



City of Women

David R. Gillham

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Sigrid Schröder is, for all intents and purposes, the model German soldier's wife: She goes to work every day, does as much with her rations as she can, and dutifully cares for her meddling mother-in-law, all the while ignoring the horrific immoralities of the regime. But behind this façade is an entirely different Sigrid, a woman who dreams of her former lover, now lost in the chaos of the war. Her lover is a Jew.

But Sigrid is not the only one with secrets.

A high ranking SS officer and his family move down the hall and Sigrid finds herself pulled into their orbit. A young woman doing her duty-year is out of excuses before Sigrid can even ask her any questions. And then there's the blind man selling pencils on the corner, whose eyes Sigrid can feel following her from behind the darkness of his goggles.

Soon Sigrid is embroiled in a world she knew nothing about, and as her eyes open to the reality around her, the carefully constructed fortress of solitude she has built over the years begins to collapse. She must choose to act on what is right and what is wrong, and what falls somewhere in the shadows between the two.

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City of Women Details

Date : Published August 7th 2012 by Putnam Adult (first published January 1st 2012)

ISBN :

Author : David R. Gillham

Format : Kindle Edition 385 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, War, World War II, Cultural, Germany

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From Reader Review City of Women for online ebook

Julie Christine says

There is no black or white in war, but the variations of gray are infinite. With the protection of history and hindsight, we can sit at our remove and imagine how our moral compass would guide us through treacherous situations, but fiction – well-crafted fiction – can offer three-dimensional dilemma and nuance that our egos would deny.

David Gillham's *City of Women* is just such a work and it is an excellent. Berlin in 1943 is a city of shadows. Nearly all able-bodied men are fighting across various fronts; left behind are hungry, cowed, suspicious citizens and their Nazi keepers, the old and infirm, wounded soldiers, and black marketeers. But mostly, Berlin is kept afloat by the wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of soldiers and officers. It is a city of women.

One of these women is the lovely and enigmatic Sigrid Schröder, a stenographer and wife of a combat officer. Sigrid's war is reduced to the daily grind of her job and the grim existence she shares with her wretched mother-in-law. Scrapping together enough to eat, making do with threadbare clothes, huddling in a bomb shelter, not attracting the attention of her apartment building's informers or Nazis patrolling the streets, would seem to leave Sigrid with no time or energy for moral quandaries. But there are empty moments, split open by boredom, loneliness and desperation. How Sigrid fills them drives the plot of this atypical wartime thriller.

Gillham juggles many elements. His skill at maintaining a complicated narrative with many characters, while remaining true to history, is tremendous. He adds new elements to our understanding of German citizens' attitudes and behaviors during the war while crafting the hold-your-breath suspense of a literary thriller. His portrait of Berlin is pitch-perfect – the hopelessness and the viciousness of a city living in fear are claustrophobic and terrifying.

Gillham's characters are intriguing, sympathetic and nuanced. The moments of tenderness and betrayal leave the reader uncertain of whom to trust, demonstrating the inconsistencies and unpredictability of human behavior that are true even in the best of circumstances. In the worst of times, who among us wouldn't do what we needed in order to survive? Who among us would risk everything to ensure the survival of others?

What holds this back from a 5-star read is the overheated atmosphere. David Gillham's Berlin might be drab and crumbling, but beneath the patched coats and bomb rubble is a city pulsing with sex. I'm torn here, because it also raises an important question of how women survive, even now, when their political and physical power is so often compromised. Sex becomes a refuge and a weapon. Still, the movie theatre trysts and living room carpet couplings become tedious and make you wonder how Sigrid would have been portrayed by a woman writer.

In addition, this is one of the most poorly proofread books I have encountered in recent memory. That isn't the author's fault, but it jars the reader from her world and sends her dashing for her red pen.

A compelling novel that I highly recommend to WWII history enthusiasts and literary thriller fans alike.

Nancy Oakes says

I'm afraid I didn't care for this book all that much, but the setting (atmosphere, sense of place & time) was so well evoked that I can't totally write it off.

