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Diaries: Volume 1, 1939-1960 (Isherwood, Christopher Diaries)



Synopsis

At times pious, at times profane but always unashamedly honest, The Diaries of Christopher Isherwood provide an inside look at the life and times of one of the most celebrated writers of the century. Chronicling Isherwood's life from 1939, when he emigrated to the United States, until 1960, these entries cover some of the most turbulent years of his career and give readers unprecedented insight into the major turning points in his life. Here, Isherwood relates the spiritual crisis he went through as World War II began, his discipleship (along with Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard) with the Hindu monk Swami Prabhavananda and his decision to become a pacifist. Here also are his accounts of his intense social life in Hollywood, his career as a screenwriter and his many sexual affairs. Readers will be particularly fascinated by his revealing anecdotes and gossip about the literary greats (such as W. H. Auden, Thomas Mann, E. M. Forster, and Tennessee Williams) and movie stars (such as Greta Garbo, Charlie Chaplin and Sir Laurence Olivier) of the time.

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Customer Reviews

Christopher Isherwood is noted for his novels and autobiographical writings, especially *The Berlin Stories* (the basis for the film, *Cabaret*) and *Christopher and His Kind*. But Isherwood put at least as much of his genius in his Diaries as he did in his writings intended for immediate publication. The first volume follows Isherwood as he emigrates from England to the United States where he became a Hollywood scriptwriter. This volume continues with his lifelong affair with Don Bachardy to his

establishment as a major writer in the early 1960s. Isherwood's Diaries are beautifully written, gossipy, and indispensable for anyone who cares about writing, the creative process, and gay history.

Gossip, Isherwood noted in his diary after reading the Goncourt journals, can achieve "the epigrammatic significance of poetry. To keep such a diary is to render a real service to the future." He was then in the second year of his own diary, begun in January 1939 with his exit from England for a new life in America, his home until his death in 1986. He would draw on the diary for his novel *A Single Man* (1964), but the work for which he would be best remembered was done in the 1930s—the plays with Auden and the Berlin Stories, turned by John van Druten into *I Am a Camera* and musicalized further as *Cabaret*. The diaries show him only as an observer of these money-spinning stage metamorphoses. To many readers, the most important part of this literally weighty book will be the index. Although not in the canonized elite of the Auden-Priestley generation, Isherwood, through his connections on both sides of the Atlantic and his Hollywood scriptwriting years, encountered a vast number of people whose doings and misdoings make his diaries a mine of rumor, anecdote and mere facts. Of lesser interest to some readers will be Isherwood's Vedanta discipleship with Southern California swamis, his desultory drug-taking experiments, his sexual adventures in the local gay community or his recuperation from hangovers. The diaries show him, however, to be on occasion a memorable observer of his contemporaries (one is "like Dorian Gray emerging from his tomb") and an unmemorable critic (*Waiting for Godot* is "Franco-Irish ugliness and stupidity"). Bucknell, who edited and introduced Auden's *Juvenilia: Poems 1922-1928* and founded the W.H. Auden Society, furnishes a glossary of capsule biographies and textual notes. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I thought I would receive a thin diary in the mail. imagine my surprise as about one thousand pages of wonderful fun came my way....I recommend this. Isherwood was fabulous.

This is the first volume of Christopher Isherwood's diaries, covering the period 1939-1960. In it he describes his move from England to America, his working life, his spiritual struggles, his friendships and his personal dramas. It's not a day-by-day record; sometimes there are gaps of months or years which have only been filled in sketchily after the event. Also, it's obvious that a number of significant events didn't make it into these diaries at all, which is a touch frustrating. However, Isherwood tried to add to his diary at least twice a week and the editor has provided a great deal of additional

information, so the thread of the narrative is rarely lost altogether. You could read this book for, or at least mine it for information on, a number of topics: Isherwood's own literary output, working in the movies, pacifism and the Quakers during World War II, the Vedanta movement, the growth of Los Angeles. All sorts of famous literary and Hollywood figures are recorded by Isherwood. But I enjoyed it most for the writing - some of the descriptive passages, for example, are just beautiful - and Isherwood himself. I found his struggles to better himself by pursuing the spiritual life, live up to his talent and hold obviously-broken relationships together quite moving. Similarly, I felt really pleased for him when he got the job, bought the house, enjoyed a visit with friends, found happy domesticity with Don Bachardy. I can appreciate that not everyone wants to read about such ordinary matters. For some reason, though, it all appealed to me. A feature I especially liked were the little snippets Isherwood recorded simply because they stuck in his mind or appealed to his sense of humour: conversations overheard on a bus, amusing advertisements and the like. The picture of the world-famous author gloomily stuffing himself with marshmallows in the evenings because Don's gone out and he's all alone is priceless. When people appear and disappear from such a long narrative and may only be referred to by their first names, the index and extensive glossary become vital. The glossary contains more information on certain individuals than the diaries themselves do, giving the reader a fuller appreciation of them, and Katherine Bucknell's introduction provides a useful framing perspective on the diaries. The length of the book is a problem (surely it could have been published in two volumes?), and you might find your commitment starting to waver. Sometimes I did let names just wash over me because I found it too hard to remember who everyone was. Can you ever truly know someone from their diary? I doubt it. A diary reveals some aspects of the person but can't contain the whole, and since Isherwood let a number of people read his diaries and seems to have had publication in mind, a certain amount of self-consciousness in his portrayal of himself seems inevitable. Does that matter? For me, it didn't. Definitely a worthwhile read.

