



The Good German

Joseph Kanon

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Set in Berlin just after the end of World War II, a brilliant thriller about the end of one war and the beginning of another, by the bestselling author of *Los Alamos*.

Berlin, 1945. Jake Geismar, former Berlin correspondent for CBS, has managed to wangle one of the coveted press slots for the Potsdam Conference. His assignment: a series of articles on the American occupation of postwar Berlin. His personal agenda: to find Lena, the German mistress he left behind at the outbreak of the war. When he stumbles on a murder--an American soldier washed up on the shore of the conference grounds--he thinks he has found the key that will unlock his Berlin story. What he finds instead is a larger story of corruption and intrigue reaching deep into the heart of the occupation and a city not only physically but morally devastated, where children scavenge for food in the rubble, sex can be had for a cigarette, and the black market is the only means of survival.

Berlin at zero hour is like nowhere else--a tragedy, and a feverish party after the end of the world. And nothing is simple--not the murder of a soldier and not any of the lives, American and German, that Jake encounters as he tries to solve it. More unsolvable still is the larger crime that hangs over everything in 1945, a crime so huge it seems beyond punishment.

At once a murder mystery, a love story, and a riveting portrait of a unique time and place, *The Good German* is a historical thriller of the first rank.

The Good German Details

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From Reader Review The Good German for online ebook

Rebecca says

If Tom Clancy and Casablanca had a love child, it'd be this book, and it's a great read. More action and faced-paced suspense than Casablanca, more emotional depth than Clancy. But at the same time, it has both their drawbacks as well -- too many characters with interchangeable Russian and German names, and it depends on the reader having a healthy knowledge of the history of WWII in order to understand the story.

Still, I enjoyed the mystery and intrigue in the story, and Kanon's portrayal of postwar Berlin was nuanced and moving.

Joy D says

Set in Berlin at the time of the Potsdam Conference, just after the Allied victory in Europe, Jake Geismar, an American journalist, is searching for his German girlfriend, Lena, along with a story for his magazine. While there, a murder is committed, and Jake gets involved. At first, the murder and the search for Lena do not seem connected, but with the help of German detective, the relationship becomes clear. He also wants to find out what happened to Lena's husband, Emil, a scientist working with Wernher von Braun. Jake uncovers the corruption of the black market and a covert struggle between the Americans and the Soviets to lure German scientists for assistance in arms development in advance of the Cold War.

The author combines elements of mystery, romance, and history into a compelling story with well-developed characters. It explores ethical questions of whether involvement with the Nazis will result in punishment or exoneration. Should scientists get a free pass because they continue to be useful? The main plot and sub-plots are woven together expertly. The novel conveys a strong sense of place. I could picture the bombed-out rubble of Berlin. As in many mysteries, some of the key pieces of information are delivered through plot devices.

I had not previously joined the audiobook trend, but when I found myself facing a long drive, I decided to try it. I came across this one at my local library. The audiobook reader, Stanley Tucci, does an excellent job of modulating his voice and creating realistic differentiated accents to render the various German, American, and Russian characters of both sexes. It kept us entertained while driving for over seven hours. Recommended to fans of historical fiction or mysteries, especially of the period surrounding WWII. Contains language, sex, and violence.

Tim Walker says

The author expertly creates the setting and atmosphere of Berlin in 1945 as the British, American and Russian victors pick over the corpse of a defeated nation, whilst suspiciously eyeing each other. American reporter Jake Geismar arrives by plane to cover the leader's summit, unaware that he will soon get side-tracked into a murder and racketeering investigation that will put his own life at risk. This is a fascinating thriller that skilfully and thoughtfully examines the post-War settlement and treatment of German survivors by the uneasy allies, with power, corruption and lies swirling around the central love story involving Jake

and his pre-War girlfriend, Lena. A terrifically engaging and thought-provoking read that examines the ethics of war crimes and the hypocrisy of the victors. Highly recommended.

