

# READER'S GUIDE



## *The Gift from Berlin*

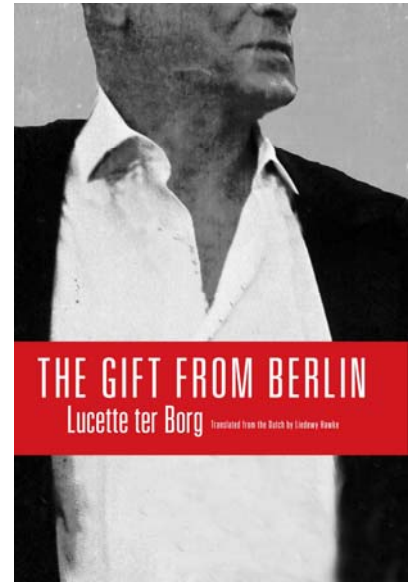
By Lucette ter Borg

Translated from the Dutch by Liedewy Hawke

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### INTRODUCING *The Gift from Berlin*

Andreas Landewee is a reluctant witness to history, having survived both World War II and the Soviet occupation of Germany. When his wife Elisabeth dies, he decides to leave Europe and join his son who is living in a cabin in the woods of British Columbia. Landewee sees this move as a chance to start a new life. But without realizing it, he begins to recreate his old one. He frantically awaits keepsakes from home, including Elisabeth's most prized possession – a piano given to her by her hero and admirer, Adolf Hitler. Yet despite these inescapable ties to the past, Landewee attempts to make good in his new home. He slowly begins to explore the memories carried within the piano, and comes to realize that only by accepting the past can he move towards redemption.



### IMPORTANT THEMES

#### *Music*

Arguably the most important theme in the novel, music is the driving force behind many of the character's decisions throughout. Every major character in the book is musically gifted in some way. From Andreas being born to the music of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, to Adolph Hitler's "gift from Berlin," there is music entwined in every aspect of the novel. Music is the only true connection some of the characters have with each other. It bridges impossible gaps such as the one shared by Andreas and his father, Walter: "Music on the other hand, my boy, real music, that's something else, a divine treasure."

#### *The Natural World*

The natural world plays an important role in this novel. The story takes place in different, yet similar landscapes. From the war-torn district of Langenburg, to the vast, serene forests of Bohemia, to the peaceful small town of Horsefly in British Columbia, the settings are natural landscapes, yet convey very different feelings for Andreas. Andreas's feelings for Europe are charged with the emotions of his entire life, but his life in Canada is more emotionally simple. Andreas's life is reflected in the forests that he tends: "He had only ever devoted himself to improving the forests and always looked ahead, needed to look ahead." He enjoys being able to take charge of something in his life. It differs from his passion for music because he does not share it: with his father, or anyone else.

#### *Multiple Points of View*

The novel spans three generations of the Landewee family. We enter into the minds of several characters from each generation, from Andreas's mother, Katharina, to Wolfgang, Andreas's son. We see all the characters from many different points of view and at different times of their lives. However, the characters' stories are always centred around Andreas. In this sense the novel maintains structure, whereas it may seem fractured without the focal point of Andreas. All character actions can be directly related back to Andreas, and it is on he whom the reader centres their attention.

### *Remembrance and Recovery*

*The Gift from Berlin* is told in a non-chronological fashion. Andreas is continually recalling memories of his past. These include memories of events he remembers fondly, such as meeting Elisabeth or interacting with his children; but also unpleasant memories, such as the Russian Red Army taking over his town of Hauenstein, or his divorce from Hannelore. We get the sense that Andreas feels the need for closure in his life, that he must revisit each of his memories – both happy and sad – and deal with them. In this way the novel acts as a recovery narrative, where one must confront their issues from the past in order to move on with the future. At the end of Andreas's life, he finds redemption.



### ABOUT LUCETTE

Lucette ter Borg is a writer, journalist, and director. Her first novel, *The Gift From Berlin*, won the 2005 National Dutch Debut Prize. She is the editor of *World One Minutes: Video & Literature*, a collection of short stories and poems, and author of the graphic novel, *The Cannon Ball*. Lucette has a son and lives in the Netherlands.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Discuss the similarities between Andreas's mother and Elisabeth. Does he fall in love with Elisabeth because he sees his mother in her?
2. Walter, Andreas, and Wolfgang lead similar, yet different lives. Discuss these similarities and differences.
3. Discuss at least three examples of music within the story: two that have a positive impact on Andreas, and one a negative.
4. World War I and II are important historical backdrops for the different timelines of the story. Why is this? What about the Soviet occupation of East Germany?
5. Why is Andreas trying to recreate his old life in his new world? Compare the positive and negative aspects of the two different, but similar lives he has led.
6. Discuss Hannelore. Is she a good or a bad character? Is she treated unfairly?
7. Discuss the contrast of Germany and Canada in the novel, and what each country means to Andreas. Which life does he prefer?
8. Who, if any, is the main antagonist of the novel?
9. Discuss the role of women in this novel. Do they have any control in the story, or are they simply set up as plot devices for the men?
10. What is the significance of the poem by Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) on page 187? What was Rilke's style of poetry?

### ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Liedewy Hawke has won both the Canada Council Translation Prize and the John Glassco Translation Prize. She has been nominated three times for the Governor General's Literary Award for Translation, most recently in 2008 for *The Postman's Round*, her translation of *Le facteur émotif* by Denis Thériault. She lives in Toronto with her husband, Tony.