personally, I had even forgotten that I owned this book. It is only after doing a little inspection on my bookshelves that I came across 'Down There on a Visit'. Fortunately, I managed to read the whole of it. How was it? I mistakenly pressed the one star button, but I was unable to change it. I wanted to give it a two stars. All in all, what am saying is that it was not for me.

The setting. It is set during world war two. The narrator takes us to different countries where we are able to witness the tension and fear before the war. It is not only the government that is affected but also individual lives.

The characters. Apart from Christoph there are a handful of other characters. They are Ambrose, Lancaster, Hack, Aleck, Paul, and Web..ter. The narrator tells us how the war has affected each ome of them.

Their relationships. They are friends and apart from that they participate in various sexual acts which at the time was considered immoral. Sex between men was outlawed prompting Ambrose to ask how the government planned to enforce the law. Would they have policemen watching over people's bedrooms in an attempt to prevent homosexual acts? It sounds impossible. In fact, they are unsuccessful in their relationships with memebers of the opposite sex and an example is Waldemar and Dorothy. In the end, Christoph is also engaged to Paul who has an erection disorder.

The war. The war takes them to very far places. They move from country to country with the aim of searching for happiness. They end up having to do with the evil around them. Some engage in Yoga so as to cope with their limitations and desires.

Conclusion. Christopher Isherwood is very popular in Europe. He is lauded especially for his book 'Good-by to Berlin'. I encourage you to give him a chance you never know what will come of it.

Matthew Mainster says

Isherwood at his absolute best, IMO

Gina says

It really wasn't bad. I just know Isherwood can be so much better. It has been maybe a month or so since reading this book, and already I am forgetting some of the 'stories' included in this collection (this is a novel,

but in form it feels more like a short story collection).

The one I found particularly memorable was the very first - the emotional revelations of Isherwood in his youth (as well as his reflections on these revelations as a grown adult) did not read as dated. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said for the very last story, where Isherwood descends into the murky depths of pacifism and American Zen-Buddhist thought. It felt more like looking at a curiosity than reading a novel: the meditation, the rhetoric... ALL of it - so far away and inauthentic (if I may) that at times it made me wince. But it wasn't bad. It wasn't bad. Just a bit silly. And the good thing is, Isherwood doesn't take himself entirely seriously either, so it is all redeemable.

The final thing I have to say about the book that makes it a genuine curiosity is (if I am guessing correctly) there are several passages where Isherwood describes E. M. Forster (called EM in the book). These passages made me sublimely happy, just because Isherwood's description so perfectly matches the vision I had of Forster in my head already. Personally I have always been interested in the relationship between the two (if you are interested as well, a significant portion of their correspondence has been published - it's quite enjoyable) so seeing it here, in a published novel, made me happy. Not to mention, in the current political climate, reading about Forster's response to the worsening situation in Britain right before WWII was strangely grounding.

Michael Flick says

Roman à clef made up of 4 novellas all with the narrator "Christopher"--hard not to get that "key." But it's a Christopher who "is almost a stranger to me. ...We still share the same skeleton, but its outer covering has altered so much that I doubt he would recognize me on the street. We have in common the label of our name, and a continuity of consciousness; there has been no break in the sequence of daily statements that I am I. But what I am has refashioned itself through the days and years, until now almost all that remains is the mere awareness of being conscious. And that awareness belongs to everybody; it isn't a particular person."

Thus memoir becomes novel in that the author is his own fictional character, himself from his own past. And as a fictional character, he can have a fictional past.

The most interesting is the last of the novellas, "Paul." Why names other than Christopher's have been changed escapes me. "Paul" is Denham Fouts and "Augustus Parr" is Gerald Heard, two of Isherwood's most important friends between 1940 and 1953.

"Augustus" introduced Isherwood to oriental philosophy, which became central to his life: "There are three kinds of bondage, aren't there...addiction, preten[s]ion, aversion—what I crave, what I pretend to the world that I am, and what I fear." Here (and, of course, throughout his life and writing) Isherwood deals with addiction and pretension more successfully that with aversion, his fear of the future, dread of the past.

"Paul" is a complex and fascinating character, fictional and real. He sees things with stunning clarity: "Oh, darling Chrissikins! ...You're exactly like a tourist who thinks he can take in the whole of Rome in one day. You know, you really are a tourist, to your bones. I bet you're always send post cards with 'Down here on a visit' on them. That's the story of your life." And it's the story in this and all his other writings.

