

THE LILAC PEOPLE

READING GROUP GUIDE

by Milo Todd

About the Book

For readers of *All the Light We Cannot See* and *In Memoriam*, a moving and deeply humane story about a trans man who must relinquish the freedoms of prewar Berlin to survive first the Nazis then the Allies while protecting the ones he loves

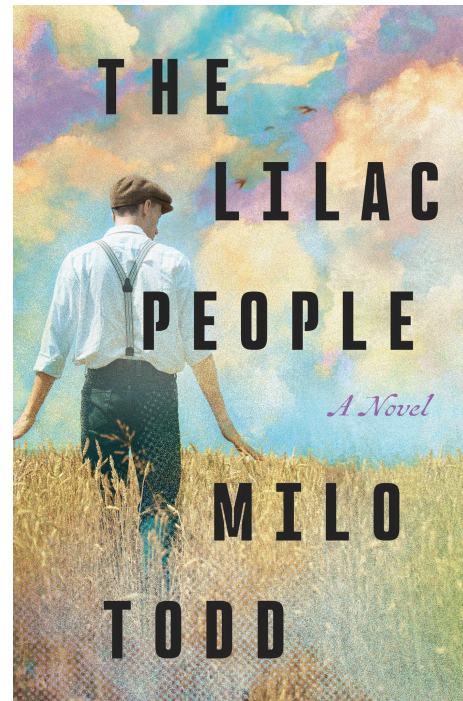
In 1932 Berlin, Bertie, a trans man, and his friends spend carefree nights at the Eldorado Club, the epicenter of Berlin's thriving queer community. An employee of the renowned Dr. Magnus Hirschfeld at the Institute of Sexual Science, Bertie works to improve queer rights in Germany and beyond, but everything changes when Hitler rises to power. The institute is raided, the Eldorado is shuttered, and queer people are rounded up. Bertie barely escapes with his girlfriend, Sofie, to a nearby farm. There they take on the identities of an elderly couple and live for more than a decade in isolation.

In the final days of the war, with their freedom in sight, Bertie and Sofie find a young trans man collapsed on their property, still dressed in Holocaust prison clothes. They vow to protect him—not from the Nazis, but from the Allied forces who are arresting queer prisoners while liberating the rest of the country. Ironically, as the Allies' vise grip closes on Bertie and his family, their only salvation becomes fleeing to the United States.

Brimming with hope, resilience, and the enduring power of community, *The Lilac People* tells an extraordinary story inspired by real events and recovers an occluded moment of trans history.

About the Author

Milo Todd is a Massachusetts Cultural Council grantee and a Lambda Literary Fellow. His work has appeared in *Slice Magazine* and elsewhere. He is co-editor in chief of *Foglifter* and teaches creative writing to queer and trans adults.



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Discussion Questions

1. Bertie has a fixation about inanimate objects, such as where they came from and where they went. Why do you think this is?
2. Bertie is often preoccupied with Gert's whereabouts, especially after WWII. In what ways is his preoccupation reasonable? In what ways is it detrimental? Where is the line, if any, between healthy and unhealthy concern about a loved one?
3. Trans people during the Weimar Republic could carry police-sanctioned cards identifying themselves as trans. In relation to the time, do you feel this was a good thing or a bad thing? Why?
4. Why do you think Karl was so resistant to masculinity lessons despite identifying as a man?
5. Does this book reflect today's current political climate? Why or why not?
6. Karl says that survival is inherently selfish. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
7. In what ways, if any, does this book alter your perceptions of WWII, the Holocaust, and/or America's role in the liberation of Germany? Did anything surprise you?
8. When Karl shares his story, no white space is used. Contrarily, when Hitler becomes chancellor, plenty of white space is used. What do you think these narrative approaches are meant to express?
9. Bertie, Karl, and Sofie all show their grief and survivor's guilt in different ways. What are these ways and why do you think they differ from one another?
10. Do you feel Sofie and Bertie are bad people for going into hiding instead of actively fighting against fascism? Why or why not?
11. Do you feel Bertie was in unrequited love with Gert? Why or why not?
12. What do you think "Das Lila Lied" ("The Lilac Song") means to Bertie, Sofie, Karl, and Gert? What do you think it represents in the story itself?

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13. Do you agree or disagree that all German citizens were made to pay reparations after WWII (in the form of physical labor and low food rations)?

14. In what ways do you feel community is expressed in this book? Which expressions are positive and which are negative?

15. Do you believe Sofie would have been better off if she'd never met Bertie? Why or why not?

16. Do you interpret the ending as happy, sad, bittersweet, foreboding, hopeful, or something else? Why?