I know people are really in love with this novel, and once again I'm swimming against the current of public opinion here because it just didn't do that much for me. In my long review I make the point that the author's original intent to

"...write a novel with a completely female cast of characters, because I wanted to explore wartime from a feminine point of view"

would have made this book more realistic and would have added something to the existing works of historical fiction set during this time period, but I felt that what I got instead was like chick lit set against the backdrop of the Holocaust. Rather than following his instinct, the author decided that his original idea "fell flat" and that he "needed the dramatic tension of the love affairs to keep the plot moving and the suspense tightened." (from an interview at Psychology Today).

Now, I know my opinion sounds kind of harsh, but well, I can't help how I feel. How can there not be real suspense when, at the very least, the novel recounts Berlin in 1943 where people are being watched, or are themselves agents of the watchers or where there are regular bombing raids that create tension and a fear of nothing to go home to when the all clear sounds? Then there are some of the other female characters in this novel whose stories, had they been considered and more developed in terms of the original idea of "wartime from a feminine point of view," would have made for much better reading and may have offered more of a look at what these women might have actually gone through during this time.

I think I'd recommend City of Women to people who like their historical fiction on the lighter side; this one has more of a beachy feel rather than a serious examination of lives where "regiments of husbands, uncles, and brothers have been mobilized and Berlin has become a city of women."

Beverly Diehl says

Really bewildered by the many star reviews by people, and as far as Stephen King describing the sex as hot-hot-hot.... NO, it is not-not-not. Not for anyone who is used to reading steamy sex scenes or erotica, anyway. Unless you think it's hot to have a total stranger in a movie theater strike up a conversation, and, a couple sentences into it, grab your hand and put it on his erection.

Because after that kind of foreplay, wouldn't any woman say, "oh yeah, baby, climb on top of me and do me right now." In a movie theater seat.

There are lots of sex scenes like that, much tearing of clothing and rutting but just not much sexual tension building to said scenes, or in them.

I waited the whole book, thinking/hoping there would be an explanation of WHY this seeming ordinary

Berlin hausfrau began an affair like that, the first time, but never found out. I imagined, perhaps, a character like her might feel a kind of dull desperation like Halle Berry in Monster's Ball, wanting to be made to FEEL something, but there was nothing in the actual pages to either show that or perhaps another reason - because it was Tuesday? because she was aroused by the other people getting busy a few rows away? - that Sigrid would decide to bang a stranger in the cinema.

Despite being written (kind of) from Sigrid's point of view, I never felt close to her, or any of the characters; they all felt stiff and unbelievable, loving around like paper dolls. I don't mind flawed characters, but I wanted to like some of the people in it, anybody, but I came away not really liking anyone.

The author also made the odd choice to write in present tense - except when in flashback mode (and there were plenty of them), and it's a style choice that is perhaps meant to give it more immediacy, but I wasn't feeling it.

And the whole issue with the Jewish mother and two girls, who may or may not be the lover's wife and kids... that was weird. The plot itself was interesting and had lots of twist and turns. And I thought the cover was gorgeous.

Laura says

This is another book where I seem to have the opposite opinion of pretty much everyone, and maybe I'm crazy for hating this book, but hate it I do.

Okay, first a disclaimer: I in no way believe that a male author can not write brilliant female characters, or vice versa. That said, in the case of this specific book, I don't think the male author can write a realistic female character. The whole time I was reading it I was reminded that the author was male, and the primary female characters read like manifestation's of the author's sexual fantasies, with none of the nuances of character to make them interesting or three-dimensional. There is the gorgeous, voluptuous main character, who is so driven by her sexual urges that she seems to think with her d--- ...oh wait, that's right...she doesn't have one. Because she's supposed to be a woman, I keep forgetting. And uh oh, I think it's time for another disclaimer: I'm not saying women can't be sexual beings and obsessed with sex above all other aspects of life. I'm not even saying that Sigrid and her friend at work can't both fit that description and carry on purely sexual affairs with barely a second thought (although that would be a BIT more rare in the 1940's, and probably taken more seriously than they do). I accept that the character can feel no guilt over cheating on her wounded husband with more than one partner, feel no guilt about desiring her Jewish lover to let his wife and children be sent to a concentration camp so that they can "truly be together." Yes, people that selfish do exist, and yes, some of them are female. What I do not accept is that I am supposed to then believe that she has enough empathy to risk her own life helping Ericha (also known as male fantasy number three: a fierce, sexually-free, dark-haired young beauty, who of course at one point poses naked and sleeps with people to help the cause) hide Jewish men and women from the Gestapo. The characters are un-even, unrealistic, and for the most part unlikable (don't even get me started on Egon, the main love interest)...which is quite an achievement actually. The two main characters *risk their lives saving people from the Gestapo*. You would think making women like that unlikable would be a lot harder/more unlikely than writing female characters who are believable, and yet...

