

# goodbye to berlin isherwood

**Goodbye to Berlin Isherwood:** An In-Depth Exploration of Christopher Isherwood's Classic Novel

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## Introduction to Goodbye to Berlin Isherwood

Published in 1939, *Goodbye to Berlin* by Christopher Isherwood is a seminal work that captures the tumultuous atmosphere of pre-World War II Berlin. This semi-autobiographical collection of stories offers a vivid snapshot of life in the Weimar Republic, blending sharp social commentary with compelling character studies. Recognized for its literary significance and cultural impact, the novel has cemented its place as a cornerstone of modernist literature and LGBTQ+ narratives. In this article, we will explore the themes, characters, historical context, and enduring legacy of *Goodbye to Berlin*.

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## Overview of Christopher Isherwood and the Context of the Novel

### Who Was Christopher Isherwood?

Christopher Isherwood was an English-American novelist and playwright, renowned for his keen observations on society and human nature. Born in 1904, his works often reflected his experiences living in Europe, especially Berlin during the 1930s. His writing style combines candid realism with poetic nuance, making his stories both engaging and insightful.

### The Historical Background

*Goodbye to Berlin* was written during a period of political upheaval and social change. The rise of Nazism, economic instability, and cultural experimentation characterized Berlin in the early 20th century. Isherwood's depiction provides an insider's view of this vibrant yet precarious city, capturing both its glamour and its darkness.

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## Main Themes of Goodbye to Berlin

### 1. The Decline of the Weimar Republic

The novel vividly portrays Berlin's decline as a center of liberalism and artistic freedom, giving way to authoritarianism and repression. The juxtaposition of bohemian life with political unrest underscores the fragility of democracy.

### 2. LGBTQ+ Identity and Community

Isherwood's portrayal of Berlin's queer scene is groundbreaking, offering one of the earliest literary representations of gay life. The characters' stories highlight themes of sexuality, identity, and societal acceptance.

### 3. Social Class and Poverty

Through its diverse cast, the novel explores the disparities between the wealthy bourgeoisie and impoverished workers, emphasizing social stratification and economic hardship.

#### 4. The Impact of Fascism

The looming presence of fascism and the threat of war permeate the narrative, reflecting the growing tensions that would soon engulf Europe.

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#### Key Characters in Goodbye to Berlin

##### 1. Sally Bowles

A central figure, Sally is a vivacious British cabaret singer whose flamboyant personality embodies Berlin's nightlife. Her struggles with love and identity reflect broader societal shifts.

##### 2. The Narrator (Chris)

An unnamed narrator based on Isherwood himself, Chris observes and interacts with Berlin's diverse inhabitants, providing a personal perspective on the city's complexities.

##### 3. Fräulein Schroeder

A pragmatic and somewhat cynical landlady, she offers insights into everyday life and the socio-economic realities of Berliners.

##### 4. The Jewish Characters

The novel features several Jewish characters whose experiences highlight the rising anti-Semitic sentiments and the precariousness of Jewish life in Nazi-era Germany.

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#### Structure and Style of the Novel

Goodbye to Berlin is composed of loosely connected vignettes and stories that paint a comprehensive picture of Berlin life. Isherwood's writing style is characterized by:

- Realism: Vivid descriptions and authentic dialogue bring characters and settings to life.
- Humor and Irony: Despite the serious themes, the narrative often employs wit to critique society.
- Autobiographical Elements: The stories draw heavily from Isherwood's own experiences, adding depth and authenticity.

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#### Significance and Literary Impact

##### Cultural and Historical Significance

Goodbye to Berlin is considered a critical document of the Weimar Republic's final years. Its honest depiction of Berlin's underground nightlife,

political unrest, and social dynamics provides invaluable insights into a pivotal historical period.

### Influence on Literature and Media

The novel has inspired numerous adaptations, including:

- The 1951 play *I Am a Camera*, which later served as the basis for the musical *Cabaret*.
- The 1972 film *Cabaret*, starring Liza Minnelli, which brought widespread attention to Isherwood's work and themes.

### Contribution to LGBTQ+ Literature

As one of the earliest works to openly discuss gay life, *Goodbye to Berlin* has had a lasting influence on queer literature and representation.

