

# A READING GROUP GUIDE

for *A Single Man* by Christopher Isherwood

## ABOUT CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

Christopher Isherwood was a British-American novelist whose career spanned from the late 1920s into the 1980s. He was born in 1904 into a family still deeply influenced by the mores of Edwardian England. Christopher, as the eldest son, was expected to achieve great things, but almost from the start his mode was to counter those expectations and seek a world beyond England.

In 1929, he traveled to Berlin with the poet W. H. Auden, whom he had met during his studies at Cambridge University. It was a transformative trip for the young writer. His fiction about Berlin in the 1930s in turn came to shape later generations' understanding of that city and of a period in which vibrant free expression of every sort met the increasingly harsh hand of rising Nazi power. Isherwood's *Berlin Stories* were made into a play, *I am a Camera*, and into the hit 1972 movie, *Cabaret*, directed by Bob Fosse and for which Liza Minnelli won an Academy Award. In *Berlin Stories* the writer Christopher Isherwood is a character, attended to by a housekeeper who calls him "Herr Issyoo." In the movie, British actor Michael York plays a character similar to Isherwood.

A pacifist, Isherwood moved to the United States with Auden in 1939, a move for which they both were widely criticized in England. Isherwood stayed for a time in New York but soon moved to Hollywood and began working as a screen writer and later also as a teacher. He became a citizen of the United States in 1946. In California, he became interested in Indian Vedanta, a philosophical tradition concerned with self-realization and the nature of reality. In 1953, Isherwood met Dan Bachardy, a painter and portraitist who became his partner until Isherwood's death in 1986. Isherwood was an increasingly vocal and visible activist on behalf of gay rights.

Isherwood's "American" novels, in addition to *A Single Man*, include *Prater Violet*, which Stanley Kauffmann called "one of the best short novels in English written in this century," *A Meeting by the River*, and *The World in the Evening*. Isherwood also published works of memoir, including *Christopher and His Kind*, *Kathleen and Christopher*, about his relationship with his mother, and *My Guru and His Disciple*.

## QUOTES ABOUT CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

“Isherwood’s . . . forthrightness about homosexuality—his early courage in refusing to see himself as criminal or crazy—will probably be the lasting basis of his reputation. . . . *A Single Man* [is] the unsparing, pissed-off tale of one day in the life of a fifty-eight-year-old gay man named George. Parker does not overestimate this novel when he calls it ‘Isherwood’s most profound and most skillfully written book.’” —**Thomas Mallon**, “Darling Me,” *The Atlantic*, January/February 2005 [a review of Peter Parker’s biography of Isherwood]

“Even though queer sexuality was not uncommon in his small circle of English friends (notably W. H. Auden and Stephen Spender), the realization that homosexuality spans national borders and social classes was an epiphany for Isherwood when he first visited Germany in 1929, and it would prove critical to his slowly developing activist spirit. One of the fundamental ways that the discovery of a queer tribe emboldened Isherwood was that it provided him with a community. It would be decades before he would formulate a clear picture of this community and what his eventual advocacy on its behalf would entail. His 1964 masterpiece *A Single Man*—among other things a treatise on the homosexual as isolated and alone—would hint at the need for such a community. . . .”

—**Timothy K. Nixon**, *The Gay & Lesbian Review*, November-December 2007

“Before Ellen met Anne, Isherwood and Bachardy were probably the most frequently photographed openly gay couple in the world, attracting every professional and would-be professional photographer who ever lived in or visited the Los Angeles area, including Cecil Beaton, George Platt Lynes, and Horst.” —**Jim Berg**, *Lambda Book Report*

