



Artificial Silk Girl

Irmgard Keun , Kathie Von Ankum (Translator) , Maria M. Tatar (Introduction)

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In 1931, a young woman writer living in Germany was inspired by Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* to describe pre-war Berlin and the age of cinematic glamour through the eyes of a woman. The resulting novel, *The Artificial Silk Girl*, became an acclaimed bestseller and a masterwork of German literature, in the tradition of Christopher Isherwood's *Berlin Stories* and Bertolt Brecht's *Three Penny Opera*. Like Isherwood and Brecht, Keun revealed the dark underside of Berlin's "golden twenties" with empathy and honesty. Unfortunately, a Nazi censorship board banned Keun's work in 1933 and destroyed all existing copies of *The Artificial Silk Girl*. Only one English translation was published, in Great Britain, before the book disappeared in the chaos of the ensuing war. Today, more than seven decades later, the story of this quintessential "material girl" remains as relevant as ever, as an accessible new translation brings this lost classic to light once more. Other Press is pleased to announce the republication of *The Artificial Silk Girl*, elegantly translated by noted Germanist Kathie von Ankum, and with a new introduction by Harvard professor Maria Tatar.

Artificial Silk Girl Details

Date : Published April 17th 2002 by Other Press (NY) (first published 1932)

ISBN : 9781892746818

Author : Irmgard Keun , Kathie Von Ankum (Translator) , Maria M. Tatar (Introduction)

Format : Hardcover 216 pages

Genre : Fiction, European Literature, German Literature, Classics, Cultural, Germany, Historical, Historical Fiction

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From Reader Review Artificial Silk Girl for online ebook

Isabella says

Ganz im Ernst – hätte ich das Buch nicht für die Uni lesen müssen, hätte ich nie danach gegriffen. Zwar finde ich es ganz interessant, was Keun mit dem Werk aufzeigen will, aber die Art und Weise, wie das umgesetzt wird, sagt mir einfach nicht zu. Die Protagonistin Doris schreibt das Geschehene in einem Tagebuch nieder, aber es fühlt sich mehr wie ein konfuser innerer Monolog als eine kohärente Erzählung an. Immer wieder werden die Sätze mit Gedankenstrichen unterbrochen, es gibt grammatische Fehler aufgrund Doris' mangelnder Bildung, und überhaupt gibt es keine rechte zeitliche Verortung, sondern nur einen Haufen Namen, von dem der eine unbedeutender als der andere ist. Ganz zu schweigen davon, dass ich Doris kontinuierlich schütteln wollte, weil sie so verflucht unsympathisch ist. Wie gesagt – ich verstehe, warum Keun das so geschrieben hat. Gefallen hat es mir dennoch nicht.

Anina e gambette di pollo says

Giretto in libreria, è lunedì, piovigginia, ma la poltroncina è comoda e mi faccio quattro chiacchiere con la signora.

Entra un signore brevilineo sui cinquanta con telefono all'orecchio.

Prende un libro al volo, lo posa sul banco davanti alla signora, mette la mano (ha solo una mano in uso) in tasca, tira fuori 20 euro (preciso preciso il costo del libro) e mette pure quelli sul banco.

La signora batte, scarica, infila il libro in una busta non biodegradabile e la porge all'uomo che la prende e se ne va. Ovviamente senza perdere né linea né battuta.

Anche in questo romanzo ci sono molti uomini i cui rapporti umani sono simili a quello instaurato dal brevilineo.

Secondo ritratto femminile dopo Gilgi.

Anche questa è una ragazzina nel Berlino del 1932, ma non ha molti sogni. Vive le giornate e le nottate che si susseguono uguali e diverse. Doris è come il tessuto a cui si deve adeguare chi non ha molti mezzi e che è destinato a stropicciarsi, al contrario della vera seta.

Chissà se Capote lesse questo romanzo, perché Doris ricorda un poco Holly Golightly. Una Holly europea in una città che all'epoca brillava della luce smagliante di una stella morente, prima che venga il buio.

Il racconto è in prima persona e la scrittura è ancora più interessante dell'altro romanzo. Un tono leggero sempre in bilico tra commedia e dramma, con belle immagini e piccoli commenti fulminanti. Tra incontri occasionali, brevi miserie, rapporti senza sorprese e insospettabili relazioni passa una giovinezza che sembra non sgualcirsì e della quale non sapremo il futuro.

Tiffany? Qui non c'è, ma c'è il suo pellicciotto adorato, morbido rifugio nel freddo della città.

16.01.2018

Steve says

Irmgard Keun (1905-1982), around 1928

I've made no report of my rapt exploration of the culture, history and literature of the Weimar Republic (which I have been anxiously scanning for parallels to the current rise of antidemocratic forces in the USA and Europe partially motivated - or at least enabled - by a serious, global economic setback) since last December,() but most definitely not because I haven't found anything worthwhile.

However, an extremely funny and perceptive novel told from the first person perspective of an eighteen year old daughter of a thoroughly proletarian family in the last years of the Republic is sufficiently unique to motivate me to pull out the keyboard and propel another unnecessary missive into the electronic ethers.

Like her first, *Gigli, eine von uns* (1931), Irmgard Keun's second novel *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* (1932, available in English translation under the title *The Artificial Silk Girl*) was a bestseller in a Germany teetering on the brink of a nightmare set to last twelve years and cost millions of people their lives. In fact, it was the last of Keun's novels to be published in Germany until long after the war; the Nazis burnt her books ("Asphaltliteratur mit antideutscher Tendenz") and she fled into exile where her subsequent texts were released by refugee publishing houses in Amsterdam.(*)

Max Pechstein, 1925

One might think that a young girl whose ambition is

Ich will so ein Glanz werden, der oben ist. Mit weißem Auto und Badewasser, das nach Parfüm riecht, und alles wie Paris. Und die Leute achten mich hoch, weil ich ein Glanz bin.