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### Adaptations and Cultural Legacy

#### Theatre and Film

- **Musical and Film:** The story's adaptation into *Cabaret* has cemented its place in popular culture, highlighting themes of freedom, love, and political upheaval.
- **Stage Productions:** Numerous theatrical adaptations continue to celebrate Isherwood's depiction of Berlin's vibrant underground scene.

#### Literary Influence

- Inspired later writers exploring themes of sexuality, social change, and political unrest.
- Recognized as a pioneering work in the genre of semi-autobiographical fiction.

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### Why Read *Goodbye to Berlin* Today?

#### Relevance in Contemporary Society

The novel's themes of political instability, social inequality, and LGBTQ+ identity remain relevant today. It offers valuable lessons on resilience, tolerance, and the dangers of authoritarianism.

#### Literary Merit

Isherwood's storytelling combines literary elegance with social critique, making it a compelling read for fans of modernist literature.

#### Cultural Appreciation

Understanding the historical context enriches appreciation of Berlin's cultural history and the broader human experience during times of crisis.

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### Conclusion

Goodbye to Berlin by Christopher Isherwood stands as a powerful testament to a bygone era, capturing the complexities of a society on the brink of transformation. Its richly drawn characters, candid portrayal of LGBTQ+ life, and insightful social commentary continue to resonate with readers worldwide. Whether viewed as a historical document or a literary masterpiece, the novel remains an essential read for anyone interested in history, culture, and human resilience.

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#### SEO Keywords and Phrases

- Goodbye to Berlin Isherwood
- Christopher Isherwood Berlin novel
- Weimar Republic literature
- Berlin 1930s stories
- LGBTQ+ representation in literature
- Berlin nightlife history
- Cabaret musical adaptation
- Isherwood's autobiographical stories
- Impact of fascism in Germany
- Classic modernist novels
- Berlin's cultural history

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#### Additional Resources

- Books: Christopher and His Kind by Christopher Isherwood (memoir)
- Films: Cabaret (1972), inspired by the novel
- Articles: Scholarly analyses of Goodbye to Berlin and its themes
- Museums: Berlin's Museum of Musical Instruments and the Berlin Story Museum for historical context

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By understanding the depth and significance of Goodbye to Berlin, readers can gain a richer appreciation of this landmark work and its enduring relevance in literature and history.

## Frequently Asked Questions

### **What is the main theme of 'Goodbye to Berlin' by Christopher Isherwood?**

The novel explores themes of social change, identity, and survival in pre-World War II Berlin, capturing the atmosphere of a city on the brink of upheaval.

### **Who are the central characters in 'Goodbye to Berlin'?**

The book features characters like Sally Bowles, a British singer; the narrator, a young writer based on Isherwood himself; and various Berlin residents navigating life amid political tensions.

## **How does 'Goodbye to Berlin' depict the rise of Nazism?**

The novel subtly portrays the growing influence of Nazi ideology through the changing social landscape and the increasing fear and uncertainty experienced by the characters.

## **Is 'Goodbye to Berlin' a standalone novel or part of a series?**

It is a collection of semi-autobiographical stories that serve as a standalone book but are also part of Isherwood's broader body of work depicting Berlin during the early 1930s.

## **Why is 'Goodbye to Berlin' considered an important literary work about Weimar Berlin?**

Because it vividly captures the cultural vibrancy and political instability of Weimar Berlin, providing a nuanced and personal perspective on a pivotal historical period.

## **How has 'Goodbye to Berlin' influenced modern literature and media?**

The novel has inspired numerous adaptations, including the famous Broadway musical 'Cabaret,' and continues to influence portrayals of pre-war Berlin in literature and film.

## **What is the significance of the title 'Goodbye to Berlin'?**

The title signifies the end of an era, reflecting the characters' farewell to the vibrant but volatile Berlin society before the onset of World War II.

## **Are there any recent adaptations of 'Goodbye to Berlin'?**

Yes, the novel has been adapted into films, stage productions, and radio dramas, with the most notable being the 1972 film 'Cabaret' inspired by the book's characters and setting.

