



The Education of Arnold Hitler
by Marc Estrin

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READING GROUP GUIDE ...SORT OF...

The best teacher I ever had was a philosopher-historian named Hans Meyerhoff. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays at noon, he held forth on "Existentialism in Literature" in the largest hall on the UCLA campus. People would pack the room, sit on the stairs, eat lunch standing at the back, to hear this man. Each week he would begin a new book. He would stride across the stage to the lectern, slowly reach down and pull the book from his briefcase, open the book decisively in front of him, and say, in a thick German accent,

"Vhat does ziss book show?"

With this question, he taught me how to read. "Vhat does ziss book show?" is one of only three things in all my schooling (other than typing class in Junior High School) that I have found valuable as an adult.¹

I find many of the reading guides I've seen on line to be demeaning, both of the book and the reader. Such material often consists of a series of obvious questions, still wet with pedagogic saliva. So in an unstructured way, and with *hommage* to Hans Meyerhoff, who died in an auto accident in 1965, let me just point to several areas of importance in Arnold Hitler. Vhat does ziss book show?

Language

My first thought was to write a novel about the pathologies of contemporary language, awash in "free-floating signifiers" where "security" means permanent war, "clear skies"

¹ I knew you'd ask. Number two was from a biology professor in college, a notion again delivered in a thick German accent. He was listening to a student report on a lab experiment, and interrupted with an indignant "Per zent?! Per zent means von hundert! Do you haf von hundert samples?" The third was a joke from another biology professor, this time in American English: "A scientist and his friend were driving past a flock of sheep on the side of the road. The friend said, "Look, the sheep have just been shorn." The scientist replied, "Yes. At least on this side." All three of these, I realize now, have to do with epistemology.

means pollution, and “tax relief,” impoverishing the public. Poor Arnold would find himself suffering from the implacable irrationality called up by his name. His

“But I’m not Adolf — I’m Arnold! He’s dead. I’m someone else. Get real,” just doesn’t seem to cut it.

I ask you: Why not? Is the world hopelessly insane, or is there good reason for such stubborn reaction? The obvious implication is that there are other instances, more general than Arnold’s, in which similar confusions and subsequent complications occur. It might be profitable to ask “Vhat does ziss book show?” about corrupt and distortive uses of language.

Bildungs- and Unbildungsroman

While I’m certain there may be folks out there who would love to read a novel about semiotics, I’m also certain that they are few. Besides, when one sits down to write fiction, the characters take over, with all their problems and relationships. And so the book soon became not “about semiotics,” but the story of Arnold, a really nice guy with a really awful name, someone *afflicted* with semiotics — as are we all, but he more personally.

There is in German literature, the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of education²: After confusions and false starts in childhood, a character learns the way of the world, and develops into a mature and understanding human being.

Learning to cope often means learning to deal with ill-luck and evil.

The Education of Arnold Hitler did not always have a (possibly) happy ending. Its first version began with Arnold’s burnt body in his bunker, and flashed back to the story that had brought him to that lamentable condition. My notion was not only of a *Bildungsroman*, but also of an *Unbildungsroman*³ — the formation and the destruction of a promising human life in an unequal match with evil.

My editor, Fred Ramey, and I both sensed that the awfulness was somewhat excessive, alienatingly so⁴, and I began to play with the idea of a happy ending. I found it more interesting, and no more improbable. Instead of Arnold careening in black monotone off a cliff, fully victimized by his name, I got to explore more colors, more character interactions.

I ask you: What would have been the effect of that earlier ending on the issues of the book as a whole? Would it have been more realistic? More revealing? If you email me,

² Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* is the most famous, classic example. Mann’s *Magic Mountain* is a brilliant variation on the theme.

³ a term which made sense to at least some of the native speakers I consulted.

⁴ and more than alienating — a kind of blatant sign-on to “Estrin Does Irony”: Arnold destroyed not for his name, but for not living up to it.

I'll be happy to send you a file of where the first ending branches off from the current one — and you can let me know what you think. That might be a really interesting discussion. Here's what I think: Even with the current ending, things may not continue so rosily after the book is over, but at least now everybody — including the cat — gets something to eat.

"The Problem of Evil"

Unless one is Hawthorne or Melville⁵, it's quite presumptuous to take on Evil as a major theme, but a *Bildungsroman* can hardly avoid it.⁶ Melville's short story "Billy Budd" is a short, blazing account of the confrontation of good with evil. While a reader of *Arnold Hitler* doesn't have to have read Melville's story⁷, it is a controlling metaphor of the book. In Melville, Billy the Good, the "handsome sailor," is brought to his doom by the inexplicable hatred of his shipmate, Claggart. Similarly, each phase of Arnold's life attracts a potentially lethal opponent. As yang brings on yin, so must Arnold bring on his Claggarts.