[I want to be such a shine, way above. With white car and bath water that smells like perfume and everything like Paris. And the people respect me because I'm a shine.]

might be of rather limited interest, but not only is Doris' simultaneous naiveté and shrewdness completely convincing, as is her mixture of vulnerability and resolve; her courageous and desperate efforts to flourish in a world designed to keep persons of her gender and class on the street corners or in the factories very engaging; and her matter-of-fact attitude towards sex, shorn of all moralistic and romantic idealizations, quite unexpected in a text from the 1930's; but the entire text is told in Doris' voice, and her clumsy and colorful German, oftentimes becoming quite telegraphic, is a remarkable spice in a book already full of strong flavors. As Doris scrambles and slips time and again on the nearly vertical walls erected by the patriarchy, the monied and the educated, one realizes how subliminally critical *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* actually is.

Despite Graham Greene's now laughable assertion that "In five years' time it will be unreadable," *Das kunstseidene Mädchen* is being read again,(**) and it is good enough that I've moved two of her other books close to the top of my TBR pile.

() When I wrote about Erich Maria Remarque's *Der schwarze Obelisk*.

(*) Remarkably, after her untimely death was prematurely reported in the European press, Keun returned to

Germany with false papers in 1940 and lived quietly with her mother in Cologne until the end of the war!

(**) Keun's collected works have been recently published in Germany, but Keun wasn't rediscovered until the late 1970's, too late to be of much use to her personally. Her last decades were spent in financial desperation, alcoholism and, for a time, in a psychiatric institute.

Tuck says

a classic of feminist lit, from 1931 Germany!! About a strong -- if young party-hard, bad decision making -- woman who's just trying to get over (thanks every day Curtis Mayfield), and does, for the most part. Sure she has to lie some, fake organisms, cadge drinks, lift the occasional haute couture (sp?) item, work at crummy jobs for low pay, freeze her ass off in shitty apartments, have pretty bad hangovers, dance till her feet ache, hide from nazis, etc etc. all in the day of a young woman anywhere really and i guess that's what makes this novel so good; slangy, fast moving inner and inter dialog, very nice descriptions of place, food, fashion in Berlin, and beautiful examples of a modern woman in a not-so-modern world.

oops i forgot to mention too that Keun and Joseph Roth were an item for a while in the late '30's. You don't know how much hope and warm fuzzy that gives me.

<http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia...>

oh darn, HOW do you paste pics?

Leah Mayes says

Why is this hailed as a window to pre-Nazi Berlin when the narrator's observations are not especially insightful, about her environs or about the times in general? Why is this hailed as feminist literature when Doris defines herself in terms of how desirable she is to men and chooses to remain blithely ignorant of the world around her unless it involves increasing her desirability and odds of finding a man to take care of her? There is validity in the comparisons to "Sex and the City" and "Bridget Jones's Diary" and in deeming Doris "the original material girl," but that's not necessarily a good thing, and it certainly doesn't make for an interesting novel. Doris is a shallow, judgmental, petty girl whose ambition is to become famous and wear fabulous clothing and be surrounded by the best of all consumer goods despite lacking the intelligence, skills, or work ethic that would merit such rewards on her own. She is not particularly clever or witty. She is proud of the fact that she lacks interest in politics or social affairs but is crafty and manipulative and tends to land on her feet because she knows how to stretch the truth (or lie) to get what she wants and is attractive enough to appeal to men's baser instincts. Her downward spiral is the result of the theft of a fur coat, and hanging on to that stolen coat is the primary motivation for a series of bad decisions she makes. I don't find that a particularly sympathetic plight.

I have no problem with stream of consciousness or faked memoirs that ramble and give half-thoughts in an attempt to seem realistic, but the writing is often incoherent and confusing. This edition is riddled with disgraceful typos that render things even more tricky to follow. (There are a lot of opening quotation marks with no closing quotation marks, so it is difficult to know when there has been a change in the speaker of dialogue.) I'm not sorry I read the book, but I can't say I enjoyed it. I am relieved, though, that it was a fast

read and that I had checked it out from the library rather than purchased it.

Julia says

Inhalt: Doris ist Sekretärin bei einem zudringlichen Rechtsanwalt. Sie will nicht mehr tagaus, tagein lange Briefe tippen, sondern ein Star werden. Sie will in die große Welt, ins Berlin der Roaring Twenties...

Irmgard Keun hat Doris' *kunstseidene Abenteuer* „naiv und brillant, witzig und verzweifelt, volkstümlich und feurig“ beschrieben (Hermann Kesten). Bunte Unterhaltung in Verbindung mit satirischer Zeitkritik – eine seltene Einheit. (Quelle: Buch)

Vor der Rezension: In Klassik Edition stelle ich euch Rezensionen zu etwas anderen Büchern vor. Bücher, die ich vielleicht im Zuge der Uni gelesen habe, vielleicht auch ein bisschen out-of-comfort privat und die eine Rezension wert sind. Ich spreche von Büchern, die viele unter euch als nervige Schullektüre bezeichnen würden. Mit der Ausnahme, dass die Bücher, die ich hier bespreche weg gehen von dem Lektürekanon. Ich möchte euch mit diesen Rezensionen zeigen, dass Klassiker auch toll sein können und da besondere Bücher auch besondere Rezensionen erfordern, werde ich die Rezensionen der Klassik Edition anders aufbauen als alle anderen. Schreibstil und Co sind bei diesen Büchern nicht wichtig. Der ist eh anders und meistens gewöhnungsbedürftig. Nein, ich möchte Literatur solcher Art kontextualisieren und weg gehen von „Was will der Autor uns damit sagen?“. Und wer weiß, vielleicht kann ich euch ja sogar dazu animieren den einen oder anderen Klassiker zu lesen und zu lieben.

