

Hedwig and Berti

by Frieda Arkin

Thomas Dunne (an imprint of St. Martin's Press)

A Reading and Discussion Guide

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ANNOTATION:

In *Hedwig and Berti*, a novel published over 35 years after the author's first work, the formidable Hedwig Kessler, a woman from a highly respectable and accomplished German-Jewish family, carries herself regally through life, first in England, then in America, after escaping her horribly changed, beloved homeland in 1938 with trunks of family heirlooms and precious books of family history, along with her diminutive afterthought of a husband, Berti.

SUMMARY:

As the incredible news of Nazi atrocities filters in from Germany, Harry Eisenstein opens the door of his London flat in the spring of 1938 to German cousins he didn't know he had. Somehow, Hedwig Kessler, a stoutly traditional German of a highly accomplished and respectable Jewish family, has managed to escape Germany, her beloved fatherland, after it changed so horribly under Hitler. Hedwig's imposing manner and regal bearing do not invite questioning, although Hedwig speaks English and French, as well as German. Harry eventually gathers that she intends to wait out the Nazi regime in despised England, and then – once life has returned to normal – to go back to the Kessler family estate in Germany, along with her meek, diminutive husband, Berti, and the trunks of family heirlooms she has brought with her.

As foreign as Hedwig and Berti appear to Harry, they seem to adjust to life in England, eventually moving out of Harry's flat with their infant daughter Gerda, who was surprisingly produced by the seemingly impregnable Hedwig. Hedwig, less than impressed with the English in general and with Harry in particular (in whom the Kessler blood must be extremely weak), endures England's entry into the war and the war itself by consuming medicinal doses of *Schnaps*, regaling family and acquaintances with tales of the fabled Kesslers, and reminiscing fondly about her childhood, so different from the memories of her estranged older brother Bruno.

With nothing left of the Kessler family or their estate in Germany, Hedwig moves the family to America, where Bruno welcomes "black sheep" Gerda, a talented, young, and temperamental concert pianist. Still the guardian of the family history, Hedwig does not

let the precious trunks out of her sight as they travel by boat to New York City. Once in America, however, she prefers not to know Bruno's reasons for hating the beloved grandparents who raised her while sending him away. Though uprooted and cut off from family, Hedwig and Berti finally achieve some measure of happiness in a life that travels several tragic turns.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How did reading about the arrival of Hedwig and Berti from the point of view of Harry Eisenstein affect your first impressions of Hedwig (who first appears to Harry in his sleep-befuddled state as a "Valkyrie" with "a bosom so monumental that Harry nearly cringes")? Why might the author have chosen to open the story this way?
2. Why does the term "creative confrontation" (p. 7) come to Harry's mind when Hedwig is first examining him at the door, with her eyes sweeping his face "like a violent caress"? How does Hedwig confront the world the way a painter does?
3. "Though she's called herself his cousin, Harry won't for a moment believe a woman like this one can in any way be related to him." (p. 9) What, if anything, does Harry have in common with Hedwig? How can Harry's alienation from painting be compared to Hedwig's exile from her homeland?
4. With Berti, "the little husband (p. 9)" who goes unnoticed at first, Harry feels "some bond is immediately established." (p. 7) What does Harry have in common with Berti?
5. Early in the book, Harry hears a slap from the room where Hedwig is trying to teach Berti English (p. 34). Gerda violently attacks the first piano she ever comes across, "playing hit my mother on the nose till the blood comes..." (p.88) Later, Hedwig feels an "intense need to smack" Berti (p. 111). Gerda's piano teacher Enid Sickles tells her agent, "I swear I could belt her one across the chops." (p. 138) Why are so many violent impulses mentioned? How do these impulses compare to the incidents of violence and cruelty by the Nazis that are described in the book?
6. When Hedwig is "dreamily" suggesting old-fashioned, German names for the baby, Harry has the urge to "grab his cousin by her beautiful hair and shake the teeth out of her for the damnable insistence she has of living at right angles to reality." (p. 67) How does Hedwig's ability to deny reality affect her relationship with her older brother Bruno? With her daughter Gerda? With Berti?
7. Why was the news about Harry and his flat revealed so long after the fact and in such a matter-of-fact way? (p. 110) Did it come as a shock? Why, or why not? What impact do you think the author meant the news to have on the reader?
8. When Pansy Quillinan, the wife of Berti's veterinarian boss, sees Berti gazing adoringly at her, she "has an instant comprehension that some people live their lives almost entirely in their heads." (p. 99) Would you describe any characters other than Berti as living this way? If so, who and why?