“Critics tend to view Isherwood’s literary fame as having peaked in the 1930s, when he joined friend W.H. Auden in Berlin and wrote the fiction that became famous in the musical ‘Cabaret.’ But his years in Southern California resulted in his best novel, ‘A Single Man,’ and best seller, the sexually frank memoir ‘Christopher and His Kind.’” —**Claude Peck**, *Minneapolis Star Tribune*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Reread the first few pages, particularly the description of George becoming composed before the mirror in the morning. This is the George “they demand and are prepared to recognize.” Later in the book, as he drives on the Interstate and also as he watches a game of tennis on campus, parts of George—the “chauffeur body” and “talking head”—seem to take over relations with the outside world, as chauffeur or talking head. Are there scenes in the novel in which the layers or parts of Georges become one? Which scenes are they and why?
2. George says that in the neighborhood where he lives he plays the role of the mean old storybook monster. It is a role he has played with increasing violence since Jim died, revealing a part of himself he did not want Jim to see (see p. 20-22). How has Jim’s death changed George?
3. When Jim’s family calls to say that he has been killed, why does George betray no emotion? How does the fact that few know the terms their relationship affect his ability to grieve?
4. How does Doris fit into the novel? Does the passage in the hospital give an insight into Isherwood’s ideas about death and the passage of time?
5. How do Doris and Charlotte differ as women in George’s—and George’s and Jim’s—life?
6. In 2003, *LA Weekly* named *A Single Man* “the Best LA novel.” How does the city figure in George’s imagination? What different settings does George pass through? What kind of contrasts does he set up and which settings are more tolerable or tolerant?
7. This novel was published in 1964. What elements of life in the ‘60s do you see in the book? Do the observations about American culture still seem apt? How have things changed?
8. On p. 90-91, George has an exchange with a fellow faculty member, Cynthia, about American hotels. Cynthia laments that American hotels feel like they came straight from the factory, while the old hotels in Mexico each feel like a particular place. George’s rejoinder argues that the American hotel room is an “advertisement in three dimensions for our way of life,” one that he contrasts with

European attachment to history and things. How serious is George in making this argument?

9. Christopher Isherwood is perhaps best known internationally for his two books about Berlin in the 1930s, which were collected together as *Berlin Stories* and became the basis of the hit stage play and movie, *Cabaret* (starring Joel Grey and Liza Minelli, directed by Bob Fosse). Isherwood said that Berlin opened up the possibility of a different way of life. For many gay readers, *A Single Man* had the same impact. Why might this be the case?

10. When George arrives on campus he is an actor, ready to go on stage. He uses his office as a green room, to stage both his entrance to and exit from the classroom. He suggests that everyone in every job is an actor of some sort. Is that true? How much of this feeling of being an actor is peculiar to George and his position in the world?

11. On p. 48, George feels he is a representative of hope to some of the students on campus. “It’s just that George is like a man try to sell a real diamond for a nickel, on the street. The diamond is protected from all but the tiniest few, because the great hurrying majority can never stop to dare to believe that could conceivably be real.” What does George mean? What idea of value is going on here?

12. In his walk across campus with Russ Dreyer, George is distracted by a tennis game. The game is bracketed by reference to C.P. Snow, a British scientist and novelist who famously wrote about “two cultures”—those of the arts and the sciences—and their failure to communicate. Does the heightened sensuality of the description of the tennis match suggest that there is a third element in life? Is it sensuality?

13. In the class discussion, the topic is an Aldous Huxley novel, *After Many a Summer Dies the Swan*, whose title is based on a poem, “Tithonus,” by Alfred Lord Tennyson. The poem is about a lover granted immortality but not eternal youth. The satirical Huxley novel focuses on an aging millionaire fearing death. How do these two works comment on George’s situation? How do these choices of literary references perhaps comment on Isherwood’s own heritage in England and America?

14. There are instances in the novel in which George is happy. One of these is when he has dinner

at Charlotte's, when he feels “la felicidad” despite “her blues.” Later, when George starts to “make magic”—describing olde Englande—he says it is fun and no harm as long as no-one hears him.

What does Charley and her wish to sink into the past mean for George, good and bad?

15. Imagine what George might have been like with Jim still alive? Is the reader a stand-in of sorts for Jim? How so?

16. What about Kenny and the scenes with him near the end of the book? Do they suggest anything about the future for George?

17. How does the movie *A Single Man* differ from the novel? Why do you think the director, Tom Ford, chose to alter aspects of the novel?

## MORE WORKS BY CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS

### Novels

The Memorial

The World in the Evening

Down There on a Visit

Prater Violet

A Single Man

A Meeting by the River

### Other

The Condor and the Cows (travelogue)

Kathleen and Christopher (letters)

Isherwood on Writing

Where Joy Resides (anthology)

### Memoir

Lions and Shadows

Christopher and His Kind

My Guru and His Disciple

## REFERENCES / MORE ABOUT CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

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Parker, Peter, *Isherwood: A Life*. London: Picador, 2004.

*Chris and Don: A Love Story* (2007 film)

Kauffmann, Stanley, "Death in Venice, Cal." *The New Republic*, September 5, 1964, p. 23-25 [a review of the novel, *A Single Man*]