Meine Meinung: Das *kunstseidene* Mädchen ist erstmals 1932 erschienen. Es spielt jedoch in den 20er Jahren. Hier in Deutschland. Wir befinden uns in der Weimarer Republik. Der erste Weltkrieg ist vorbei und die Niederlage sitzt noch tief in den Knochen. Außerdem erwartet die Weimarer Republik mit all ihren Problemen tagtäglich und Arbeitslosigkeit steht ganz oben auf der Problemliste. Mitten in diesem ganzen Chaos befindet sich Doris und, wie es zu dieser Zeit üblich war, sind Politik und das aktuelle Zeitgeschehen im Bürgertum in Vergessenheit geraten. Man will sich nicht mit all den politischen Problemen belasten. Man hat schon wirtschaftliche Sorgen genug. Außerdem boomen gerade Theater, Film und Kultur und das ist die Art, wie man sich zu dieser Zeit amüsiert und versucht die Sorgen zu vergessen. Genauso ist auch der Roman geschrieben. Doris möchte ein Glanz werden und groß herauskommen. Ihr Tagebuch, das wir in Form des Romans lesen, nutzt sie, um alle ihre Erlebnisse und ihren Weg nach ganz oben zu dokumentieren. Schreiben wie Film will sie und so ist der Schreibstil sehr szenisch und wird so interessant zu lesen. Ich würde sogar so weit gehen, dass ich das Buch als ein Jugendbuch bewerten würde. Auch, wenn hinter dem *kunstseidenen* Mädchen mehr steckt als nur ein Unterhaltungsroman. Aber welche Botschaft steckt dahinter? In den 20er Jahren gibt es DEN Trend. Er heißt „Die neue Frau“. Viele von euch haben jetzt sicher das Bild einer erfolgreichen Karrierefrau im Kopf, die Familie, Job und Freizeit perfekt unter einen Hut bekommt und dabei auch noch sehr erfolgreich ist. Dieses Frauenbild stand in den 20ern aber noch nicht stellvertretend für die neue Frau sondern eher die Sekretärin. Einfache Mädchen aus der unteren Mittelschicht. Mit der neuen Frau war ein Aufleben der Frau in Kultur und Medien gemeint. Man trug die Haare kurz, zog Hosen an, ging arbeiten und zeigte Interessen an kulturellen Dingen. So wurde die Frau recht schnell zu Werbezwecken genutzt und die konsumorientierte Seite von uns Mädels direkt angesprochen. Allerdings blieb die neue Frau nur ein Modetrend und viel sind an diesem Idel gescheitert. Spätestens mit den Nationalsozialisten ist das Bild völlig verschwunden. Anhand von Doris wird der Versuch eine neue Frau zu sein geschildert. Allerdings auf eine sehr satirische Art denn man könnte nicht mehr scheitern, als Doris es tut. Um ein Ganz zu werden und reich und berühmt zu sein will sie nämlich gar nichts tun. Sie will nicht dafür arbeiten sondern versucht es mit den Mitteln, die Frauen seit jeher benutzen um das zu bekommen, was sie wollen:

Männer und Intrigen. Hier kommen wir dadurch auch zu dem Punkt, der mir an dem kunstseidenen Mädchen so gar nicht gefallen hat. Und dieser Punkt ist Doris. Wirklich, satirisch hin oder her, ich habe Doris wirklich gehasst und mal ganz ehrlich: Man will Doris auch einfach nicht als beste Freundin haben. Sie ist intrigant, hat komische Moralvorstellungen und weder Anstand noch Bildung. Aber genau mit Doris wird eben jenes Scheitern der neuen Frau gezeigt und das macht die Botschaft dahinter, die Verzweiflung, die mit diesem Scheitern einhergeht so deutlich.

Irmgard Keuns Roman trifft die Mentalität und den Zeitgeist der 20er Jahre also auf den Punkt und stellt die Gesellschaft in dieser Zeit sehr gut nach. Verpackt in einem Roman in Tagebuch-Form kann man Das kunstseidene Mädchen darüber hinaus sehr gut lesen und durch das filmische Schreiben wird das Geschehen sehr lebhaft und szenisch dargestellt. Die Protagonistin Doris war nicht meins und genau das hat mir den Roman sehr verdorben. Dennoch trifft sie genau mit Doris den Zeitgeist und stellt diesen auch sehr satirisch dar. Wenn ihr euch also für die Gesellschaft der 30er Jahre interessiert und über die Protagonistin hinwegsehen könnt bzw. ihr eher negative Charaktere sogar liebt, solltet ihr euch am kunstseidenen Mädchen versuchen.

Bewertung: Eigentlich sträube ich mich ein bisschen gegen das Bewerten von Klassikern. Ehrlich. Ich will euch mit schlechten Bewertungen nicht abschrecken noch sind die Bücher, die ich mit 5 Füchschen bewerte für euch auch immer Highlights. Und was für Belletristik gilt, das gilt erst recht für die Klassiker. Dennoch habe ich mich entschieden Füchschen zu vergeben obwohl ich euch dennoch sagen muss: alle Klassiker sind lesenswert! Wagt euch ruhig mal dran und werft einen Blick über den Tellerrand. Es tut gut. Obwohl es im letzten Abschnitt oben den Anschein hat, als hätte mir das Buch sehr gut gefallen und als sei Doris mein einziger Kritikpunkt muss ich sagen, dass genau dieser Kritikpunkt eine sehr große Wirkung auf meinen Lesespaß hatte und ich in dieser Hinsicht wirklich enttäuscht vom Buch war. Deshalb bekommt Das kunstseidene Mädchen von mir nur 3 von 5 Füchschen, da ich mit Doris einfach so gar nicht klar kam.

