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Ninety Years Ago, This Book Tried to Warn Us

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The power of some classic realist novels, like Zola's "Germinal" and Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," lies in the way they wholly capture their era. Others endure because they continue to feel remarkably prescient, like Eliot's "Middlemarch" and William Dean Howells's "A Hazard of New Fortunes," which took on the perils of surviving financially in Gilded Age New York.

Then there are novels that are simultaneously very much of their time and yet almost clairvoyant about the future.

Lion Feuchtwanger's 1933 novel "The Oppermanns," which is being rereleased this month with a revised translation of James Cleugh's original by the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Joshua Cohen, is one of those books. It's been nearly 90 years since its publication, but reading it now is like staring into the worst of next week. It's all there: The ways in which a country can lose its grip on the truth. The ways in which tribalism — referred to in "The Oppermanns" as "anthropological and zoological nonsense" — is easily roused to demonize others. The ways in which warring factions can be abetted by the media and accepted by a credulous populace.

The novel reads like a five-alarm fire because it was written that way, over a mere nine months, and published shortly after Hitler became chancellor, only lightly fictionalizing events as they occurred in real time. In "Buddenbrooks" fashion, the story follows the declining fortunes and trials of a family, the German Jewish Oppermanns, prosperous merchants and professionals, as they scramble to hold on while fascism takes hold of their country. It's a book that fairly trembles with foreboding and almost aches with sorrow.

"How do you know when to sound the alarm?" asked Cohen, who also wrote an introduction to the new edition, when I reached him by phone on book tour in Italy. It's easy to slam someone for overreacting, he explained. But we would do well to remember the instances in which a strong reaction is justified: "There's an enormous bravery that comes with writing about the present, an enormous risk and an enormous thrill. You have to ask yourself: 'What if I'm wrong?' And also: 'What if I'm right?'"

Feuchtwanger was willing to place that bet, working off fury as well as considerable access to journalistic, governmental and undercover sources within Germany. But unlike much overtly political fiction, his book is imbued with all the humor, humanity and sweep of a 19th-century epic. The result, Fred T. March noted in his 1934 review in The Times, "is addressed to the German people, who will not be allowed to read it, urging them to open their eyes. And it is addressed to the world outside bearing the message, 'Wake up! The barbarians are upon us.'"

Lion Feuchtwanger. Atelier Jacobi /ullstein bild, via Getty Images

Consider the misbegotten assumptions Feuchtwanger took on then that continue to threaten today:

Populist ignorance cannot prevail in an enlightened world. Just as New Yorkers scoffed at the idea that Donald Trump, lead buffoon of the tabloid '80s, could be taken seriously as a presidential candidate, so do the bourgeois intelligentsia of "The Oppermanns" chortle over "Mein Kampf," a work they find impossible to reckon with in the land of Goethe: "A nation that had concerned itself for centuries so intensively with books, such as those they saw around them, could never allow itself to be deceived by the nonsense in the 'Protocols' and in 'Mein Kampf.'"

Direct engagement confers legitimacy. When Edgar Oppermann, a doctor, faces antisemitic attacks in the newspapers, his boss advises silence. "The whole of politics is nothing but a pigsty. Unless one cannot help doing otherwise, one should simply ignore them. That's what annoys the pigsty crowd most." To confront the forces of illiberalism is only to sully oneself, Edgar believes. Those in the press who propagate such lies "ought to be put into an asylum, not brought before a court of law."

Technology will out disinformation. At each turn, the Oppermanns and their milieu have trouble believing that propaganda will take hold. "How could they expect to get away with such a monstrous, clumsy lie?" Gustav Oppermann, the central figure in the novel, asks himself after the Nazis blame the burning of the Reichstag on communists. "Nero might have put over such cheap stuff in burning Rome. But things like that were impossible today, in the era of the telephone and printing press." Of course, the era of Twitter and TikTok has shown that advances in technology still amplify falsehoods.

If you ignore it, it will go away. In the novel, two bourgeois Germans foresee a grim future but fall back on complacency. One describes the first world war as "only a curtain-raiser" with "a century of destruction" to follow, predicting, as he puts it, "a military power beyond conception, a judiciary power with severe, restrictive laws and a school system to educate senseless brutes in the ecstasy of

self-sacrifice." His companion merely replies: "All right, if that's your opinion. But perhaps you'll have another cognac and a cigar before it happens."

It's up to the next generation. The novel's most tragic figure is the teenage Berthold Oppermann, a student guilty only by ethnicity and familial association. Berated by a Nazi schoolteacher for delivering an allegedly anti-German paper, Berthold says he is "a good German" and refuses to apologize. "You are a good German, are you?" his Nazi teacher sneers. "Well, will you be so good as to leave it to others to decide who is a good German and who is not?" While classrooms today are a far cry from those in Nazi-era Germany, one needn't reach far for contemporary parallels, with students increasingly operating in an atmosphere of fear and conformity — of their peers, depending on location, on the right or the left — while the adults too often abdicate responsibility, whether out of complicity or fear.

The situation was inevitable. In the Oppermanns' world, escalating problems are viewed as uniquely German, unique to their time and to a particular regime. "Our opponents have one tremendous advantage over us; their absolute lack of *fairness*," explains a lawyer at one point. "That is the very reason why they are in power today. They have always employed such primitive methods that the rest of us simply did not believe them possible, for they would not have been possible in any other country."

Wrong again.

As for Feuchtwanger, the same year that "The Oppermanns" was published, the German Jewish author was stripped of his citizenship and had his property in Berlin seized and his books burned. He was banned from ever publishing in Germany again.

By the time the book was published, Feuchtwanger had already settled in France, where he was later imprisoned following the German invasion. He ultimately escaped to the United States, where he lived for the last 17 years of his life.

Is this still the same country where he'd find refuge?

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