

The Luminous Life of Lilly Aphrodite
Beatrice Colin

About the book

This novel is set during the First World War and the outbreak of WW2, in Berlin. It tells the story of Orphan, Lilly Aphrodite and how she grows up to become a screen icon, although her fame is short-lived.

Selling roses or dancing in cabaret shows, Lilly and her friend Hanne face squalor, persecution and hatred throughout the war years and we hear how life changes as the Nazis come to power. The novel gives a taste of life in Berlin before the Nazis imposed their rules. We hear about the vibrant and open culture, the different communities within the city, and we are shown how hatred and persecution grow during a period of recession and poverty.

Lilly is discovered by a Russian Director, who, the story tells us, is eventually imprisoned and murdered in Dachau. Through the films in which he casts her, she is handed a contract and moves to Hollywood. She returns to Germany, in search of the Director, Ilya, but also at the request of Goebbels – the chief architect of Nazi propaganda to appear in Nazi films. Lilly attends the premiere of the film she makes but as the film runs it becomes clear that Lilly and Ilya have chosen to stand up to the hatred of the Nazis by destroying the scenes in which she appears. Thinking she has struck a deal with the Nazis, Lilly leaves to return to California; however Ilya is not given safe passage out of Nazi Germany.

Discussion Questions

Please note that some of these questions will act as spoilers for the book.

why do you think that Lilly formed such a strong attachment to Sister August during her time at the orphanage?

Lilly is heavily influenced by Hanne throughout the book. Why do Kurt's, and therefore Hanne's political opinions not affect her?

what does this book tell us about life in Berlin in the lead up to the Nazi regime of hatred?

we hear about the importance of culture in the 1920s and 1930s in Berlin. What do you think life was like? Could we say that the inclusion of the character Eva allows us to have a taste of the diverse communities who lived there?

from what you have read in this book, do you think it's easier to understand how policies of hate and discrimination can grow?

Lilly moves to California and faces persecution there. Do you think that returning to Germany upon the request of the Nazis is a wise decision?

the author tells us the fate of Ilya, and recounts him telling other prisoners about Lilly during his incarceration at Dachau. We don't know how he ended up there, but what reasons do you think were given for his imprisonment?

did Ilya save Lilly's life or her reputation?

You can use HMD resources to find out more about the different groups persecuted under the Nazi regime: <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/victims-of-nazi-hatred>, life in the concentration camps such as Dachau: <http://www.hmd.org.uk/genocides/the-holocaust/life-in-the-camps>

You may also wish to find out more about life in Berlin before the Nazi regime: <http://www.ushmm.org/education/resource/hms/homosx.php>