Friederike Knabe says

There is nothing fake or artificial about the heroine of this surprising work of fiction. First published in 1932 in Germany, it was followed very quickly by its English translation in 1933. It was an immediate hit for a young author's second novel; praised for its pointed sense of humour as well as the underlying critique of society. The story, written in the form of the central character's musings and diary, blends a young woman's daily struggles to make ends meet with an at times sarcastic yet always witty commentary on daily life among the working classes during the dying days of the Weimar Republic. Irmgard Keun cleverly uses her memorable character - Doris - who is as naïve as she is shrewd - to convey her own astute observations and critique of social and economic conditions of the time. While many aspects of the impending political disaster could not be predicted, Keun conveys her presentiments through Doris's experiences. Despite the less than rosy picture it draws for Doris, the story is written in a deceptively light-hearted style, using the regional and working class colloquial language of her character with some Berliner phraseology and idioms thrown in. Keun's vivid imagery and metaphors are unexpected as they are hilarious. Not having read (yet) the new English translation, I cannot comment on the way in which Keun's peculiar language, grammatical mistakes and all, is being conveyed in another language.

Running out of options to subsidize her meagre income as a less than competent typist, Doris dreams of making it big in the movies. "I want to be a shine" (Ich will ein Glanz sein) is her ambition. She has the looks for it and her choice of boyfriends is aimed at having them provide the necessary accessories for her status as

a glamour girl. Options appear to open when she lands a one-line action part against stiff competition. Unfortunately she gets carried away with her brief moment of "Glanz", and walks off with a fur coat that "wants me and I want it - and now we have each other". Sensuality is prominent when Doris describes fabric, often linking it to smell, objects and the people she meets. Her closeness and loyalty to her former colleague and friend Therese is touching, relying on her as much as wanting to support her in turn. To escape being discovered with the fur coat, she leaves her mid-size town for Berlin, the centre of fashion, the arts and the movie business. Her luck goes up and down, depending on the circumstances and generosity of the current boyfriend. All the while she pines for her first and only love, Hubert. As soon as she feels settled into an almost "normal" life of some luxury with one partner, events force her to leave quietly or secretly. Yet, unflinchingly, she pursues her dream and the search for a Mister Right. Will she find him? As we follow Doris through a year's seasons, we realize that we take in much more: Keun's rich and detailed portrayal of Berlin and brilliant characterization of some of its multi-faceted people, always seen, of course, from Doris's perspective.

Not surprisingly, given Keun's topics and social critique, Keun's books were blacklisted and all available copies confiscated in 1933. No longer able to publish Keun went into exile to Holland, where she continued to enjoy great popularity among other German exile friends. When Holland was invaded in 1940 she had to flee again. Reports of her suicide enabled her to return under cover to Germany, where she survived until the end of the war. Unfortunately, Keun could not rekindle the public's interest in her writing; she died in 1982, lonely and poor. Her books were rediscovered decades later and have also benefited from recent re-translations. Read today, *The Artificial Silk Girl* (*Das kunstseidene Mädchen*) has lost nothing of its charm and relevance as a portrait of a working girl's life then (and now?).

JacquiWine says

4.5 Stars

Reputedly inspired by Anita Loos' *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, Keun set out to write a response from the German perspective, one that ultimately shows us the darker side of life which lies beneath the glamour of the capital city, Berlin.

First published in 1932, *Silk Girl* is narrated by Doris, a striking young woman whose voice I found utterly engaging right from the very start. It reflects her complex personality – a glorious mix of the naïve and the streetwise, the vivacious and the vulnerable. Doris longs for the finer things in life, fashionable clothes and accessories, the bright lights and the big city. She dreams of becoming a successful actress in the movies. Instead, she's stuck in a provincial town, in a dead-end office job she's barely qualified for, trading on her charms and good looks to keep on the right side of the boss. Moreover, Doris is forced to pass the majority of her wages to her lazy father who promptly uses the money to get drunk. What little is left over goes on a treat, in this case a new hat – well, a girl's got to keep up appearances, especially if she wants to get ahead.

To read my review, please visit:

<https://jacquiwine.wordpress.com/2017...>

Kalkwerk says

Weimarer Republik: Die junge Schreibkraft Doris träumt von einem glamourösen Leben als Filmstar in der Großstadt. Doch wie kommt ein ungebildetes Unterschichtenmädchen aus der Provinz dort hin? Ein Talent hat Doris: Sie ist die Frau der tausend Masken, die Männern immer das vorspielen kann, wonach sie sich am meisten sehnen. Im Gegenzug regnet es Geschenke aus jener Luxuswelt, deren Teil Doris werden möchte. Dass sie sich dabei bald nicht mehr nur in der Nähe der Prostitution bewegen wird, wird Doris schließlich schmerzlich erfahren.

Große Kunst an diesem Text ist vor allem die Sprache der (nur scheinbar) naiven Doris. Gerade diese Naivität nutzt die Autorin für gesellschafts- und zeitkritische Einsichten, die außerhalb des Figurenbewusstseins liegen, dem Leser jedoch oft ein Lächeln auf die Lippen zaubern.

Sandra says

Das Kunstseidene Mädchen (The Artificial Silk Girl) is a book by Irmgard Keun, written in the time of the Weimarer Republik (pre-Nazi Germany). The book is a diary of sorts, without the "Dear diary" sentences. This is just Doris writing what she wants whenever she wants.

Doris is an interesting character. She's living in a middle-large city and bored to death by her job. She describes herself as not that pretty, but she must have been interesting enough, because many men seem to want her, her boss included. One of my favourite moments in the book was when she stood him up: "Ich wunderte mich von neuem, wie ein Mann, der doch studiert hat und schlau wird aus Blasewitz seine Backzähne, derartig dumm sein kann." (I wondered again how a man, who has studied and can understand about Blasewitz's back teeth, still can be so stupid.)

The book is about how Doris makes her way through life, not always in a completely honest way, but just trying to make a living. It's also very much about her experience with men: she goes dancing, she goes home with men, she lives with a couple of men and she's definitely no virgin. Yes, she's promiscuous, but so many people seemed to be. The book is also very much about German society before the Nazi regime. There was one page where you could already see that the antisemitism was on the rise. And what the book discusses most of all: unemployment and money-troubles and how people go about solving their problems.