## **Additional Resources**

Goodbye to Berlin Isherwood: An In-Depth Review and Literary Analysis

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Introduction: Reimagining a Classic Through Isherwood's Lens

Published in 1939, Goodbye to Berlin is one of Christopher Isherwood's most acclaimed works, capturing the tumultuous atmosphere of pre-World War II Berlin through a series of semi-autobiographical stories. Often heralded as a

pioneering work of modernist literature, this collection offers a compelling, nuanced portrait of a city on the brink of upheaval, seen through the eyes of its diverse inhabitants. Over the decades, adaptations and critiques have kept the book relevant, cementing its place as a cornerstone in 20th-century literature.

This article aims to dissect the novel's core themes, stylistic features, historical context, and its influence on literature and popular culture. Whether you're a seasoned reader or new to Isherwood's work, this comprehensive review will deepen your understanding of *Goodbye to Berlin* and its enduring significance.

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## The Context: Berlin in the 1930s and Isherwood's Perspective

### Historical Background

Berlin during the early 1930s was a city teetering on the edge of radical change. The Weimar Republic's fragile democracy was unraveling amid economic hardship, political extremism, and social upheaval. The rise of Nazism created a climate of fear and uncertainty, which Isherwood captures vividly. The city's vibrant nightlife, artistic experimentation, and diverse population are contrasted starkly with the growing shadow of fascism.

### Isherwood's Personal Connection

Christopher Isherwood moved to Berlin in 1930, immersing himself in its eclectic culture. His firsthand experience provided authentic insight into the city's complex social fabric. His observations are not merely reportage but are infused with empathy and nuanced understanding, making *Goodbye to Berlin* a vital document of its time.

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## Literary Style and Narrative Structure

### Semi-Autobiographical Approach

*Goodbye to Berlin* employs a semi-autobiographical framework, blending fictional characters with real-life observations. The narrator, often regarded as a stand-in for Isherwood himself, recounts encounters with a diverse cast of Berliners, including:

- The charismatic and enigmatic Sally Bowles, a British expatriate and singer.
- The Jewish shopkeeper, Mrs. Shlemiel, embodying the Jewish community's precarious position.
- The communist activist, Fritz Wendel, illustrating political tensions.
- The mysterious and morally ambiguous characters that populate the city's nightlife.

This mosaic of characters offers multiple perspectives, enriching the narrative's depth.

### Literary Techniques

Isherwood's prose is marked by:

- Sparse, precise language: Reflecting modernist tendencies, his style eschews unnecessary ornamentation.
- Stream of consciousness: Providing insight into characters' inner worlds.
- Vivid imagery: Capturing Berlin's vibrant yet threatening atmosphere.
- Dialogue-driven storytelling: Bringing authenticity to interactions and social dynamics.

#### Thematic Focus

The novel explores themes such as:

- The fragility of identity in a rapidly changing society.
- The coexistence of decadence and despair.
- The rise of fascism and the loss of personal freedoms.
- The fluidity of sexuality and social norms.
- The transient nature of happiness amidst chaos.

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#### In-Depth Analysis of Key Characters and Settings

##### Sally Bowles: The Embodiment of Freedom and Fragility

Sally Bowles is arguably the most iconic character in *Goodbye to Berlin*. Her vivacious personality, rebellious spirit, and tragic vulnerabilities encapsulate the allure and peril of the city's bohemian scene. She is an English expatriate striving for fame in a society that is rapidly shifting beneath her feet.

- Symbolism: Sally represents the fleeting nature of glamour and the cost of escapism.
- Character Arc: Her trajectory from carefree performer to tragic figure underscores the novel's exploration of displacement and loss.

##### The Berlin Nightlife: A Microcosm of Society

Berlin's nightlife, depicted as a pulsating hub of entertainment, vice, and political activism, serves as a backdrop that reflects the city's multifaceted identity:

- Cabarets and jazz clubs as sites of liberation and chaos.
- The contrasting presence of political flags and street protests.
- The mingling of different social classes and nationalities.

This setting emphasizes the city's paradoxical nature—both vibrant and threatening.

