



BERLIN STORIES – OR WHERE DID
THIS YEAR GO?
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I would like to begin with some advice to future Fellows: do not leave the task of writing your report until after you leave Wiko. One month will pile up on another and you will still not yet have written your report. This can lead to an excruciating situation, in which you are plagued by guilt. And the longer you delay, the better you will feel that your final report should be ... until the situation becomes impossible.

So, in short: I knew I should have written this report while I was still at the Wiko. I surely cannot be the last person to turn in his report, but even that excuse is starting to wear thin. With each passing day, the task becomes more difficult in ways that I had not foreseen. The distance in time and space makes it increasingly difficult to decide which of the many things that I could write about I should write about. Should I just present a dry

report of my accomplishments over the year, along with the usual thanks to the great staff and my amazing fellow Fellows? I could do that. And if I do not, it is not because it was not an intense and extremely enjoyable year at the Wiko. For it was. But that does not make the situation easier. The problem is this; which aspects of that wonderful year should I single out in my report? It seems wrong to pick any particular handful as the only ones deserving mention in my report. Now, three months since my return to Konstanz, my mind is still filled with memories of that wonderful year. But, alas, having dithered for months over which of these memories to eternalize in my report, they are now all starting to become quite hazy. In the wake of what was once a set of clear and distinct memories, all that remains is merely a set of warm and fuzzy feelings – feelings of vague intellectual stimulation, camaraderie and friendship. But I am sure of this much: these feelings will forever tie me to the Wiko.

While sitting at my desk wondering what I should say in my final report for Wiko, *Berlin Stories* by Christopher Isherwood somehow caught my eye on my bookshelf back home in Konstanz. I forgot when I bought the book and when I read it last. Usually, I record these facts in the cover of the book when I read it, along with some remarks about what I thought about the book. Also, I usually mark up passages in the book that strike me as interesting. In this book, however, I have not entered a single annotation or comment. I am not sure what that means, but I remember clearly that I was fond of the book. This is not unlike my relation to my own Berlin story last year in Wiko. I remember clearly that I loved it, but no isolated moments from the year stand out clearly any longer. Instead, the year stands out in my memory as a single unanalyzable whole – a whole that remains as memorable as it now has become unrecountable.

Yet perhaps Isherwood's own set of Berlin stories do present me with a way around my problem. For there is the question to what extent our respective Berlin experiences, his and mine, coincide in detail. There are, indeed, some points of convergence between us. Some of these, admittedly, are fairly superficial. I mean really superficial. For example, Isherwood starts with the following remark: "From 1929 to 1933, I lived almost continuously in Berlin, with only occasional visits to other parts of Germany and to England." That is pretty close to the truth regarding my own experience at the Wiko. For, as you know, as a Fellow I was not supposed to travel too much that year. (Actually even this superficial point of convergence does not completely hold: For I was not completely able to live up to that requirement as much as I would have liked, as 2009 was the "Darwin year", and the whole world, or at least part of it that was aware of the fact, celebrated the

200th birthday of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his magnum opus.) Some of the convergences go deeper, however. For Isherwood goes on: “Already, during that time, I had made up my mind that I would one day write about the people I’d met and the experiences I was having.” This is the point of convergence between Isherwood and myself that I would really like to expand upon in the rest of this report.

Well, anyhow that was the original plan. For I would have liked to be able to claim to have told my Berlin story with relish and style like Isherwood. But Isherwood, alas, had more foresight than I did. He informs us of a special secret strategy he employed in order to pull off that feat of his that I would so liked to have been able to emulate: “So I kept a detailed dairy, which in due course, provided raw material for all my Berlin stories.” Reading that sentence of Isherwood’s, I now suddenly realize that the parallels between his own approach to writing his masterwork and my own approach to writing my final report for the Wiko do not go quite as deep as I had originally hoped when, in my desperate search for a literary exemplar, I reached for my copy of his book and so hopefully removed it from the bookshelf.

Yet I do take comfort in the following fact: The reason that I was invited to be a Fellow at Wiko was not because of my literary accomplishments, but because of my contributions to the science of biology. I like to flatter myself that, in another life, in which being a biologist made less of a claim on my attention, and in which my own literary talents had been allowed to flourish, my own Berlin story would make for as engaging reading as Isherwood’s *Berlin Stories* do. But that life of belle-lettres is not the life that I have chosen to lead. And I can hardly regret that decision, as it is that very choice that led to my having been granted the wonderful opportunity to spend last year at Wiko. So the present report, with its lack of literary polish, its awkward transitions, its halting structure, and, last but not least, its abrupt and anti-climactic conclusion, will have to suffice.