So the book was very interesting and very insightful. But what I also really loved was the writing style. Keun's voice as Doris was personal and funny. Doris was a lovely character, she knew what her faults were but she was not ashamed of them. She gets inspired to do the right thing in the end and shows real character growth. I found her very inspiring, because throughout the book she shows real strength, both physically and mentally and I admired her the more for it.

The Materialien in this particular edition were also lovely. They consist of texts that have to do with Irmgard Keun (such as excerpts from letters and interviews), and excerpts from other relevant texts written in the time of the Weimarer Republik (Erich Kästner, Christopher Isherwood) and also some short excerpts from texts that have discussed this particular book, that help you think about the themes in the book (for instance: is this a book about emancipation, or is it not?).

I can honestly say that the Weimarer Republik is my favourite time in German literature history - the most interesting books seem to come from that period of time and this book was no exception. Highly recommended.

Kim says

I first encountered Irmgard Keun when I read *After Midnight*, her critique of Nazi Germany expressed in the first person narrative of Sanna, a young German woman who doesn't overtly criticise the Nazis at all. In this, Keun's first novel, the protagonist is Doris, another naïve young German woman. First published in 1931, Keun wrote the novel with the idea that it would be a German version of the hugely successful *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. The novel is mostly set in Berlin in the late 1920s, where working class Doris heads from her hometown after she steals a fur coat. Doris longs for love, fame and fortune - preferably as a movie star - and tells the story of her life in Berlin in the first person. Less a journal and more a series of almost stream of consciousness scenes from her life, Doris goes from one sexual relationship to another in an effort to survive and to succeed.

The work provides an interesting insight into the glitziness and superficiality of Berlin in the late 1920s. Doris is an endearing character, who retains vulnerability and compassion despite the desperate circumstances in which she lives. It's particularly poignant to read about Doris knowing what was to come for people like her and those she cared about in a few short years. And knowing that Keun's work went on to be banned by the Nazis, it's instructive to read something she wrote both before they came to power. However, for all of the strengths of the work and its inherent interest as a historical artifact, I didn't connect with Doris as I did with Sanna in *After Midnight* and her plight didn't move me as much as I wanted it to. Neither Doris nor the glimpses of Berlin in the 1920s she gave me were enough to keep me really engaged. That said, I still want to read some more of Keun's work.

classic reverie says

Why I decided on Irmgard Keun's *The Artificial Silk Girl* for my next reading is because when reading Bobby Underwood's "I Died Twice"; he had mentioned a book "After Midnight" by Martha Albrand which I looked up and came across Irmgard Keun's book by the same title. I decided to read her first novel but read the second one thinking it was her first. I find it extremely fascinating reading books from the past especially during certain times in history. In this book written in 1932 which is fiction yet it is not; because Irmgard Keun describes to us Germany through Doris' eyes. This is not a political book but it has politics noted because really life has a tinge of politics everywhere.

The forward quote below basically says this.

"While there can be no doubt about Keun's anti-Nazi sentiment, her "artificial silk girl" doesn't really have any political convictions. In fact, she is completely clueless when it comes to politics, and therefore a perfect example for so many Germans of that time who realized what they had gotten caught up in only when it was too late to do much about it. In that sense, *The Artificial Silk Girl* can be read as an historical document, an entertaining and disturbing account of what it was like to be a young woman in Berlin as the Golden Twenties were drawing to a close."

The translator's note in this edition I must disagree with something she stated about "Doris features a predecessor of Bridget Joneses, the Carrie Bradshaws, and the shopaholic Rebecca Bloomwoods of our day." First of all Doris' circumstances are dire as many during that time post world war 1 in Germany. Yes, the

modern times of today with regard to sex are so whatever you want. I will not get into my thoughts on modern times regards to this but Doris was not just looking for fun with men but looking to obtain things that she needed. She was not the so called "material girl" or "bystander" as the translator noted. Yes, Doris wants to have a watch or have some nice clothes to wear and how to get them but through the men she meets. She does not seem just any man but takes what she can. She works but the income is small and certain amount must go to her parents. She uses sex to obtain things and fun is not the factor. She is not living the high life but trying to survive with some respect. I think this story is more akin to Ayn Rand's "We the Living". Even though the countries are different, poverty and many circumstances are similar but the ending in Keun's has hope.

Doris sees prostitutes and thinks how terrible that situation is but what she does could be counted as such. Yes, she gets to chose but she is still selling herself. I suppose she needs to think there is a difference because otherwise she would think she is sinking deeper into loss of self respect.

"And yesterday I was with a man who came on to me and took me for something that I'm not — that I'm not, even now. But there are whores standing around everywhere at night — so many of them around the Alex, so many, along the Kurfürstendamm and Joachimsthaler Strasse and at the Friedrichstrasse Station and everywhere. And they don't always look the part at all either, they walk in such a hesitant way. It's not always the face that makes a whore — I am looking into my mirror — it's the way they walk, as if their heart had gone to sleep."

This story is told by Doris who writes all that happens to her in this book and even though she does not want to show her inner feelings like a diary would, she shows use glimpses of herself. Her writing is stream of consciousness which goes off into another subject but returns to her main story. I found it quite interesting but with a sadness that almost every word emits and I feel it too!

Her friendship with the neighbor who was blinded during world war 1 told us about the differences from someone that lived before the war and someone born during and after. She told him what she saw in Germany and after taking him to many places and describing, he does not see as she does in excitement but a gloomy depressing time. She knows only this and after his reaction she starts to see a little differently.

"The city isn't good and the city isn't happy and the city is sick," he says — "but you are good and I thank you for that." I don't want him to thank me. I just want him to like my Berlin. And now everything looks so different to me —"

The story- we follow Doris and all that happens to her before she leaves Cologne and after she arrives in Berlin. We get to see Berlin and the people through her eyes and the disappointments and her change of attitude from all that happens to her.