Todd Stockslager says

Falls a good editor short of "Worth my time" status. Involved and overlong mystery set in immediately post-war Berlin in 1945 has too many intricate subplots (and subsequent false-ending resolutions) to sustain edge-of-seat emotional levels all the way through, and the great emotional impact of the first few scenes setting up the philosophical discussion of the "good" German is dulled by too many repetitions.

Still, the characters are enjoyable, the dialogue is good, and the plotting strong enough to pass the mystery test of reaching a point where the reader has to finish the book without stopping no matter how late at night. You'll just wish that point (and the end) had come about 75 pages sooner. Its easy to see why this book is the basis for a soon-to-be released Hollywood treatment with George Clooney in the lead role.

Lewis Weinstein says

The Good German is a thrilling historical mystery, with a gripping underlying psychological exploration. Kanon presents the struggle for German rocket scientists, Americans versus Russians, with both sides desperate to enhance their own post-war technology and neither concerned about the Nazi past and practices of the men they are seeking. It is hard to find the moral high ground.

The main characters are well-presented and well-developed over the course of the novel. Secondary characters are plentiful and each adds a sharp emphasis to the story. The post-war devastation of Berlin is portrayed with frightening clarity. The plot is complicated and difficult to keep fully in mind, as the reader shares the frustration of American reporter Jake Geismar in sorting through it, but that is exactly the real-life confusion Kanon wants to show.

I will be dealing with some of the same issues - what did Germans know and why did they do what they did? - in my new novel tentatively titled CHOOSING HITLER. Kanon has set a high bar.

Friederike Knabe says

Kanon's The Good German starts slowly, designed to immerse the reader in the atmosphere of the Berlin of the early post-war months. It is July 1945, the time of the Potsdam Conference. Kanon's ability to take you virtually by the hand and to lead you through the place is exemplary: ruins, bombed out houses, roads blocked by rubble, empty spaces where, before, Berliners had lived - and where the protagonist himself had lived as a journalist. Jake Geismar, supposedly reporting on the Conference, is really in Berlin fulfilling a promise, a quest. Kanon's portrayal of Berlin is accurate - based on visits to the modern Berlin and his in depth research of the Berlin at the end of WWII and the changes since then. You could easily use it as a tour guide of a different kind.

But of course, Berlin of 1945 is not the story. The story of the returning US journalist and his German girlfriend leads the reader like a red thread through the book. Her family is mixed in with the plot. The description of day-to-day life in difficult times gives the story reality and perspective. People do a lot just for a package of cigarettes.

Jake's search for his love of the happier pre-war days through the ruins, the alleyways, is becoming increasingly desperate. Is she still alive? Where would she be? Finding an individual in those early post-war months in Germany was almost impossible; no records were available, the houses where they had lived often destroyed and no forwarding address - unless you were really lucky.

Things turn out to be a lot more complex as you go: more deaths and threats, intrigue and false allies. And the tension grows. It is a thriller after all: a thriller with political messages as well as interesting character developments. In addition to Jake, the protagonist, and Lena, his girlfriend, we meet intriguing characters, in particular among the Germans. While the Russians dismantled factories, taking home whatever technology they could find, a special team from the US's occupying forces were rounding up the scientists and experts who designed the technology in the first place. The Russians realized the problem and tried to get in on the act. Would it work? So, who is the Good German?

The events around the Potsdam Conference provide a useful backdrop. It fits the story well to observe the increasing tension between US and Soviet soldiers who easily turn to an exchange of gunfire to mask more sinister intentions.

Kanon's book is in a category of its own. More than a thriller and more than a romantic story, it is a skillfully put together account of a complex situation in a difficult moment of time. It is successful as "a good read" and as a chronicle of events that gives the reader food for thought and reflection.

this is a revised version of a ten-year old review.

Andrew Robins says

This book was off to a good start with me based on the synopsis alone - I love fiction based either during or after the second world war, so in that sense, that was a star earned from the start.

However, it turns out that this is a really excellent, cleverly written book.

It tells the story of Jake Geismar, an American journalist who, in the years before the war, was based in Berlin, and in that time had an affair with the wife of a German rocket scientist.