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#### Major Themes Explored

##### The Decline of the Weimar Republic

The narrative underscores the political instability permeating Berlin. The rise of Nazi ideology is subtly woven into the fabric of daily life, exemplified by:

- Increasing anti-Semitic rhetoric.
- The fear among Jewish characters like Mrs. Shlemiel.

- The sense of impending doom felt by many residents.

### Sexuality and Identity

Isherwood's candid portrayal of sexuality was groundbreaking for its time. Characters navigate their desires amidst societal constraints, challenging traditional norms:

- Homosexuality as an integral aspect of identity and social interaction.
- The fluidity of sexual relationships, exemplified by Sally's bisexuality.

### Dislocation and Transience

The characters' constant movement—relocating, hiding, or fleeing—mirrors the broader societal dislocation. The city itself is a character, embodying change, uncertainty, and the transient nature of life.

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### Critical Reception and Legacy

#### Contemporary Reception

Upon release, *Goodbye to Berlin* was praised for its vivid storytelling and honest depiction of a collapsing society. Critics admired Isherwood's ability to humanize the political upheaval without resorting to didacticism.

#### Literary Impact

The novel is credited with influencing the development of:

- Modernist literature, in its fragmented structure and stylistic innovations.
- Gay literature, given its frank treatment of sexuality.
- Travel and social reportage, due to its vivid depiction of Berlin's diverse communities.

### Adaptations and Cultural Influence

Most notably, the novel inspired the 1951 Broadway musical *Cabaret*, which further cemented its themes in popular culture. The musical's portrayal of Berlin's decadence and political tension echoes Isherwood's original work, albeit with artistic liberties.

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### Why *Goodbye to Berlin* Remains Relevant Today

Despite being set in a specific historical context, the novel's exploration of social upheaval, identity, and political extremism resonates in contemporary times. Its portrayal of a city on the edge serves as a cautionary tale and a reminder of the importance of tolerance, resilience, and awareness.

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### Final Thoughts: A Must-Read for Lovers of Literature and History

*Goodbye to Berlin* stands as a testament to Isherwood's mastery of capturing

the human condition amidst chaos. Its richly drawn characters, evocative settings, and incisive themes make it a must-read for anyone interested in understanding the social fabric of 20th-century Europe or exploring the depths of human resilience.

Whether approached as a historical document, a work of literary art, or a cultural critique, the novel offers invaluable insights into a city and a society at a pivotal moment in history. Its enduring relevance underscores the timeless importance of storytelling as a means to comprehend and reflect on our collective past.

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Final Verdict

Rating: 4.5 out of 5 stars

Goodbye to Berlin remains a landmark achievement in modernist literature and social commentary. Its evocative storytelling and profound themes make it a compelling read for those seeking to understand the complexities of human nature amid societal upheaval. Christopher Isherwood's work continues to inspire, challenge, and inform, ensuring its place in the canon of great literary works.

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Note: For a more immersive experience, readers are encouraged to explore various editions of the novel, including annotated versions and critical essays, to deepen their understanding of its historical and literary nuances.

## **Goodbye To Berlin Isherwood**

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: Goodbye to Berlin** Christopher Isherwood, 2012-09-27  
Isherwood's classic story of Berlin in the 1930s - and the inspiration for Cabaret - now in a stand-alone edition. First published in 1934, Goodbye to Berlin has been popularized on stage and screen by Julie Harris in *I Am a Camera* and Liza Minelli in *Cabaret*. Isherwood magnificently captures 1931 Berlin: charming, with its avenues and cafés; marvelously grotesque, with its nightlife and dreamers; dangerous, with its vice and intrigue; powerful and seedy, with its mobs and millionaires — this was the period when Hitler was beginning his move to power. Goodbye to Berlin is inhabited by a wealth of characters: the unforgettable and “divinely decadent” Sally Bowles; plump Fraulein Schroeder, who considers reducing her Buste relieve her heart palpitations; Peter and Otto, a gay couple struggling to come to terms with their relationship; and the distinguished and doomed Jewish family, the Landauers.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: Goodbye to Berlin** Christopher Isherwood, 1939 First published in 1939, the novel evokes the gathering storm of Berlin before and during the rise to power of the Nazis. Events are seen through the eyes of various individuals whose lives are about to be ruined.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: An Isherwood Selection** Christopher Isherwood, 1979-01-01  
**goodbye to berlin isherwood: The Berlin Stories** Christopher Isherwood, 2008 A classic of 20th-century fiction, Berlin Stories inspired the Broadway musical and Oscar-winning film *Cabaret*. This newly released paperback edition features an Introduction by the acclaimed novelist Maupin.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: Goodbye to Berlin** Christopher Isherwood, 1940