LettriceAssorta says

Salve a tutti. Oggi parlerò della mia ultima lettura, ovvero: Doris, La ragazza misto Seta, di I. Keun. Dico subito che ho avuto la tentazione di lasciare il libro a metà, ma ho desistito per concedergli l'opportunità di dimostrare che mi stavo sciogliendo in una precoce idiosincrasia. Non è mia consuetudine abbandonare un libro, mi sembra una sconfitta personale, la mia incapacità di comprenderne l'essenza. Per cui mi sono gettata a capofitto nella lettura con ancora più caparbia e determinazione, anche alla luce di alcune recensioni davvero entusiastiche.

La storia è molto semplice e gradevole. Ruota attorno alle avventure tragicomiche di Doris, una diciottenne smaliziata e poco istruita degli Anni Trenta che cerca di barcamenarsi meglio che può, in una società strutturata in modo da offrire veramente poco alle donne. Oppressa da un lavoro di dattilografa che non la fa sentire per nulla gratificata, Doris è costretta a subire le molestie del datore di lavoro fino a quando, un giorno, questi le salta addosso e lei per tutta risposta gli assesta un calcio negli stinchi. Da questo momento in poi, perde sì il lavoro, ma non la voglia di diventare una stella, una qualunque, del cinema, del teatro, degli ambienti che contano, poco importa, la parola d'ordine è emergere. Questa determinazione la porterà nella grande città di Berlino dove vivrà molte avventure, non tutte piacevoli e dove farà la conoscenza di molti personaggi, alcuni piuttosto pittoreschi.

La narrazione si snoda lungo le pagine di un quaderno sul quale Doris annota le sue vicende e lo fa fregandosene della grammatica: un sollievo per lei che in ufficio era costretta a controllare ogni virgola! Le parole scorrono libere, i pensieri sono come un fiume in piena e danno vita ad una lettura piuttosto inusuale. Questo schema narrativo che a prima vista potrebbe costituire un punto di forza del romanzo, si sgretola a mio avviso sotto i colpi di alcune fragilità stilistiche. Durante la lettura infatti, questo profluvio di parole, vomitato senza sosta dalla protagonista, se da una parte è un ottimo espediente letterario per rendere la sua personalità e il suo flusso di pensiero, dall'altro ne disturba la lettura. Confesso che delle volte ho perso il filo.

Il personaggio principale è ottimamente caratterizzato. Doris si definisce ambiziosa, anche se non sa bene in cosa desidera realizzarsi. Ha un'attitudine ironica, disincantata e alcune volte compie delle azioni discutibili, ma lo fa con un candore che spiazza e delle motivazioni proprie che se non la giustificano, la identificano però come un'indole buona. Mi ha molto divertito l'episodio in cui riceve in regalo una confezione di praline con la crema e le morde giusto per vedere se dentro c'è anche la nocciola. Allorché si accorge che non c'è, le incarta di nuovo, come se nessuno le avesse toccate e le regala alla sua amica Therese. Oppure quando va in gita con Hubert nel bosco dei cuculi e lui si sdraiava con gli occhi chiusi. Doris gli mette delle formiche sugli occhi e sulle orecchie per farlo svegliare. Il tutto sempre con assenza di malizia (o quasi). Ne conseguono situazioni davvero esilaranti che talvolta lasciano attoniti. Interessante la girandola di variopinti personaggi e i contesti.

Il titolo è tratto da una convinzione della protagonista di non dover mai indossare abiti misto seta quando si esce con un uomo, perché si sgualciscono subito. Sempre pura seta! Questo modo di pensare aggiunge un nuovo tassello all'immagine della personalità di Doris, sempre in bilico tra la conquista del vero amore e il disincanto, tra la ricerca dell'indipendenza e il costante bisogno di protezione. Impietoso è il quadro che emerge della società tedesca degli Anni Trenta, dove la figura femminile aveva ben poche speranze di affrancarsi dalla propria condizione sociale se non attraverso il matrimonio. Nonostante questo, Doris scappa alla volta di Berlino, cercando un riscatto che purtroppo per lei si scontra con il muro di indifferenza della grande metropoli. Le luci sfavillanti, i tanto agognati vestiti di seta e il bel mondo, rappresentano solo un effimero miraggio rarefatto dall'economia che stagna e dalla miseria dilagante. Troppo presto arriverà il momento del disincanto. Da qui ben si comprende l'attaccamento della ragazza ad un pellicciotto sottratto in teatro ad una guardarobiera addormentata. Simbolo di quella seta, quello sfarzo, quel effimero successo a cui ambisce, quel lussuoso capo d'abbigliamento rubato diviene per lei una specie di irrinunciabile corazza con cui affrontare l'ostilità del mondo, una sorta di oggetto transizionale che fa da ponte tra il desiderio e la realtà.

Tutto sommato, una lettura godibile.

Buona lettura

Viktoria says

das muss man einfach gelesen haben! eine bessere beschreibung des lebensgefühls der 20er jahre gibt es nicht!!!!

Monica Carter says

Tilli says: "Men are nothing but sensual and they only want one thing." But I say: "Tilli, sometimes women too are sensual and want only one thing." And there's no difference. Because sometimes I only want to wake up with someone in the morning, all messed up from kissing and half dead and without any energy to think, but wonderfully tires and rested at the same time. But you don't have to give a hoot otherwise. And there's nothing wrong with it, because both have the same feeling and want the same thing from the other.

I hope I can express my fondness for this book so that people will actually go to find it at a bookstore or library, and read it. It was published in Germany in 1933. Shortly thereafter, the Nazis banned Keun's work and destroyed all remaining copies. Fortunately, a British translation survived and Other Press has chosen wisely chosen to republish it. After all, Keun was a contemporary of Alfred Döblin who encouraged her to write. Thus, we have a story of a young woman who moves from a small German town to Berlin to take it as an actress only to encounter homelessness, poverty and bouts with prostitution. Now there's a summer read.

