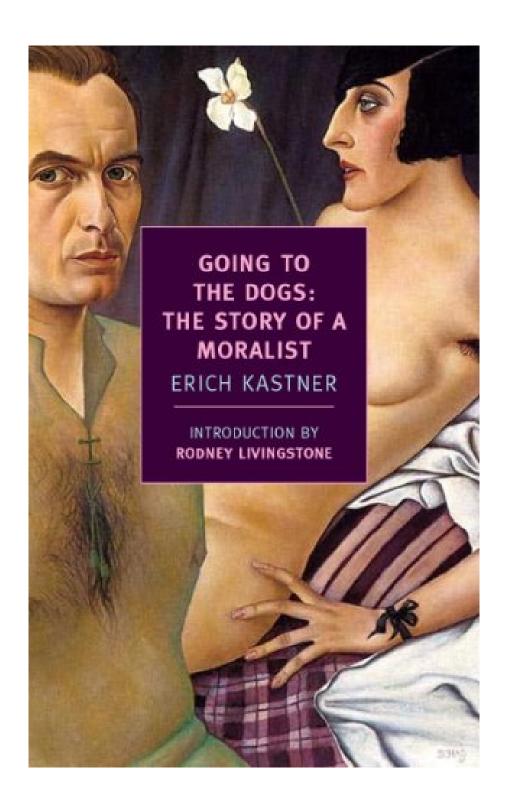


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Going to the Dogs is set in Berlin after the crash of 1929 and before the Nazi takeover, years of rising unemployment and financial collapse. The moralist in question is Jakob Fabian, "aged thirty-two, profession variable, at present advertising copywriter . . . weak heart, brown hair," a young man with an excellent education but permanently condemned to a low-paid job without security in the short or the long run.

What's to be done? Fabian and friends make the best of it—they go to work though they may be laid off at any time, and in the evenings they go to the cabarets and try to make it with girls on the make, all the while making a lot of sharp-sighted and sharp-witted observations about politics, life, and love, or what may be. Not that it makes a difference. Workers keep losing work to new technologies while businessmen keep busy making money, and everyone who can goes out to dance clubs and sex clubs or engages in marathon bicycle events, since so long as there's hope of running into the right person or (even) doing the right thing, well—why stop?

Going to the Dogs, in the words of introducer Rodney Livingstone, "brilliantly renders with tangible immediacy the last frenetic years [in Germany] before 1933." It is a book for our time too.

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Most helpful customer reviews

12 of 13 people found the following review helpful.

A Chilling View of Weimar Berlin

By garwood

Erich Kastner (1899-1974) is perhaps best known for his children's books, especially the much translated, `Emil and The Detectives'; and through film adaptations of `Lottie and Lisa', the source of Walt Disney's, `The Parent Trap'.

However in `Going to the Dogs' (published as `Fabian', in 1931), Kastner probes the hopelessness, intrigue, and degeneration of Weimar Germany.

Most vivid here is that particular Weimar sense of purposelessness and restlessness which generated (in many) an intense, desperate, seeking. The German concept `sehnsucht' (lit. yearning-addiction), comes to mind. One clearly feels the frustrated longing for what isn't, and perhaps what can not be.

After defeat in 1918, Germany plunged into turmoil which didn't end until Hitler. People were adrift: authority, institutions, and cultural norms lost their force. Dire economic circumstances contributed to a breakdown of structures, engendering vast social and cultural disintegration.

Setting aside its disastrous ending, some very fine art, music, and literature arose (Kurt Weil comes to mind), of which Kastner's work is an important part. Although this novel is little known, it is very much worth reading, especially with (and for) an historical awareness.

One could argue `Going to the Dogs' is not truly a novel, but a series of set pieces, episodes tied together by its protagonist, Jacob Fabian, (likely, in part, Kastner himself), and the city of Berlin. Its best read not for plot, or even character, but for the vital sense of time, place, and milieu it conveys - along with its timeless depictions of flawed human nature.

We meet hypocritical newspaper editors, prostitutes (male and female), naive activists, opportunists, politically enraged drunks shooting pistols, a detached father and absent mother, a depraved husband, a malignantly jealous academic - all in an atmosphere of abundant alcohol and hyper-charged sexuality.

Yet Fabian is not as unaware, or lost (or detached) as he may first seem. Largely, he's a sympathetic character: decent, and oddly enough, a somewhat conservative moralist whom we understand even better now, knowing what was to come.

No, Kastner is not as charming as Zweig, or as polished as Joseph Roth, or as psychologically astute as Schnitzler, but he does provide a unique and invaluable insight, conveyed with a Viennese intensity: a significant of-the-period view of Weimar Berlin, a place where, "Life is a chance, death is a certainty."