First of all, these diaries are beautifully and ably edited by Katherine Bucknell, providing a fascinating introduction of over fifty pages. In addition to the journals themselves, Bucknell delivers an Isherwood chronology, glossary, and index at the end. She divides the journal into three parts: The Emigration, January 19, 1939–December 31, 1944; The Postwar Years, January 1, 1945–April 13, 1956; and The Late Fifties, April 14, 1956–August 26, 1960. The voice of Isherwood evolves from that of a solid mid-career writer to that of an “emeritus professor,” beginning his

senior years with as many projects as he can handle. I have always felt a certain affinity for writer Christopher Isherwood (born in Wybersleigh Hall, High Lane, Cheshire, England 1904-1986, for a number of reasons. Largely because he is one of the first important writers of his generation to write fiction with gay characters with gay love lives, as if it is a normal situation. I have looked to his writing for a certain guidance. Through his well-traveled life he demonstrates a certain brand of courage. He never seems to hide who he is from the world at large. even Hitler and the Gestapo as he lives in Berlin during his twenties. He doesn't marry a woman as cover, as many of his colleagues and friends do. He openly loves and shares a domestic life in a major way with at least two men, three, if you count one relationship that is rather ill-fated. The latter one, his partnership with artist Don Bachardy, thirty years his junior, endures from 1953 until

Isherwood's death in 1986. I also feel close to Isherwood because of the career he chooses, one that is rather skin-of-your-teeth at times. He writes the projects he wants to, not the ones that necessarily earn him the most money. Granted, he does work in Hollywood, writing and co-writing screenplays for any number of films. Even with regard to these, he seems to turn down the less interesting projects or the ones in which he knows working with certain personalities will be difficult. He lives by his wits but also by a strong artistic intuition, and by his own well-honed critical skills. Seems that he is seldom wrong in assessing the work of others, and his own, as well.

Through reading this 1050 page document, I have attained yet another view of Christopher Isherwood, and that is as human being. At one point, in the 1950s, he and Bachardy have around \$6,000 in the bank (a little over \$50,000 in today's currency). You can't get more skin-of-your-teeth than that. Isherwood begins keeping diaries when he is twenty; however, those written prior to this time he himself destroys. He is in his mid-thirties when he begins keeping the series of diaries that are featured in this volume. It is also at this time that he begins publishing, in particular, the novel, *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*. This volume of diaries is a blend of many features. Isherwood writes of his daily travails with lovers, physical ailments, which seem to grow in number as he ages, tussles with film studios, accounts of social events, both formal and informal. From the limited amount of Isherwood's fiction that I have read (*The Berlin Stories*, *Down There on a Visit*, and *A Single Man*), I wouldn't expect to encounter a person encumbered with a number of insecurities: his health, his weight, his looks, his mostly tentative drug use (he has a real penchant for mescaline), alcohol consumption, driving, finances. You name it and he seems to fret over it. Daily. At the same time, there emerges from these journals a man who is quite serious about his work. I

paraphrase some of his oft-repeated wording: Didn't write today. Too hung over from last night's party. Wrote four pages on novel today. Want to write 100 pages by my birthday. He is as critical of his own work, when it doesn't come together, as he is of others'. He lives for his art. Even in his fifties, to insure a proper income, he must accept film writing offers and part-time teaching opportunities at various colleges and universities in the Los Angeles area, where he chooses to make his home following his naturalization as a US citizen. In fact, an important part of each entry seems to be a report of the weather. Went to the beach today. It was hot. It was cold. Still hot. Still foggy. Absolutely gorgeous. These comments could well be a comment on his internal weather. At any rate, the Diaries provide any writer with plenty of positive and negative examples of how to be a "successful" writer.

This title should be read by all fans of Isherwoods' novels and stories for insight into the man's character and life-style during his middle years after he emigrated to the United States. I was particularly interested in his commitment to Vedanta and how that developed during these years, as well as the gradual development of his relationship with the very young Don Bachardy about whom we have so little information otherwise. Bachardy was and is a very private person. Isherwood emerges as a complex man and, like most diaries, this book shows him with all his personality warts as well as the ups and downs of his daily life. He suffered acutely at various times from very human maladies; boredom, writers' block, loneliness and hypochondriacal concerns. I think this has to be remembered when reading someone's diaries or letters. It's like seeing a person undressed; you get to view the good, the bad and the ugly. There is surprisingly little of Isherwood's sexual views or life included here however; certainly not much that is explicit, and his occasional bitchy remarks about Hollywood personalities is refreshingly candid. I would compare these diaries to those of Evelyn Waugh although Isherwood was far less the curmudgeon that Waugh was and lacked Waugh's crusty mean spiritedness.

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