



Shadow and Light

Jonathan Rabb

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Berlin, between the two world wars. When an executive at the renowned Ufa film studios is found dead floating in his office bathtub, it falls to Nikolai Hoffner, a chief inspector in the Kriminalpolizei, to investigate. With the help of Fritz Lang (the German director) and Alby Pimm (leader of the most powerful crime syndicate in Berlin), Hoffner finds his case taking him beyond the world of film and into the far more treacherous landscape of Berlin's sex and drug trade, the rise of Hitler's Brownshirts (the SA), and the even more astonishing attempts by onetime monarchists to rearm a post-Versailles Germany. Being swept up in the case are Hoffner's new lover, an American talent agent for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and his two sons: Georg, who has dropped out of school to work at Ufa, and Sascha, his angry, older son, who, unknown to his father, has become fully entrenched in the new German Workers Party as the aide to its Berlin leader, Joseph Goebbels. What a spellbinding novel "Shadow and Light" is, and what a novelist Jonathan Rabb has become!

When we last met Hoffner, it was 1919, and he had taken on the disappearance and death of Rosa Luxemburg in "Rosa," a novel the critic John Leonard hailed as "a ghostly noir that could have been conspired at by Raymond Chandler and Andre Malraux." "Shadow and Light" is equally brilliant and atmospheric, and even harder to put down or shake off. Like Joseph Kanon or Alan Furst, Rabb magically fuses a smart, energetic narrative with layers of fascinating, vividly documented history. The result is a stunning historical thriller, created by a writer to celebrate--and contend with.

Shadow and Light Details

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From Reader Review Shadow and Light for online ebook

Peggy says

Berlin 1927 Herr Kriminal-Oberkommissar Hoffner is investigating an apparent suicide of a movie producer. He has already suffered from standing with those who do not aid the rising nazi party. In fact they killed his wife. Now he discovers that his older son is running with a group closely allied with several individuals who will become Nazi leaders. I loved the descriptions of Berlin and learned more about 1927 politics but I found the investigation of the suicide and other plots hard to follow..I know the author was writing as Hoffner saw things but please then tell me what Hoffner is thinking, not just doing!

Donna Brown says

Probably because I was more familiar with the too-numerous characters, I found this an easier read than Rosa. In both books plots are over-complicated and labyrinthine. Nikolai Hoffner is not a very good father, a terrible husband, and very careless of his women. However, I like him and worry about him. He's like a real person to me. The backdrop of Berlin in the 1920s is fascinating. This book helps in understanding the changes Germany was going through.

Like Rosa, this book left me lost a lot of the time through the middle but mostly came together at the end. It was good to get to know Hoffner's youngest son and his family, who brought a wholesomeness to the glum detective's life. Although somewhat cold-blooded in his personal life, Nikolai has a strong sense of right and wrong, exceeded only by his compulsive need to solve mysteries.

It's a fascinating book in both character and plot and, like Rosa, worth reading.

David Lowther says

Shadow and Light is the second in Rabb's Berlin trilogy. The first, Rosa, was set in 1919 in the politically turbulent Berlin following the German surrender in the First World War.

The author mixes real people with fictional and the policeman Hoffner is the leading character in both novels.

Both novels have extremely complex plots which, at times, are difficult to follow. In Shadow and Light however, as the narrative reaches its conclusion, I felt an overall sense of satisfaction which I hadn't experienced reading Rosa. The story revolves around the giant German film studios, Ufa, where the legendary director Fritz Lang is putting the finishing touches to his masterpiece Metropolis. An early suicide (or was it murder?), a disappearing gadget which Ufa hope will give them the lead in the race with Warner Brothers to perfect sound movies, the appearance of Joseph Goebbels and the efforts of businessmen backing the fledgling Nazi party, to get control of Ufa combine to tell a very interesting tale. Even Peter Lorre makes a brief appearance, pestering Lang for a part in what was to become the director's first talkie classic M. Rabb's portrait of decadent Weimar Berlin is suitably seedy and very convincing. Hoffner, the detective, is persistent but flawed and takes time to get to the truth while trying to keep some kind of relationship with his two sons, one of whom has joined the Nazi party.

I'm very much looking forward into reading the third in the trilogy which is set in 1936.

Surreysmum says

I enjoyed this, but it was definitely more shadow than light for most of the book. The evocation of Berlin between the World Wars was marvellous, but extremely depressing, as was the protagonist detective's defeated attitude. Loved the way actual historical facts about Fritz Lang, his Nazi-sympathizer wife Thea von Harbou, and certain notorious Nazis such as Goebbels were woven into what might otherwise seem an entirely bizarre plot about sound film technology. At the end of the day so many of the actors were bad, that one ceased to care whether it was the greedy Americans or the nasty capitalist monarchists, or the scary Nazis, who really had the upper hand in suppressing the technology. It is Rabb's grim joke, I suppose, that the mob boss who is a pal of sorts for police detective Nikolai Hoffner, is one of the more sympathetic characters.