\*\*\*\*\*\*

### Three final points:

The cover art (Christian Schad's `Self Portrait With Model', 1927) is intriguing (note the title block obscures the woman's breast - an unintentional allusion to the censorship of the original edition?) And although we might visualize Fabian as looking like Schad, the grittier art of either Otto Dix of George Grosz might have been more fitting.

Also, a book this important could use a fresh translation as this British-English rendition is at times clumsy. Anthea Bell's recent translations of Stefan Zweig are light, engaging, and models of clarity: NYRB should have used her talents here as well.

Finally, Rodney Livingstone's introduction is thoughtful and informative, but as is all too common in NYRB titles, its too revealing and should be read as an afterward.

10 of 11 people found the following review helpful.

Going to the Dogs: The Story of a Moralist

By Jared Branch

Erich Kastner lived in that seminal time between World Wars in which so much of modern literature is based. Training to be a teacher, his studies were interrupted when he volunteered for the first and, living in Switzerland during the outbreak of the second, he returned to Germany, now during its Third Reich, with grandiose ideas of novelizing the war. At one point he attended his own book burning. He took up with the school of "New Objectivity" that, borne in response to the mass society, found solace in the idea of the individual in much the same way that modern society, increasingly free of disease and hunger, shuns vaccinations and the mass production of food as a return to its humanity, even if this morally base state leaves us wanting.

Going to the Dogs take place in the Weimar Republic, shortly before its fall. Kastner's angry but also apathetic with the society in which he finds himself. The crux of his anger is articulated through the editor of the newspaper who invents news, slaughters men without concern, influences opinion (or, "the most convenient...the public lack of all opinion"), and is "too respectable" to support the government. Society is failing, politically and economically, not because of the "present (economic) crisis", but because of the "spiritual sloth" that underlies it. In his 1950s preface he bemoans that "people nowadays understand even less" because society is "inoculating the masses with new standardized opinions." The idea that our knowledge isn't our own brings up an interesting point; how do we form our own judgments? How - and why - do we know whatever it is we know? How do we separate that which is didactic from that which is dogmatic?

Fabian, fictionalized Kastner, is an ascetic, living a Spartan lifestyle; to him, even coffee is sweet. He "cultivate(s) mixed emotions as a hobby" and is "melancholic, so nothing much can happen" to him,

although when he finally attempts to better society it ends so poorly that the results are absurd. It's interesting that, while shunning everything sweet, the writing is full of treacly, moralizing dialogue. In each chapter he attempts to go out on a high note. Like other lesser authors, Kastner is incapable of listing his qualms with society in any way except explicitly, through stilted and unnatural dialogue, that leaves nothing to the reader and nothing ambiguous in which one can find their own meaning or ascribe their own importance.

Given that this was written in 1930s Germany, it should come as no surprise that Freudian psychology figures prominently. One man, describing the sexual proclivities of his wife at which we are supposed to balk, says that their marriage "produced wish-dreams of whose content, my dear sir, you can, happily, form no conception." While both genders are overly sexualized (this is, after all, "satire"), it's only women who are judged for their deviance. And while women run brothels full of men, "people were sauntering past along the pavements without any idea of the crazy things that happened behind the house-fronts." Any semblance to permanence is only an illusion, as houses catch fire during the night because of defects in their construction.

How well can a work of satire concerned with 1930s morals hope to age? It is an interesting dynamic that a book on morals belies the idea as conceptualized by a modern, educated world. In dealing with morals the question always arises of whose, exactly, morals they are to be. That NYRB chose to re-release this now speaks to their belief that history repeats or, at a minimum, educates. So when the newspaper editor laments that the country is falling "into the hands of foreigners" or that "the state bolsters up the bankrupt landowners" and dares not impose taxes on the rich, you're apt, if you're of a certain mindset, to attempt to make parallels. We like to believe that events are causal and to find meaning in words. But there are just events, and it's humans that make those into stories. So, while we should be wary not only of Kastner's prescriptions on morality, we should be wary too of the idea that history forms some grand narrative through which we can learn.

6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

A book for Voyeurs

By John Mccarthy

For anyone who might want to catch an understanding of the free-fall culture within the educated elite in Berlin during the waning years of the Weimar Republic, this book is a feast.

Fundamentally, the book consists of a series of episodes experienced by its protagonist, Fabian. As such, it speaks to his and to his cultures emptiness, restlessness and meaninglessness.

Life, in that period, the author sees to say, was no more or no less than a series of off-beat experiences, mostly sexual, that lead nowhere.

In the book, at least as I read it, there was no growth, no coherence, no learning, no climactic event...but rather just one lost and relatively joyless experience after another.

And, yet, at some level the book satisfies...for Fabian, who is the 'string' that connects all these dead-end experiences, is a sympathetic creature, lost to be sure, but likable just the same.

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