I ask you: Doesn't the longstanding literary trope of placing Evil into separate characters imply the innocence of the individual? Is it still possible in this morally complex (and often dishonest) world to posit the possibility of innocence? Is it even desirable?

Judaism

Here's a good example of how the characters, not the author, direct the book. In my original "semiotic" novel, I had no intention of having Arnold flirt with Judaism. It was the sardonic Rick Mather⁸ who thought it would be amusing to have a Jew named Hitler — and who then begins his odd, effective Temptation. Once it became clear that Arnold (having become a pariah) might consider embracing the "religion of pariahs,"⁹ Edmond Jabès's *Book of Questions* became a leitmotif, and Arnold's undergraduate work and thesis were determined. Judaism turned pregnant, and transformed *Arnold* into (oi!) another Jewish novel.¹⁰

I ask you: I would be quite interested to hear from readers, especially Jewish readers, how they respond to Rick's, Arnold's, Jacobo's and Evelyn's take on these issues. Now that I mention it, what *are* their takes? I do think the novel would be a good choice for synagogue reading groups. I mean, What does ziss book show about Judaism?

⁵ or Mel Brooks

⁶ Orwellian language is a symptom; the cause is far greater.

⁷ any more than a reader of my *Insect Dreams* has to have read Kafka's "Metamorphosis"

⁸ I, myself, am *not* sardonic.

⁹ See Jean-François Lyotard's brilliant and incisive essay "the jews."

¹⁰ I was quite surprised to find my first novel, *Insect Dreams: The Half Life of Gregor Samsa*, so classified by the critics. I was even more surprised to be invited by the Yiddish Book Center to be part of their "Jewish Writers Live" reading series. Now I think of myself as "a Jewish writer" with the responsibilities thereof. And surveying my production, I see how true (and obvious) the observation is, and how thick-headed I was to have it pointed out to me.

Art and (Political) Understanding

Evelyn's art was unforeseen: I just didn't expect it. In *Arnold's* "ironic" days, I had thought of her just as an everyday neo-Nazi girl next-door who had always wanted to go out with a guy named Hitler. I knew she'd grow, as all characters do, but hardly in the way she did. The transformation came when I thought, "Well, maybe she's only playing at being a Nazi." All the questions followed: Why? To develop her art. What kind of art? Well...

I've never painted or sculpted. I don't take photos. And I certainly don't dance in strip joints. All Evelyn's artworks flowed from her sauciness and the implied values of her political associations.

I ask you: As she explored neo-Nazism, so she taught me about it — not so much by my doing research¹¹ as through her playing around with such fierce, destructive imagery. But beyond that, the process demonstrated for me the possibility of using imagined art to understand politics. What does ziss art show? Democrat art. Republican art. Pro-life art. Pro-choice. Anarchist. Disciplinarian. Not what themes are used on the narrative level — but how are the "partial-birth abortions" or the IMF actually portrayed, and what do we learn about movement consciousness from the imagery? Yes, there are art critics who study such things, but they interpret and comment on particular, already-existing works. What about allowing new works into the world as thought-experiments, and allowing their births to teach us about their subjects?

The Glorious Online

Since I've already asked you some big questions, let me also invite you to share your thoughts with me online, so as to further develop the guide, and my own understanding of *Arnold Hitler*. I'm sure the Unbridled webmaster can come up with a way to keep this dialogue open. For me, it's the most enjoyable part of post-production.

A Note on Other Work in the Pipeline

I have four completed drafts of novels awaiting revision. What "completed" means is that they each have a beginning, a middle, and an end that I, at least, like. Now all I have to do is work them up. Those that succeed, you may see in print:

- *Golem Song* is the rowdy tale of a Jewish genius who has a plan to save the world. Watch out.
- *The Lamentations of Julius Marantz* tells the truth behind a global religious hoax, and the sad fate of its dismayed enabler.
- *When the Gods Come Home to Roost* details a successful — if ethically questionable — trip to the fountain of youth.

¹¹ though there were a lot more researched Nazi scenes, with more language, ideology, speeches and songs in the earliest draft — so many, I'm afraid, as to be oppressive.

- In *Tsim-Tsum*, a novella, God is living in a '96 Hyundai, surveying His creation. Improvement requires extreme treatment — and it was so.

I am currently at work on a novel called *Skulk*, which has the large ambition of national political revolution, and the smaller, more realizable one, of seeing the alphanumeric “Building 7” in *The New York Times* for the first, and likely only time.

Bob and Ray, two of the great semioticians of the last century, used to sign off their radio show with “Write if you get work, and hang by your thumbs,” and “It takes a heap of flying to make a man a bird,” all three notions of which seem apropos the subject at hand. Do write if you get work, watch out for those thumbs, and remember Icarus when you get a chance.

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