Rabb writes in a very accomplished style, but dense and demanding. In the dialogue scenes, through which he advances most of his plot, the reader must be constantly on the alert to read the nuances in the oblique utterances of characters whose emotional state we are only vaguely aware of, or else risk becoming totally lost. In some ways, this struggle for comprehension replaces the usual, old-fashioned contract of mystery writer and reader, that the former leaves enough clues to enable the latter to solve the mystery on his or her own. Of course you could also claim with some justification that this struggle is what characterizes Hoffmann as well.

For the depth of its portrayal of a place and time I had not previously read much about, I've added this book to the "historical novels" shelf as well as the mysteries.

Oswaldo says

Aviso: Éste libro es la segunda parte de una trilogía (La trilogía de Berlin), no necesitan haber leido el primero para entender la historia, pero se recomienda para profundizar en los personajes.

Sombras y luces a primera vista (y leida) suena como un cliché.

El detective borracho, que es el mejor en lo que hace, se encuentra con un caso que escapa de sus manos y tiene involucrados a casi todas las grandes cabezas del gobierno alemán en la época post gran guerra - pre segunda guerra mundial. Obviamente hay una femme fatale. OBVIO.

Pero lo que hace interesante a la obra de Jonathan Rabb son sus desarrollos; a primera vista, el caso tiene pinta de mafia involucrada por cuestiones monetarias, para terminar en un verdadero desmadre... económico por supuesto. El ambiente pre-post guerras realmente se siente en Berlín, el resentimiento de pérdida es palpable en cada calle de la ciudad; las cabezas más grandes saben lo que se avecina, no tienen de otra que modificar sus planes y adaptarlos a lo que viene.

...:::SPOILERS:::..

Y eso es en lo que Jonathan Rabb acierta con su libro: los eventos pasan por que tienen que pasar, y no importa lo que hagas o quien seas, no impedirás nada. Eres sólo un trámite legal.

...:::FIN DE LOS SPOILERS:::..

No te das cuenta de lo maravillosa que es la obra hasta que te distanías de ella y la comparas con el cliché andante del género noir. Definitivamente una lectura muy buena y con ganas de leer más sobre esta trilogía.

Val says

The book takes place in Berlin, between the two world wars. When an executive at the renowned Ufa film studios is found dead, it falls to Nikolai Hoffner, a chief inspector in the Kriminalpolizei, to investigate. With the help of Fritz Lang (the German director) and Alby Pimm (leader of the most powerful crime syndicate in Berlin), Hoffner finds his case taking him beyond the world of film and into the far more treacherous landscape of Berlin's sex and drug trade, the rise of Hitler's Brownshirts (the SA), and the even more astonishing attempts by onetime monarchists to rearm a post-Versailles Germany.

It took a little while to get into but once the pieces starting falling into place, I couldn't put it down. Since I'm a WWII history buff as well a fan of Fritz Lang's work, I really enjoyed all the historical details.

Lewis Weinstein says

This is a complex story, and I'm not sure I understood all of the pieces even when I finished the book, and certainly not while reading it. But that may well be the point. Berlin 1927 was a chaotic combination of dark forces, working at cross-purposes in which the only clear common ingredients were greed and a manic search for power. It was certainly beyond the skills of a single flawed policeman to understand, let alone impact; his well-meaning personal and professional failures are compassionately presented.

So the confusion is perhaps the message, shown as if through an ever-darkening gauze screen and never fully explained. If you're willing to suspend a need for total clarity, it is a fine read.

For me, as research for my novel-in-progress (tentatively titled Choosing Hitler), Shadow and Light paints a frightening picture of a year early in the Nazi rise, particularly in the relationship between the Nazis and the industrialists who foolishly thought they could use the Nazi movement for their own ends, when of course it turned out to be very much the other way around.

Denise says

In 1927 Berlin, chief inspector Nikolai Hoffner of the Kriminalpolizei is called out to the famous Ufa film studios to look into the supposed suicide of an executive found dead in his bathtub. With the help of renowned film director Fritz Lang and crime boss Alby Pimm, Hoffner is soon involved in an ever more complicated investigation reaching far beyond the film business into the sex trade, industrial espionage, a far-reaching conspiracy and the rise of the Nazi party, with plenty of sinister foreshadowing involving names that will rise to infamy in later years.