After the end of the war in Europe, he comes back, officially to cover the Potsdam Conference, but really to find his pre war lover. Whilst at Potsdam, he sees the discovery of the body of an American officer, dragged out of the river whilst carrying a huge amount of money.

This leads into a multithreaded story involving him tracking down what happened to the soldier whilst trying to find his pre-war lover, whose husband turns out not to be dead as first thought, but to be very much alive, and wanted by both the Russian and American forces.

This book is much more than that, though. The bigger question it poses - hinted at by the title - is that of

what constituted a "good" German in the days immediately following the war, and who got to decide exactly what "good" meant?

We have the subplot of a jewish woman on trial by the occupation forces for having acted as a "greifer" - a Jew who guaranteed her own survival so long as she identified "U boats", jews hiding from deportation by walking around Berlin all day.

At first, we are to think that she deserves all she gets, but as the story pans out, we start to question whether she was really guilty of anything more than other Germans - or indeed Americans and Russians - in the story.

We have the rocket scientist who, despite being non political, could be seen as complicit in the use of slave labour at Nordhausen. Then there is the friend of Geismar's lover, who was happy to pander to Nazis and is equally happy to pander to the occupation forces just to survive.

There is the lone US lawyer, a Jew diligently chasing down those guilty of war crimes, working for an administration which doesn't really care about finding the small cogs in the machine who have blood on their hands. The US politician whose only concern is to find the rocket scientists to get them back to the US to exploit their huge knowledge.

In all this, who is "good" and who is "bad"? That is what this book is about, and it asks the question very eloquently,

A very intelligent, well written, highly readable book.

zan says

Not my favorite. It's very plot-heavy, and I'm a character-development lover. I love the descriptions of Berlin and I wish I'd had a map to trace where he was at every move. That said, he knew far too much of Berlin far too well. The city is much bigger than Kanon makes it out to be. I do like the way in which he tackles guilt, remorse, and Vergangenheitsbewältigung.

Mark says

I have had this on my to-read list for a long time, and I'm so glad I finally got around to it.

The Good German is a subtle mystery that will keep you guessing until the end, but what really makes it work is its uncanny ear for the dialogue of the WWII generation and the ways they have of relating to each other, and the complex, nuanced moral entanglements the book lays out.

Jake Geismar is an American journalist who has come back to the ravaged ruins of Berlin at the end of World War II. He soon has two goals: one personal, one professional. The personal goal is to see if his lover from before the war, Lena Brandt, the wife of a brilliant mathematician, is still alive. The professional one is to figure out who killed a soldier who was on the same incoming flight as Geismar, and whose body washes up on the shore of a lake in Potsdam during the Churchill-Stalin-Truman peace conference, his uniform stuffed with Russian money.

Jake is supposed to be in Berlin to write features for a magazine, but that takes up only a small part of his time. He finds Lena, who has been through her own hell to survive, and nurses her back to health with the help of a Jewish doctor. She thinks her husband is dead, but it soon is apparent he is not only alive but is one of the many rocket scientists the Americans want to take back with them and keep away from the Russians, no matter how entangled the German scientists were with the Nazis.

As for the dead soldier, Geismar starts working with the theory that he was the victim of some black market scheme gone awry, but he then learns that the soldier is somehow connected to his lover's husband, and that both the American and Russian intelligence operatives want to find him.

Before it's all over with, a close friend of Geismar's will be killed, he will work with a tough American soldier who may be betraying him, a former German police officer whose fine mind shines through his alcoholism, and he will have to make a critical decision about the fate of Lena's husband. Mixed into this already tense and complicated story is the discovery that another of his former employees is on trial for turning over fellow Jews to the Nazis, and Jake ends up taking responsibility for the real reason she did that in the first place.

There are times when the clipped dialogue gets almost too cryptic, but along the way, Kanon reveals just how morally compromised everyone in the war was, no matter how much some of them wanted to paint a simple picture of good guys vs. bad guys.

This is a tremendously paced novel that is a worthy member of the club that includes Alan Furst, David Downing, John Le Carre, and other masters of morally ambiguous sagas.