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**goodbye to berlin isherwood: *Mr. Norris Changes Trains ; And, Goodbye to Berlin*** Christopher Isherwood, 1985

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: *Travels in the Reich, 1933-1945*** Oliver Lubrich, 2010-05-31 Through the eyes of foreign authors, this collection offers a new perspective on the horrifying details of German life under Nazism, in accounts as gripping and well-written as a novel, but bearing all the weight of historical witness.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: *Where Joy Resides*** Christopher Isherwood, 2025-09-23 Best known for *The Berlin Stories*—the inspiration for the Tony and Academy Award-winning musical *Cabaret*—Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) was a major figure in twentieth-century fiction and the gay rights movement. *Where Joy Resides* is the perfect introduction to the author's essential writings. This collection presents two complete novels, *Prater Violet* and *A Single Man*; episodes from three other novels, *Goodbye to Berlin*, *Down There on a Visit*, and *Lions and Shadows*; along with excerpts from Isherwood's nonfiction works, *Exhumations*, *Kathleen and Frank*, and *My Guru and His Disciple*.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: *Queer Times*** Jamie M. Carr, 2013-10-23 This book maps Christopher Isherwood's intellectual and aesthetic reflections from the late 1930s through the late 1970s. Drawing on the queer theory of Eve Sedgwick and the ethical theory of Michel Foucault, Carr illuminates Isherwood's post-war development of a queer ethos through his focus on the aesthetic, social, and historical politics of the 1930s in his novels *Prater Violet* (1945), *The World in the Evening* (1954), and *Down There on a Visit* (1962), and in his memoir, *Christopher and His Kind: 1929-1939* (1976).

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: *Isherwood's Fiction*** Lisa M. Schwerdt, 2016-01-03 An examination of the changing relationship between the writer and his protagonists, exploring how Isherwood's fiction achieves artistic integration and literary significance only when it reflects his personal concerns through theme and technique as he experiments with new narrative strategies.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die*** James Mustich, 2018-10-02 "The ultimate literary bucket list." —THE WASHINGTON POST Celebrate the pleasure of reading and the thrill of discovering new titles in an extraordinary book that's as compulsively readable, entertaining, surprising, and enlightening as the 1,000-plus titles it recommends. Covering fiction, poetry, science and science fiction, memoir, travel writing, biography, children's books, history, and more, *1,000 Books to Read Before You Die* ranges across cultures and through time to offer an eclectic collection of works that each deserve to come with the recommendation, *You have to read this*. But it's not a proscriptive list of the "great works"—rather, it's a celebration of the glorious mosaic that is our literary heritage. Flip it open to any page and be transfixed by a fresh take on a very favorite book. Or come across a title you always meant to read and never got around to. Or, like browsing in the best kind of bookshop, stumble on a completely unknown author and work, and feel that tingle of discovery. There are classics, of course, and unexpected treasures, too. Lists to help pick and choose, like *Offbeat Escapes*, or *A Long Climb, but What a View*. And its alphabetical arrangement by author assures that surprises await on almost every turn of the page, with Cormac McCarthy and *The Road* next to Robert McCloskey and *Make Way for Ducklings*, Alice Walker next to Izaac Walton. There are nuts and bolts, too—best editions to read, other books by the author, "if you like this, you'll like that" recommendations, and an interesting endnote of adaptations where appropriate. Add it all up, and in fact there are more than six thousand titles by nearly four thousand authors mentioned—a life-changing list for a lifetime of reading. "948 pages later, you still want more!" —THE WASHINGTON POST