Translated to perfection by Kathie von Ankum, this is a novel worth reading and savoring for Keun's uncanny ability with description and to portray a woman, whether likable or not, by what she sees and does without a moment of self-pity. Written in some way similar to a mock memoir, *The Artificial Silk Girl* gives a first -person account of Doris, a young German woman using her looks and charm to succeed. She makes no excuses and shows no regret. There's something so utterly captivating about a woman who knows what she is, how she is perceived but doesn't care what others think of her. She isn't afraid to use manipulation or deceit, but it is never without warrant. Rather she uses it as a reaction to the pretentious or dishonest behavior of other people.

Doris is not very educated nor socially savvy, and although her cynicism is often hilarious, Keun makes her seem good at heart in a touching way that avoids being mawkish. The voice is so well-developed that I could understand how, in Germany at that time, it would have become a bestseller and in turn create a scandal with its blunt honesty. What I found interesting and cloying is that in the introduction by Harvard professor Maria Tatar, which overall is excellent, is that she uses *The Artificial Silk Girl* as a precursor to *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Sex and the City*. As if sex and female independence are the currency used in all eras of feminism and *The Artificial Silk Girl* is merely an early form of chick lit. I understand perhaps the inclination to couch it that way to the modern reader, but I cringed when I read this because Keun's work is unique in voice and its original appearance was a form of political, historical and gender resistance whereas *Bridget Jones* and *Sex and the City* seem more like a reflection of the current times. I am obviously not a Harvard professor so forgive if my ignorance is showing, but I couldn't help but think of Lynn Freed's *The Mirror* or even the

works of Jean Rhys as a more appropriate parallel with their bleakness and female characters beyond redemption.

When the novel opens, Doris is working in a lawyer's office as a secretary. From the opening pages, Keun's gift for description is unmistakeable:

And for every comma that's missing, I have to fix that old beanstalk of an attorney - he has pimplies too, and his skin looks like my old yellow leather purse without a zipper.

Or later when she describes a woman in a cafe who's "...not all that young anymore and has boobs like a swimming belt." Doris knows she is about to be fired and pulls out every trick of sensuality she has, but in the end, she gets fired. Doris has a softness with certain people that saves her from being harsh. She has Therese from the office, Tilli with whom she shares an apartment with in Berlin and Herr Brenner, the blind man she offers sex to because she gets to use her eyes to describe the world to him:

"I saw - men standing at the corners selling perfume, without a coat and a pert face and a gray cap on - and posters with naked and rosy girls on them and nobody looking at them - a restaurant with more chrome than an operating room - they even have oysters there - and famous photographers with photos in showcases displaying enormous people without any beauty. And sometimes with."

Again, later, when she is describing the scene at a Russian Restaurant in Berlin for Herr Brenner:

"...a handsome man just kissed a woman as a fat as a tadpole - old men are kissing each other - the music goes one-two, one-two - there are lamps hanging from the ceiling that look like Paul's starfish collection stuck together - the music is covered with flowers like a chiffon dress which tears very easily - let me tell you, Herr Brenner, a woman should never wear artificial silk when she's with a man. It wrinkles too quickly, and what are you going to look like after seven real kisses? Only pure silk, I say - and music -"

Doris' demise is miserable but in the end there is an overwhelming and welcome sense of hope for her future. Even though Doris may have facets that are materialistic, vain and shallow, Keun also created a woman of depth which manifests through Doris' cinematic view of the world and her empathy for humanity. The back of the book makes a comparison to Christopher Isherwood, (I can only imagine it must be *The Berlin Stories*) which is much more apt than a somewhat dismissive designation to chick lit. If you need a read that is both intelligent, honest, entertaining and original, please read *The Artificial Silk Girl*. It's the presence so needed of female writer's of the past who dared to talk of sex and independence at a time when it wasn't accepted by society as easily as a *Sex and the City* sequel.

Stephen Durrant says

I only recently came across this book when I became aware that an acquaintance of mine required it for a class he teaches on the Weimar Republic. It is a remarkable book. The narrator, Doris, is a working class girl and a bit of a ditz who narrates her story and describes her surroundings in a way that appears shallow and laughable even as it reveals both insight and folksy wisdom. Doris has stolen a fur coat and finds herself alone in Berlin just trying to get by. That means that she mostly mooches off men, whom she invariably sees through: "If you want to strike it lucky with men, you have to let them think you're stupid" (60). Through Doris's camera-like observations, we begin to get a picture of the decadent, sometimes cruel society around her and even glimpse the political currents swirling about, currents that leave Doris for the most part baffled. For example, a man asks Doris if she is a Jew, and thinking he hopes for a positive response, she says, "Yes." He then drops her, which leaves her entirely baffled: "After all, a man should know in advance whether he likes a woman or not. So stupid! At first they pay you all sorts of compliments and are drooling all over you—then you tell them: I'm a chestnut!—and their chin drops: oh, you're a chestnut—yuk, I had no idea. And you are exactly the way you were before, but just one word has supposedly changed you" (38). The German novelist Irmgard Keun was a major talent. It's too bad she is not better known.

Jim says

I am sure that I will read this book again. In fact, I will probably buy a copy...hopefully some entity like Folio Society will publish this gem!

Written in the 1930s, this book could only have been published in Europe, North American social mores and sexual repression being what they were. Some of the thoughts expressed herein concern frank and open (but not specific) sexuality, particularly from the female viewpoint. Female desire and sexual fulfillment...who knew such things existed! So the book was published in Germany and was very popular for a couple of years until it was banned by the Nazis. Thereafter it was a regular feature at German street bonfires. It seems that the fascists were opposed to sex and also took issue with the protagonist's mild criticism of the state of affairs prevalent in Germany at that time.