To Isherwood's great credit, he saw himself with clarity. That's why this book is titled as it is and tells the stories that it does, of being a tourist in your own life. And that life, of course, is a fictional life.

Anna says

Another compelling pseudo-autobiography. The movement of time from the twenty three year old 'Isherwood' and his first exploration of Berlin to 'Isherwood' in the fifties in America, his grasping at spiritualism, his explorations of life, are fascinating. But really what's more fascinating is the story that he chooses to omit. The author is a viewer - the 'camera,' I suppose, that he refers to in the Berlin novels. But having read Christopher and His Kind it's rather fascinating to read this more constructed narrative and see how artfully Isherwood leaves his own sexual orientation out of the story. He's happy to discuss the sexuality of thinly disguised actual persons, but refers to his sexual partners with initials only, and no gender mentioned. Perhaps this was a wise move at that point in the twentieth century, but it's hard to reconcile this obfuscation with the proudly and openly gay man he presents himself as at other times. Most interesting is how he portrays 'Waldemar' through the filter of a woman who is going to marry him, when the reality of the affair was that 'Waldemar' was his partner. His tenderness for Waldemar shines through in the book, especially after they are separated by war and bureaucracy, and some of those passages feel like the most honest of the book. I would love to be able to read the book without this veil coming down between author and reader.

Eddie says

Interesting follow-up to "Goodbye to Berlin" and "Mr. Norris Changes Trains", but (even more than Goodbye to Berlin) it struggles to stay together. The drifting-in and -out of characters over the years and pages almost works, but somehow loses steam towards the end. It all feels a bit hazy.

Luna Bookish says

I finally read Down There on a Visit and I did enjoy it overall. As I have said 1000 times, his writing style is so enjoyable I think he could write about anything and I would enjoy it to some extent. I really enjoyed how this was broken down into sections based off of the main characters life. Also, this wrap up proves the point that you will not always love every book by an author you love and that is okay.

J. says

> ... She is the sort of monster who is often miscalled a good sport. The most monstrous thing about her is her good humor. She never pouts or sulks. She is always cheerful; and as tactless as an elephant.

Seems like whether you like this will depend on what you think it is. It's not a short story collection, or four separate novellas, or a connected four-part concoction that only makes sense when you get to the bottom line.

Even if you're ready for some loose, multi-form story-blending (ala *Goodbye To Berlin*, etc), or some esoteric period travel writing (ala *Journey To A War*) -- and I was, for either -- this still doesn't stack up. What I think we have here are some random diary / memoir style entries that got interrupted by the world war. And later got reworked, repackaged, as interconnected autobiography. Isherwood himself says he intended these to take their part in a larger work.

This would all still be fine, if the tone of the work (or any aspect, really) could be seen to be carried through all four segments. Even with some twists, a little necessary morphing, the narrative could still progress. In the early going, we get some large characters, and we hope they'll go the distance :

"And that's how you spend your life?" I asked.
Maria smiled teasingly. "That shocks you? You think I should make myself active in some profession? Or become passionate for the politics?"
"No, but--does this kind of thing really interest you?"
"Unfortunately, no--not often! For the most time, it is quite ennuyant*, because, you see, people are doing still what they did before. They do not change."*
"So then you leave them again?"
"Then I leave them. Yes."
"I suppose you'll be leaving us soon?"
"Oh, here I am not bored! Here there is much to interest me. ...But I think perhaps I must leave soon, all the same. Because I make so much trouble, no?"
Maria gave me a glance of truly vintage coquetry--not a day younger than 1914--from under her sky-blue eyelids.

And yes, that whole feeling harks back to the Berlin / Cabaret vibe that this collection seeks to update, perhaps to transcend. But time and events have moved on, and what was then gets left behind pretty quickly. We're off to Central Europe, to Greece, to England and then, somewhat interminably, to California.

In the process we lose the voice we had come to love, the quietly observant fellow-traveler, and we lapse into a grand 'Finding Oneself' sort of epic. Kind of reminiscent of the ponderous Somerset Maugham forays into self exploration. And too bad, the best thing about Isherwood was always his discreet distance, his modesty, his willingness to stay at the party so we all could watch. Never a combatant, often enough an enabler, but always a raised eyebrow, and a trusted narrator. In California, that all goes wobbly.

"That's very heartless, Maria."
"But monsters are heartless, mon vieux*! You know this--do not be so hypocrite! You cannot hold a monster by his emotion, only by puzzling him. As long as the monster is puzzled, he is yours."*