Atmospheric, complex, and gripping. Enjoyed this more than the first book.

Marley says

I don't know what to make of this book. I liked Shadow and Light a lot, but found the plot confusing and hard to follow. Some of it made no sense. Rabb writes noirishly with great atmosphere and characters. I especially liked our tortured protagonist Kriminal-Oberkommissar Nikolai Hoffner and his son Georgi, and Alby Pimm. I never quite figured out what Leni Coyle was "really" up to but maybe I'm a superficial reader in this case. Or maybe she had no idea herself. I mainly found her annoying. The book is well-researched and peppered with "real-life" people, organizations, and events: Walther Lohmann (and the Lohmann Affair), Kurd Wenkel, Alfred Hugenberg and Scherl, Ufa, Phoebus Film, and of course, Fritz Lang and the odious Thea von Harbou (whose wrist should have been broken!) A special treat is the cameo of the young Peter Lorre.

Perhaps I should have read Rabb's other novels first to put it in perspective. Even though I found the plot pretty improbable, I'm giving Shadow and Light 4 stars due to Rabb's portrayal of the Weimar Republic and, imo, its relevancy to today's America. I plan to read his other books.

Tony says

Rabb, Jonathan. SHADOW AND LIGHT. (2009). ****. Despite a labyrinthine plot and, perhaps, one too many characters, this novel from Rabb keeps you reading on and on. The plot begins at the lots of Weimar Germany's Ufa studio, the home of German cinema. A studio executive is found dead in the tub of his office bathroom. The discovery will set off an investigation that will expose the darker and more disparate side of a country coming apart at the seams. Our protagonist is Herr Kriminal-Oberkommissar Nikolai Hoffner. He is determined to find the identity of what he knows to be murder, although it was arranged to look like suicide. He gets help from two diametrically opposed quarters: Fritz Lang, the German director, and Alby Pinn, the leader of the most powerful crime syndicate in Berlin. As Hoffner probes, he finds himself going beyond the film trade and sinking into the morass of Berlin's world of sex and drugs, the rise of Hitler's Brownshirts (the SA) and the activities of previous monarchists to rearm a post-war Germany. Soon, Hoffner finds himself involved with other people who are involved with his case: a young woman from America – with whom he has an affair – the representative of MGM, and his two sons. His older son, Sascha, has become fully entrenched in the new German Worker's Party as an aide to its Berlin leader, Joseph Goebbels, and his younger son, Georg, who has dropped out of school to work at the Ufa studios. The author has obviously deeply researched the era and the histories of early filmmaking, and, most interestingly, the development of technology to add sound to film. I'm not sure if this is true or not, but the Germans and the Americans developed techniques to do this at about the same time, but the Americans were confined to the Vitaphone system, where the sound was recorded separately on a disk and played along with the movie. The Germans developed a technique of placing the sound track right on the movie film, so that sound and picture were synchronous. Anyway, a fascinating look at the period with a cast of interesting characters and lots of stumbling police work. Recommended.

Trilby says

I started this with some trepidation after my encounter with Rabb's "The Book of Q." This historical novel, however, turned out to be a tightly plotted, atmospheric mystery. The film industry, sex trade(straight and gay), criminal underworld, and of course Nazis all play a role in this novel of 1920s Berlin. The protagonist, Kriminal-Oberkommisar Nikolai Hoffner, wends his way through a labyrinthine set of leads as he investigates the suspicious death of a German film studio executive. Rabb seamlessly interweaves the story of Hoffner's investigation with historical fact. For example, half-Jewish Fritz Lang is shown to have a strained relationship with his bland-blond aristocratic Nazi wife, an accurate depiction. The vast majority of the story is told via dialogue, of which Rabb is a master. In this book Rabb has largely avoided long stretches of snore-inducing background material, as he did in "Q." Instead, the action is packed within a period of only five days, with Hoffner reeling from lead to lead, trying to figure out which are false, and which characters are playing him. The scenes with his two estranged sons are either filled with tension or sadness. Hoffner has no idea how to reconnect with either boy, and his efforts are heartbreaking to see. Similarly, he has difficulty showing affection towards women and frequently prefers walking out rather than engaging emotionally. Rabb does a fine job of sketching the dark,ominous world of post-WW I Berlin, where criminals, fascists, communists, and ruthless business people struggled for control of the city, and no one seemed to care who got stomped on, sometimes literally.