Daisy says

This is the third book in a row I've read about Berlin in the late 1930s-early 1940s (before this: Kino and before that All That I Am: A Novel).

With every one, details accumulate to make this era more personal, more human, somehow realer to me. This book has some good, sharp dialogue, especially between Sigrid and Ericha and when Sigrid meets Brigitte and Carin. The plot is enthralling although it ties up too quickly in the end. Maybe that's just because I want more of the story and the characters. There's melodrama but there's more Just Drama that makes reading it worthwhile. I read it quickly and I liked it a lot.

Berlin is a character. I wish I knew it better so I could see better the streets that are named and the areas where the action takes place.

I learned that in bomb shelters crying was forbidden and signs were mounted to announce as much.

There's a paragraph on how the Germans imagined life would be after they won the war, with Russian phrasebooks in the stores so citizens could learn how to address their new eastern servants.

(Not all Germans are bad.)

And always in the past, when I thought about blackouts, I thought only of people huddled in their apartments behind black curtains, and not that people and some businesses still kept up at night and how the streets must've looked with pocket flashlights illuminating that kind of urban darkness.

A reader might be sacrilegious to say this but spending time with this story is like watching a really good escapist black-and-white movie in the afternoon. It's time well-spent away from real life. Only imagine what real life was back then.

Laura says

Sorry, just wan't for me. Sigrid was unlikable in a harsh, cold way, the dialogue was stilted and the sex scenes were awkward, not even including the several times male characters got a kick out of placing Sigrid's hand on their erections. Plus, and I'm not sure here, but I think it might be a bit harder to have sex in a movie theater seat(something involving very skinny people who wouldn't take up too much room in the seat, and one of them having very flexible knees) than the author made out. I wanted to like this book because of the perspective of the good German, but I'd recommend Stones From the River or The Book Thief over this unpleasant effort.

Chrissie says

This book is perfect for those readers who want an intelligent thought-provoking book filled with action, from the first page to the last. It is filled with twists and turns and dead ends. What you think you understand, well you probably don't. You will by the end. If you love the ride of such an adventure I highly recommend this book.

The central theme, other than simply figuring out what was going on, is: what role would YOU have played if you were a German during WW2? Would YOU have the guts to work in the Resistance? That is not an easy question. Who do you sacrifice? Don't think valor is loaded all on one side. Whom do you hurt?

I listened to the audiobook narrated by Suzanne Bertish. Her reading was forceful and given the tempo and style of the book this is perfect. I was a bit annoyed as she insisted on pronouncing the words Patent Office

ad "pay-tent office".

So why only three stars? I found annoying incongruities that made no sense to me: a man's belt is not large enough tie up a suitcase with. I know this is petty, but why write that? Secondly, the main characters are all aberrant each in their own way. The author has collected quite a group. I cannot name one "ordinary person" among any of the central characters. There is a pronounced fixation on strange sexual behavior. Supposedly all the men are gone from Berlin but one woman still has three lovers. Where does she get all her energy? Food is rationed. The cinema antics aren't all that believable, but titillating for sure. What occurs in the cinema could happen but what are the chances everything would play out in this manner? To put it simply, the characters are a bit hard to believe in, maybe not one at a time, but as a group.

Another major complaint I have is that there is little to explain why the Germans who were silent, who obediently did as they were told, acted as they did. True, if you don't, you lose your job. That IS in the book, but there is no history, no discussion of the fact that after WW1, inflation was rampant in Germany, there were no jobs and that the common man just wanted some food and law and order and JOBS. So although I too despised those who did as they were told and "followed the rules", as all good Germans should do, I would have liked more depth, something that illustrated why these people behaved as they did. That none of this is pointed out makes them look worse than they really were, and I don't like that.