Cphe says

Took a while to get into but thoroughly enjoyed the descriptions of post war Berlin. Quite a few subplots running throughout the novel and they were not all completely addressed to my mind. However I did feel that the "moral" dilemma of the time was well addressed. An interesting novel, thought provoking and well worth the read.

Nancy Cook Lauer says

What an intense book. The story of a U.S. journalist returning to war-torn Berlin to cover the Potsdam Conference. The search for his missing lover, the efforts to bring Nazis to justice, the details of the camps, so much violence, so much sadness. The United States' willingness to overlook war crimes in order to bring rocket scientists to America. It's all fictionalized here, while hewing closely to history. A disturbing era that I learned far too little about in school.

Atishay says

The days surrounding the fall of the Third Reich have never failed to generate an interest among historians and romantics alike. So was the case with me when I picked this book up during a random search in a forgettable old book sale. Sold to me at a half price or probably lesser than that, I kept this book in my shelf

for almost a year before someone read it and got so impressed that they recurrently begged me to consider reading it. So, now I'm done with it and I'm impressed- so much that I'm almost tempted to take the hand of the person who got me reading it.

Imagine Humphrey Bogart and Clark Gable rolled into one and we have the protagonist of the novel, Jake Geismar, a war journalist who returns to a new Germany occupied by allied troops in search of his love, Lena. Looking for a story in the ruined city of Berlin, he finds the body of an American soldier washed up on the shores of a river. Getting interested in knowing the motive and the culprit, Geismar travels all over the map of Berlin asking questions and making friends and enemies. Craftily woven into this central plot is the love triangle between Jake, Lena and her still surviving husband Emil, who was a scientist in the Third Reich.

Kanon proves himself to be a deft mover of situations as the characters move from one story to another smoothly with all corners of the story perfectly in balance all the time. *The Good German* also carries the undertones of the vulnerability of that period. It carefully and I believe accurately depicts the emotions and feelings of the german people during those moments when the world saw them with heart full of nothing but hatred. Particularly then when their homes were devastated by the forces and their children were terrorized and homeless. Probably a cost paid for a crime they didn't commit or were unaccountable for. Hence, it raises the question of 'A Good German' which probably prompted Kanon to place that as the title to the book. Four stars to the book for being a thriller, romance and history all rolled into one. I implore the reader of my review to give this book a chance. Kanon can definitely do a plus one in his fan list.

Sarah says

All I want to say is PLEASE read this book before you see the movie. In fact, don't watch the movie after you read it as well. If you enjoy WWII fiction that reads like fiction, then you will love this book. But the movie (like most movies based on a book) is HORRIBLE. I couldn't put this book down!

Cindy Daft says

Although I couldn't get the movie actors out of my mind while reading the book; George Clooney, Cate Blanchett, I really enjoyed this novel set in 1945 Berlin. Evokes much thought about who were really the bad people in Germany during the war. Plot was a little twisted and confusing, but the love story conquers all.

David says

I found this book in an excellent article about so-called Berlin Noir novels (Wall St Jnl, 4/30/11; see link below). For me the main intrigue--involving a murder and a Russian/US tug-of-war over a German rocket scientist--was less interesting than the portrayal of Berlin and its inhabitants in the months just after the German surrender in 1945. The city was in ruins and occupied in different zones by the Allies who are trying to institute a program referred to in the novel as the 4 Ds: demilitarization, de-Nazification, decartelization, and democracy. While the process is beginning of identifying and trying war criminals, there is a countervailing movement to return Germany to normalcy, in part by letting some morally questionable acts go unpunished--especially if the perpetrators, like certain scientists, can be of use to the victors. This tension between right and wrong--on a individual and societal level--in the setting of a city traumatized both by its Nazi past and its defeat and destruction makes this a powerful novel.

I discovered while reading it that THE GOOD GERMAN was released as a Stephen Soderbergh movie starring George Clooney and Cate Blanchett, which I had not taken notice of, in 2006--but which is now in my Netflix queue.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001...>