Ron Arden says

This book is like the old Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett novels that Hollywood made into film noir. The story takes place in Berlin in 1927 and focuses on a detective, Kriminal-Oberkommisar Nikolai Hoffner, who investigates the murder of a film director at the Ufa studios. Herr Hoffner gets caught in the middle of intrigue, murder, big business, the sex & drug trade, the rise of the Nazi party and of course a femme fatale. Jonathan Rabb mixes real people, like Fritz Lang and Peter Lorre, with numerous fictional characters to weave a wonderful story. The intrigue moves from a sound device that might revolutionize the movie industry through to battles between the communists and the fledgling Social Worker's Party, who became the Nazis.

One of the scenes at the end with Alfred Hugenberg showcase what power is really all about and give Hoffner a feeling of helplessness. If Hugenberg gets his way, Germany will rearm to fight the next war, which is ultimately good for business. That is one of the truths of this book. People like Hugenberg supported Hitler, because the Nazis were good for German pride and business. Makes you think about what and who really drive the world.

Liz says

This was a difficult book for me to get ... with so many twists and turns. Hubby indicated that it was way too complicated and I agree. The first chapters were just so difficult to get into, but the story did pick up in or after chapter 4(?). The best part of the book was the author's note indicating the actual events that occurred after the incidents in this book. If I was more of a WWI/II or movie history buff, I may have found the book more fascinating. As it stood, I was just confused with all the characters and their interaction with each other.

I thought it was a nod to the mystery/detective film genre with the detective having a somewhat "working" relationship with a known crime boss, the love interest, the personal family turmoil, as well as the work of investigating what started as a suicide. Lots of little plot twists throughout, but not necessarily my cup of tea.

Richard says

There are three detectives that I've grown fond of: Donna Leon's Guido Brunetti is the most well adjusted of the three. He's a family man, loves his wife and kids, tries to make it home for dinner, treats people well, and solves the horrendous cases he's given. Dotore Brunetti is Italian. Arkady Renko, Martin Cruz Smith's creation, is at the other end of the spectrum. Reviled by his comrades, unsuccessful at most relationships, constantly battling the system, he barely survives from case to case - physically or spiritually - but, he does make it through. Renko, Russian through and through, has grit to spare. Now, even deeper in the murky pools of detective fiction is Herr Nikolai Hoffner, brought to life by author Jonathan Rabb, and inhabiting the ultra-noir city of Berlin at the end of the Weimar Republic and the ascendance of National Socialism. Herr Hoffner comes to life in "Rosa," a convoluted tale of serial murder, and then reappears in "Shadow and Light." Hoffner is a mess. I can't tell you all the reasons why because I'd have to reveal much too much. Trust me, he's a mess. His marriage is wrecked, his kids hate him, he drinks and smokes way too much, he consorts with criminals - it looks like the bottom is on its way up to meet him. He's a hell of a lot of fun to follow around.

"Light and Shadow: A Novel," is a step above "Rosa," in milieu, plotting, and atmosphere. We learn a bit about the German film industry, the invention of sound for cinema, and the continuing rise of the Nazi Party, all while investigating a murder clumsily staged as a suicide. We also get to meet a number of famous people.

The Hoffner novels have been called alternative history, and they are that. Mr. Rabb is very clever with the "what if" portions of both books, more importantly he immerses us in a world that is vivid, exciting, and plausible.

One small criticism: I read an advanced copy of the book, so I'm hoping that before it gets to press some eagle-eyed editor removes some clumsy, and contemporary Americanisms from the dialogue. I just don't think Berliners started sentences with that oddly inflected "Hello..." that's become so popular; or said things like, "I'm trying to help you here..."

Four Bright Stars, and can't wait 'til the next one.

Nancy says

I would love to sit in the room when an author and publisher discuss (or debate) what to name a "literary" novel. Often understanding the name requires more thought than the book deserves. This title intrigues me because as I read I kept searching for the light. And searching. And searching. Trust me it was no where to be found except in the technical apparatus of the film industry.

Pre WW2 Germany has inspired a lot of recent fiction and I've been enjoying a mini-immersion into the Weimar Republic through historical novels. So I picked up this one to continue the experiences and was

definitely caught up in the shadows of Berlin in the 1920's. And, searching for some light at the end of the tunnel of darkness.

This took me to a place that I was eager to escape. But the squirmy feeling I had reading it slowed me down rather than quickening my pace (as a reader). Although billed as a mystery, I elected to read it as an historical novel (good thing, the mystery was convoluted and somewhat frustrating to follow). The atmosphere of the book was its strength for me--like Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles, the dingy offices and tawdry nightclubs really saved the book for me. And, the family dynamic between the detective and his two sons was heart-wrenching and interesting.

So, quite a mixed bag in this book.