9. What attracts Berti to Pansy? What prevents him from sleeping with her?
10. What is the something that "has miraculously been released" in Berti with his sudden desire to strangle Gerda who is behaving obnoxiously in the concert hall (p. 121)? Is Berti less passive from then on?
11. How did Gerda's physical attraction to her student Bartley Munson affect her? Why does she respond so violently to his indolence? How would you compare Gerda's losing her passion for music (pp. 202-3) to Harry's giving up painting after fifteen years?
12. How is Gerda like Hedwig in the way she deals with the truth her uncle Bruno reveals and with Hedwig's revelation of how Gerda was conceived?
13. Would Gerda have committed suicide if the opportunity hadn't presented itself so readily? Why does she do it?
14. Why do Hedwig and Berti remain married, even though neither of them seems happy? Why do you think they married in the first place?
15. We are told that Berti finds happiness before he dies, "no longer leading a life of incubation." (p. 254) Hedwig is also described as having "arrived at a fair degree of content." (pp. 255-6) Why were Berti's and Hedwig's jobs, as night clerk and housemother respectively, so appropriate for them?
16. Harry sees Hedwig as an "unpiercable knowing creature". (p. 76) Hedwig thinks of Harry as "...always examining and saying nothing." (p. 44) Who, if anyone, achieves true intimacy with another person in this book? What prevents others from doing so?
17. What might Hedwig's trunks symbolize? Is she burdened or uplifted by these possessions from the past?
18. Bruno thinks of Hedwig as sitting on her bed, counting over "all the injustices ever done her, a miser counting her gold." (p. 210) Hedwig, however, sees herself as "always adjusting" to the different ways the world interrupts her life. (p. 255) How did you see Hedwig responding to the adversity in her life? In what way did you admire Hedwig? In what way did you dislike her?
19. How might a psychologist diagnose some of the characters?
20. What did you think of the author's style of writing? How does giving readers the characters' thoughts (sometimes even those of minor characters such as Cyrus Witterhorn, who takes Gerda out to dinner) but not having an "omniscient narrator" to tell readers the "truth" about the characters affect the mood of the book?
21. What part(s) of this book stick with you the most? Why did the author end it the way she does, with Hedwig's buying a dachshund upon whom "she bestows all the fierce vigilance, solicitude and affection she is capable of, all of which she has in high supply"?

GLOSSARY OF GERMAN WORDS:

The text is peppered with German words at first, but notice how few and far between they become the longer Hedwig and Berti are in England. The following information comes from *Cassell's German Dictionary* (Macmillan, 1958):

<i>dreckige</i> (p. 17)	dirty; foul
<i>schmutzige</i> (p. 20)	dirty; obscene
<i>Bitte verzeih 'mir</i> (p. 25)	Please pardon me
<i>Tisch</i> (p. 33)	table
<i>'Stut mir leid</i> (p. 39)	I am sorry
<i>unreinliche</i> (p. 43)	unclean; squalid
<i>schreckliche</i> (p. 43)	terrible; dreadful
<i>grosses Tier</i> (p. 46)	big shot
<i>Grosseltern</i> (p. 47)	grandparents
<i>geistreich</i> (p. 66)	clever; gifted
<i>Hier hab'ich die Flasche</i> (p. 70)	I have the bottle here
<i>echte</i> (p. 102)	real
<i>Nicht zu rasch</i>	not too fast
<i>Apfelsaft</i> (p. 199)	apple juice

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

From the Publisher:

Frieda Arkin's work has been twice selected for *Best American Short Stories* and her first novel, *The Dorp*, was published in 1969 to wide critical acclaim.

She attended the Juilliard School of Music and received her Master's in anthropology from Columbia University. She has written five cookbooks, a gardening book, a number of poems, and articles for *Woman's Day*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Georgia Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Yale Review*, and *Yankee* magazine.

Frieda Arkin's short stories have appeared in journals including *The Massachusetts Review*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *The Yale Review*. After a long hiatus from fiction, when she turned to raising a family and writing a series of cookbooks, Frieda joined the late Andre Dubus's writing group, prospering under his mentorship while completing *Hedwig and Berti*. She lives in Ipswich, Massachusetts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Excerpts from Reviews of *Hedwig and Berti*

"Arkin's ear for her characters' emotional dissonance is part of what makes this novel so satisfying, and so unnerving."—*The New York Times*

"Arkin depicts these damaged characters, and their territorial and emotional displacement, with unflinching honesty and rueful insight."— *Kirkus Reviews*

"With its endearingly odd characters and lively blend of light and dark humor, Arkin's second novel (published more than three decades after her acclaimed debut, *The Dorp*, 1969) is proof that the 86-year-old writer hasn't lost her touch." — *Booklist*

Citations for Articles about *Hedwig and Berti*

Becker, Alida. Hedwig and Berti: Survivors. *The New York Times*, Mar 13, 2005.

Block, Alison. Hedwig and Berti. *Booklist*, Dec 1, 2004 v101 i7 p634(1).

Hedwig and Berti. *Publishers Weekly*, Nov 22, 2004 v251 i47 p38(1)

Sullivan, James. Masterpiece was decades in the making. *The Boston Globe*, Aug 5, 2005

Additional Discussion Guide

<http://www.readinggroupgold.com/product/product.aspx?isbn=0312333560>

Reading group guide from St. Martin's Reading Group Gold Web site.



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