

10 of the best books set in Berlin by Malcolm Burgess, 17 August 2011, the Guardian

Berlin has been at the epicentre of history for the last century, a fact reflected in its incredibly rich literary history. City-Lit's Malcolm Burgess picks 10 classics set in the city

Christopher Isherwood, Goodbye to Berlin, 1939

Christopher Isherwood's compelling fictionalised autobiography defines the wild and wicked Berlin between the wars - and Hitler's rise to power.

"All along the Tauentzienstrasse, men, women and boys are hawking postcards, flowers, song-books, hair-oil, bracelets. Christmas trees are stacked for sale along the central path between the tramlines ... In the side streets, lorry-loads of police are waiting; for any large crowd, nowadays, is capable of turning into a political riot."

- Tauentzienstrasse

Alfred Döblin, Berlin Alexanderplatz, 1929

As Franz Biberkopf leaves prison, he vows to lead a decent life on the grimy streets of Weimar Berlin - in one of the greatest German novels of the 20th century.

"On the Alexanderplatz they are tearing up the road-bed for the underground. People walk on planks. The tram-cars pass over the square up Alexanderstrasse through Münzstrasse to the Rosenthaler Tor ... House follows house along the streets. They are full of men and women from cellar to garret."

- Alexanderplatz

Cees Nooteboom, All Souls' Day, 2001

As the new millennium approaches, Arthur Daane is in a wintry Berlin trying to piece together his life in this extraordinary and atmospheric novel of the city, past and present.

"At the corner of Savignyplatz he was almost blown off his feet by a sudden snow flurry. This was getting serious. A continental climate. Another reason he liked Berlin. It always made him feel he was in the middle of a vast plain stretching deep into the heart of Russia."

- Savignyplatz

Thomas Brussig, Heroes Like Us, 1995

The riotous and laugh-out-loud novel about Klaus Uhltscht, the aspiring teenage Nobel laureate of East Berlin, who claims to be history's "missing link", the man who breached the Berlin Wall.

"She lived in Isländische Strasse, a side street running off Bornholmer Strasse. Yes, that Bornholmer Strasse, the one with the checkpoint at the far end. Milling around in front of it were members of the so-called masses ... and confronting them were a few border guards."

- Bornholmer Strasse, the checkpoint where crowds surged through on 9 November 1989

Chloe Aridjis, Book of Clouds, 2009

Chloe Aridjis's beautifully evocative novel is set in today's Berlin; a young Mexican woman flees her family only to find a city that cannot escape its past.

"We walked down Unter den Linden, the trees atwinkle with white holiday lights, and past the regally lit Brandenburg Gate ... then turned left before arriving at a sea of upright concrete slabs, which I recognised immediately as the new Holocaust memorial."

- Brandenburg Gate and the Holocaust memorial

Philip Kerr, March Violets, 1989

Freelance detective Bernie Gunther works on the mean streets of 1930s Berlin, where Nazi excesses are never far from the surface.

"This morning at the corner of Friedrichstrasse and Jägerstrasse, I saw two men, SA men, unscrewing a red Der Stürmer showcase from the wall of a building. Der Stürmer is the anti-Semitic journal that's run by the Reich's leading Jew-hater, Julius Streicher."

- Friedrichstrasse

Ian McEwan, The Innocent, 1990,

After England, the cold war Berlin of 1955 is like no place Leonard Markham has ever experienced: surreal, complex and dangerous.

"Almost too soon he was on Adalbertstrasse ... There were apartment blocks with facades drilled by small arms fire, especially round the doors and windows. Every second or third building had a gutted interior, and was without its roof. Whole structures had collapsed and the rubble lay where it had fallen."

- Adalbertstrasse

Hans Fallada, Alone in Berlin, 1947

In 1940, in the heart of Hitler's capital, Otto and Anna Quangel are alone in Berlin with a breathtaking campaign of resistance ...

"The postwoman Eva Kluge slowly climbs the steps of 55 Jablonski Strasse. She's tired from her round, but she also has one of those letters in the bag that she hates to deliver, and is about to have to deliver, to the Quangels, on the second floor."

- Jablonski Strasse

Anna Funder, Stasiland, 2003

Not surprisingly the fall of the Berlin Wall caused panic at the Stasi headquarters, as described in Anna Funder's riveting portrait of East Germany's secret police and how it controlled a nation.

"At the Normannenstrasse headquarters, there was panic. Stasi officers were instructed to destroy files, starting with the most incriminating - those naming westerners who spied for them, and those that concerned deaths. They shredded the files until the shredders collapsed ..."

- Normannenstrasse

Len Deighton, Funeral in Berlin, 1964

The classic and gripping spy novel of Cold War Berlin, with MI5's Harry Palmer played by Michael Caine in the film.

"There was plenty of activity at Checkpoint Charlie. Photoflashes sliced instants from eternity. The pavement shone with water and detergent under the pressmen's feet. Way down towards Hallesches Tor a US military ambulance flasher sped towards the emergency ward and was all set to change direction to the morgue."

- Checkpoint Charlie and Hallesches Tor

Malcolm Burgess is the publisher of Oxygen Books' City-Lit series, featuring writing on cities including Berlin, Paris, London, Amsterdam, Venice and Dublin