**goodbye to berlin isherwood: *Writing with Light*** Mick Gidley, 2010 Contributor Martin Padgett's essay: *Native Americans, the Photobook and the Southwest: Ansel Adams' and Mary Austin's Taos Pueblo* was awarded the 2010 Arthur Miller Essay Prize. This book offers a collection of essays on the interface between literature and photography, as exemplified in important North

American texts.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood:** *Goodbye To Berlin* Christopher Isherwood, 1934 The sequel to *Mr. Norris Changes Trains*, this is another semi-autobiographical account of Isherwood's experiences in pre-war Berlin. The author leads the reader on a thoroughly entertaining tour through the seedier side of a particularly decadent time in that city's history.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood:** *Isherwood and His Critics* Catherine Lilly Elick, 1986

**goodbye to berlin isherwood:** *English Novels During The Nineteen Thirties* R. B Singh, 1994

**goodbye to berlin isherwood:** *The Extinct Scene* Thomas S. Davis, 2015-12-08 In 1935, the English writer Stephen Spender wrote that the historical pressures of his era should turn the reader's and writer's attention outwards from himself to the world. Combining historical, formalist, and archival approaches, Thomas S. Davis examines late modernism's decisive turn toward everyday life, locating in the heightened scrutiny of details, textures, and experiences an intimate attempt to conceptualize geopolitical disorder. *The Extinct Scene* reads a range of mid-century texts, films, and phenomena that reflect the decline of the British Empire and seismic shifts in the global political order. Davis follows the rise of documentary film culture and the British Documentary Film Movement, especially the work of John Grierson, Humphrey Jennings, and Basil Wright. He then considers the influence of late modernist periodical culture on social attitudes and customs, and presents original analyses of novels by Virginia Woolf, Christopher Isherwood, and Colin MacInnes; the interwar travel narratives of W. H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, and George Orwell; the wartime gothic fiction of Elizabeth Bowen; the poetry of H. D.; the sketches of Henry Moore; and the postimperial Anglophone Caribbean works of Vic Reid, Sam Selvon, and George Lamming. By considering this group of writers and artists, Davis recasts late modernism as an art of scale: by detailing the particulars of everyday life, these figures could better project large-scale geopolitical events and crises.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood:** *Fashion-Wise* Maria Vaccarella, Jacquelyn Foltyn, 2019-01-04 This volume was first published by Inter-Disciplinary Press in 2013. *Fashion-Wise* offers an interdisciplinary and transcultural approach to the phenomenon of fashion, investigating its historical, socio-political and artistic aspects. The chapters collected in the volume discuss fashion in the contexts of personal and national identity, gender politics, phenomenology, psychoanalysis, history, consumer culture, ethics, education, performance studies, authenticity, disability studies, sport and celebrity culture. The authors included in this seven-part volume not only comment on the ways in which we have been 'consuming' fashion across centuries and cultures but also explore its relevance as a critical subject in cultural studies.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood:** *Decadences - Morality and Aesthetics in British Literature* Paul Fox, 2012-02-10 This collection seeks to examine the intersections of aesthetics and morality, of what Decadence means to art and society at various moments in British literature. The inclination toward either the artistic or social perspective in each essay has been rendered more straightforwardly by employing capitalization for aesthetic Decadence, and the lower-case to illustrate moral decadence. Both artistic and social values are inflected by their histories, and, as time passes, so the definition of what it means to be D/decadent alters. The very ideas of the decline from a higher standard, of social malaise, of aesthetic ennui, all presume certain facts about the past, the present, and the linear nature of time itself. To reject the past as a given, and to relish the subtleties of present nuance, is the beginning of Decadence. Purportedly decadent artists focused upon the fleeting present, ascribed value to experiencing the aesthetic moment in its purest form, and it was precisely due to this focus upon living in, and for, the moment that society often responded by expressing moral contempt for the perceived hedonism of art. The aesthetic rejection of contemporary value added to the conflict between the literary and social inflections of Decadent interpretation. The truly decadent was condemned by artists as the stranglehold society maintained on individual interpretation and the interpretation of oneself. This conflict underlies the range of essays in the collection.

**goodbye to berlin isherwood:** [The Berlin Stories](#) Christopher Isherwood, 1979 Contents. -The last of Mr. Norris. -Goodbye to Berlin.

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