This book is an exciting mystery story. One thing follows another, so you have to hold on tight. Characters surprise you. There is sex, but heck any adult can read this. And you can stop and think what would YOU have done!

May I recommend too other books about German life during the war?

A Woman in Berlin: Eight Weeks in the Conquered City: A Diary and
On Hitler's Mountain: Overcoming the Legacy of a Nazi Childhood

Stephen King says

The city is Berlin, 1943, and the woman we care about is Sigrid, whose husband is fighting on the eastern front. Sigrid is seduced by two very different men (the sex in this book is hot-hot-hot), but the real seduction involves her reluctant participation in a scheme to ferry Jews to safety. You haven't experienced such gray skies since season 1 of The Killing, but the feel is all Casablanca. I can't wait for Gillham's next novel—play it again, Sam.

Susan Jacoby says

"City of Women" is just fine for what it is: a star crossed love story taking place in WWII Germany. Unfortunately, the story lacks many valuable details that would anchor the tale in this time period. Your satisfaction with the story will probably vary according to your expectations. Rereading the books description now, I see the fault lies in me. I will say that narrator Suzanne Bertish is excellent. Her German accent light and pleasant - her intonation catching the rhythms of German speech perfectly.

I bought "City of Women" out of curiosity about the experience of German wives and mothers caring for their families during WWII. Though brought up in a second generation German immigrant family, the war was never discussed. Nor was there any sort of permission to ask questions. No one told me not to, I just got the message loud and clear that WWII was off limits. And yet I've always wondered: what did the average German know about the government's activities? What did they do with what they did know? Did parents send their children off to safer homes in the countryside as did their London counterparts? How did the disappearance of a huge chunks of the population (German men into the army and Jewish everyone to other countries or concentration camps) affect life and morale? There has been much written about wartime Britain but very little about domestic life in wartime Berlin. Unfortunately, other than a cursory mention of ration books and a few trips to a bomb shelter, this novel could take place in almost any historical period where circumstances (pick one or more: war, family disapproval, ethnic hatred, class difference) amps up the drama between two lovers cheating on their spouses.

It begins fairly promisingly and with an air of mystery. Why is protagonist Sigrid Shroeder, married to a German soldier fighting on the Eastern Front, so restless and lonely? One would expect her to be anxious about her husband's welfare, afraid for her friends and neighbors after nightly bombing raids. We quickly learn much of her alienated sad behavior is actually Sigrid mooning about for her vanished married Jewish lover. See (in case you miss the metaphor) her German soldier husband is not only distant physically, but also emotionally, you guys. Sigrid is what my daughters would call a 'guy's girl' not a 'girl's girl.' She's so beautiful and never really connects with the "city of women" left to tend the home fires during the war. Most readers will quickly recognize this novel's supporting cast of characters: impossibly mean mother-in-law, suspicious landlady, foolishly brave sidekick; you can fill in the rest.

There are some acts of heroism and personal risk in the story. However, in previous reading (like the excellent Bonhoeffer biography I devoured earlier this year) I've learned that most actual acts of heroism during this time period seemed to be fueled by moral courage or a philosophical mandate that left the hero no alternative but to confront evil head on. Sigrid's motives are largely unexplored, therefore unconvincing. Is she helping Jews out of guilt for sleeping with a married Jewish man? Is she trying to get out of the house more? It's all sort of vague. Plus, from what we learn of her lover, there isn't much to inspire such slavish romantic obsession. Although she does describe a certain part of his anatomy as "noble" which could be just as easily "novel" since I'm assuming her previous lovers were uncircumcised.

Enough. Sorry. I will end by saying that my experience echoed the much more concise review of "City of Women" written by Katherine of Ontario. For a compelling look at life under German occupation, I recommend "Anne Frank Remembered" by Miep Gies. Ms. Gies was an employee of Jewish business owner Otto Frank who hid the Franks (and many others) in occupied Holland for over 2 years. She fed them by going to several different shops a day, never carrying more than one shopping bag at a time to avoid suspicion. I doubt she had a Jewish lover, but I found reading about her life so deeply inspiring, I didn't miss it at all.

Chris says

This is a strange novel. It is not a bad novel. It is just strange. The first thing that is strange about is that the characters are not particularly likable. Sigrid, the heroine, lives in Berlin during the Second War World.

While she is not a party member, her mother-in-law is and Sigrid's husband is serving on the Front. Sigrid's life changes in two ways, one is before her husband leaves, and the second occurs when a young girl asks her for a favor. Slowly, Sigrid wakes up to life.

The book works because it is not concerned with the fall of Berlin and focuses on those in the Nazi regime who fought against it in a variety of ways. The book is strange because as in any times of war morality because conflicted. It is hard to not only do the right thing, but harder to know what the right thing is. Which is what this book looks at. At times, you want to smack Sigrid for being so stupid or obsessed with her body, yet she is basically good. In many ways, the reader takes on the role of one of the supporting characters. Strange but good. Worth reading if interested in World War II.

Lisa Vegan says

4 1/2 stars

I'm struggling because I want to do this book justice but I am not in the mood to write a review. I want to get something down though when everything is fairly fresh in my mind, because I loved this book.

I read this as a buddy read with my Goodreads friend Diane, and also read it for my real world book club. I've been wanting to read this for ages, and I'm so glad I got to this no later than I did.

I even liked the love story, and I'm not a romance fan.

Many of the characters are so memorable. I love how the people are complicated and the relationships are complicated. They felt very real. I appreciate that a male author could write such an authentic seeming female character, telling the story in third person but mostly from her point of view. I developed such strong feelings for the characters, ranging from love and admiration to hatred and, until the end of the book, at times I felt confused by some of them. With some characters, I enjoyed getting to know them layer by layer; it's how people generally do get to know each other.

There is also such a rich plot, with many twists, a few of which I guessed ahead of the reveal, most of which I didn't guess, and a couple that I didn't at all see coming. I loved how at one point in the story, I had to suspend disbelief in a major way, but then because of a twist, that part of the story made total sense, that really something else was going on that was a much more sensible thing to have happened. Everything, about people's motivations and personalities, and what happens in the story, they all ended up making sense to me, even though some were emotionally disturbing. In some chapters, so much action is packed into so few pages.

I learned some things too. I had no idea that there were that many Jews left in Berlin in 1943. I got such a feel for WWII Berlin. The atmosphere came through so well, both of the city, and of Sigrid's internal experience. At the beginning, in particular, the oppressiveness was so well drawn. Sigrid's life as it was, the experiences in the bomb shelters, just everything had me captivated.

I loved the writing style.

I relished the suspense, and there was a lot of it.

I got completely engrossed in the book and it was really hard to put down. When I did keep reading, the pages, chapters just flew by. I was trying to keep in sync with my buddy (which we basically were able to do) and at one point the narrative was so gripping that, even though I was keeping careful track, I hadn't realized I'd read from one chapter into the next.

Like many Jews, I've always wondered about what if I was in the Holocaust? Would I have been shot, drowned, gassed, starved, beaten to death, or would I have gotten out of occupied Europe in time, or gone into hiding, etc?? And then I wonder what if it was here and now and another group of people, a group of which I was not a part? Would I risk my life to help them directly? Indirectly? Would I help in ways with less risk to myself? Would I try to ignore the situation and do nothing? I'd like to think I would help, but I've never felt all that brave. I love these kinds of books, fiction and non-fiction, because they do make you think, as well as entertain you. This is a perfect book to get me again thinking of these questions. And there is a lovely 4 page long author's note at the end that addresses some of the "what would you do" question.

This is a great book! I highly recommend it to all historical fiction fans, particularly those interested in the WWII years, and especially those who enjoy reading books with strong female characters.

Andrienne says

I absolutely loved this book. It was so layered; the characters beautiful, flawed, believable; the scenes unfolding like a brilliant movie (not surprising since the author is an actor and screenwriter). I stayed up until 5 a.m. reading this book--which doesn't happen often--but it is the reason why I read! I love books like this. Sigrid is a great heroine, I rooted for her; Ericha, not so much. Sigrid's lover, Egon, I just kept picturing an awesome Michael Fassbender--ruthless, magnetic and endearing all in one. This book, although a historical fiction, is definitely sexy (I can't think of any other word). The twists in this book were well-conceived. They don't just come out of nowhere--after finishing this book, I immediately started reading it again! I needed to go back and look at the details, especially about Egon's family (great tactic in withholding information both from the reader's point-of-view and the characters'). I wish I knew some German -- the book has tons of German words weaved in but it was necessary. This debut author is someone to watch out for. Amazing. Review copy provided by Penguin Debut Author program.

Kim says

3.5 stars. I'm a sucker for historical fiction, especially about WWII. This did not disappoint.

Rebbie says

Part of me wants to give this book 5 stars for David Gillham tackling an almost taboo subject: the pov of war from the Nazis and their women. That took a lot of guts, I'll give him that much.

The other part of me wants to give him only 3 stars for choosing to portray three of the female characters as morally bankrupt, overly sexed women. This is certainly NOT to slut-shame, but come on. We're talking about a different era here. Yes, I know how loosey goosey Germany was in the 1930s; in some ways, it was a bit similar to postmodern feminism with its sexual goings on.

But still. It wasn't the same back then, and I believe that the characters should have been developed to reflect that time period properly, rather than turning it into "Sex and the City: Nazi Germany."

Ericha was a perfect recreation of a college aged girl in the 21st century, with her jaded view of men and sex, not a young female who did what she had to do because she felt she had no choice (this was in the book). So it was a little strange.

And not to beat a dead horse here, but the reaction of a husband to one of the women is a bit outlandish. Most men, especially those who have just faced extreme violence, don't act blasé about their wife's infidelity.

In order for a man to not care about his wife emasculating him and turning him into a cuckold, one of two things must be occurring. Either the man is a very weak beta (or even gamma) male, or he has zero respect for his wife to the point where he's past the pain and heartbreak she caused, and he's on his way out the door. Neither one of these are the case with this husband, thus the implausibility comes into play.

But enough about that. I only mentioned this stuff in such detail because the element of loose sexuality is so prominent in this book, and there's no way to circumvent it; it will hit you in the face like a ton of bricks, and will make no excuses for it.

Another thing I think is important to mention is how well the author wrote about PTSD and the ways that it affects all soldiers, regardless of the soil they're fighting for and dying over, or which trenches they're holed up in. There aren't the words to express these things properly, because they don't exist, despite our attempts to defy this.

Oh yeah, and before I forget, I just wanted to say that the author's use of visualization was magnificent. I mean that. And the understated way he wrote about the darkest, unspoken side of war and how they alter the core of a soldier's being is remarkable.

All in all, it would have been a perfect novel had he chosen to tow the line between the realities of what women face during wartime, and the use of their sexuality as a means to get through it.

Wilma says

Een oorlogsroman met diepgang...een verhaal dat in je hoofd blijft 'hangen'...het zet aan tot nadenken...wat ook de bedoeling van de schrijver is. De keuze tussen 'goed' en 'kwaad', wat is 'goed' en wat is 'kwaad'? Hoe hebben de inwoners van Berlijn tijdens WOII gereageerd op de misdaden die het regime uit hun naam heeft begaan? Mensen die zeggen dat ze simpelweg proberen hun kinderen te eten te geven, een dak boven hun hoofd te houden en uit de problemen te blijven?

Sigrid staat voor die keuze...en maakt de keuze om U-Boote te helpen. Voor haar ook een vlucht uit haar alledaagse, troosteloze bestaan. Iedere dag is hetzelfde, haar werk, haar 'gezellige' schoonmoeder bij wie ze inwoont, de keuze triggert haar om 'het goede' te doen maar ook om spanning in haar bestaan te creëren. Dit doet ze door U-Boote te helpen maar ook door minnaars te nemen, van een Joodse charlatan die haar voor zijn eigen 'zaakjes' gebruikt tot een SS officier. Steeds dwingen de omstandigheden haar keuzes te maken. Ik heb het verhaal in één adem uitgelezen!!

Waarom is er geen vervolg??