This book is presented as the rambling monologue or memoir of a girl who has assumed the name of Doris. There is little likable about her: she is a thief, a liar, and she'll screw you for a sandwich. She uses men to get by as she pursues her dream of becoming a star. A dream that, the reader realizes, is unlikely to come to fruition. In spite of all that, it is impossible to dislike Doris. There is something a little off about her...unhinged...maybe mentally challenged. I couldn't put my finger on the reason for this exactly, but while reading it I was constantly thinking of Sylvia Plath and Louise Brooks' Lulu from *Pandora's Box*. She is instinctive but not overly bright, making her way through decadent and impoverished Berlin as best she can. I couldn't help but root for her, a sad and lonely underdog merely wanting to be noticed. Eventually she gets a chance at love, but you'll have to read the book to see how that turns out.

I don't know why Keun is not more widely known: every page was a delight to read, and Doris is a poet and philosopher without knowing it...hell, without even knowing what it means. I'll leave you with a favourite quote (there are Many):

So they have courses teaching you foreign languages and ballroom dancing and etiquette and cooking. But there are no classes to learn how to be by yourself in a furnished room with chipped dishes, or how to be

alone in general without any words of concern or familiar sounds. (p.118)

Matt says

Very interesting lost classic. Written in early 30's Germany about what life was like for a young, attractive, spunky, slightly desperate 20-something woman who leaves her screwy home to hit the big city, in this case it's Berlin.

Keun was a bestselling author of her time and it's easy to see why. The story isn't much in terms of plot arcs or cohesion, but it doesn't need to be. We follow our heroine Doris's inner reel of perceptions and actions as she makes her way through the city, flirting and being broke, delighting in the complexity of the urban environment right after the swinging, decadent 20's and, just before that, the roiling devastation of WWI.

Doris doesn't have a lot of formal education, but she's sharp and realistic and intuitive and it isn't hard to root for her. She doesn't seem to be worried too much that generally she's looking for all the superficial things- sex, glamour, beautification, gifts from men, etc. She knows that she is living in a material world and she is a material girl. As the man said, she got to use what she got to get just what she wants.

But at the same time, we're talking about a Berlin that is going to start to go under in a very big way. As the introduction points out, Doris isn't stupid but she's dimly aware of the political upheaval that is coming, as were many Germans, until it was too late. There are times when Doris mentions seeing some political speeches that she doesn't understand and some newspaper headlines that mean little to her. It's frustrating, but not against her personally- you wish there had been a way for her to be a little more politically informed.

Doris is, in her own way, politically conscious. She can't help but notice the disturbing number of homeless people and wounded soldiers from the Great War wandering the streets, nor can she forget how many women turn to streetwalking to survive. The symptoms of the larger social/political/racial/economic catastrophes looming on the horizon are there, and she records them vividly. At one point she mentions going on a date with a guy who asks her if she's Jewish. Doris replies, indifferently, that she is not. Her date doesn't seem to register this and starts ranting shrilly about this social menace for the rest of the meal.

What she doesn't do is stick her nose in the air or blame the people she sees. Doris understands how rough it gets- at one point, destitute and heartbroken, she spends a frigid Christmas eve sleeping on a park bench. She bums rides off of strangers, hits up dates for cash, maybe hustles here and there for a meal or a glass of cognac (making the immortal observation along the way that it all tastes much better when you know you can pay for it), crashes in the back of taxis for a couple hours' sleep. She's matter-of-fact about her own plight, tolerant and sympathetic about the plight of others.

What she really wants, as do all of us, is love. She finds a temporary peace with a mopey army veteran with a piece of shrapnel in his shoulder whose wife has absconded, leaving him to abstractly mourn and pick up the pieces. Doris domesticates, tentatively at first, then goes all in, cooking dinner and washing clothes and making beds, only to see her hopes dashed. Doris is hurt, and records her feelings vividly, but is bracingly unsentimental about it as she sits in the train station nursing her broken heart and figuring out her next move.

An underappreciated gem of a book. Bestselling in its day. The Nazis banned it, burned all the copies, but luckily a few editions survived. Keun ended up ditching her idiot husband once the Nazis took control and made it to Switzerland and the Netherlands, where she mingled with Zweig and became Joseph Roth's

girlfriend. When she made it back to her home country, she had a daughter and resisted every offer to write an autobiography. This is too bad- it's well worth making the quicksilver acquaintance of the artificial silk girl.

verbava says

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Evan says

"Tilli says, 'Men are nothing but sensual and they only want one thing.' And I say: 'Tilli, sometimes women too are sensual and want only that one thing.'"

A soufflé with a dash of hard liquor at its center, *The Artificial Silk Girl* is a sly, charming surprise; an undeservedly obscure, lesser-carat literary gem that is nonetheless priceless as a vivid peek into the lives of bohemian poverty and amoral decadence in Germany on the cusp of Hitler's dark age.

The protagonist of this odyssey is an arresting young woman, Doris, who has stolen a mink coat and gone off to Berlin with a vague notion of somehow becoming a star. Doris is vivacious and slightly ditzy, street smart and vacuous, sensitive and callous, materialistic and altruistic, and who, in everything she does, drinks in life like champagne.

She is a survivor, readily aware of the power of her charms. Men can't keep their hands off her, yet she uses that power to her advantage. After losing a steady office job in a law firm for rebuffing an amorous boss (whom she consciously plays like a fiddle), she lands a short-lived job as an extra at a theater, where she applies a devilish sense of human psychology and office politics to hilariously wreak havoc before leaving town with the hot mink on her shoulders.

Once in Berlin, she spends the last of her funds and turns to prostitution for sustenance, straddling the worlds of wealth and want. Rather than mope about her condition, Doris keeps an upbeat, dreamy outlook; dazzled by the lights, sounds, movement and possibilities of Germany's manic capital city. Berlin, for her, is one big party, and her approach is one of *joie de vivre*. She is the original polyamorous woman, adopting a philosophy of tit for tat; everyone wants something, and everyone transacts.

It's this attitude -- along with some explicit criticisms of the German domestic social order and marriage -- that undoubtedly got this book banned by the Nazis and its author ostracized. In fear for her life, Irmgard Keun went into hiding in Germany and elsewhere in Europe for the entirety of the war to avoid punishment.

Fortunately, she survived, but was thereafter unproductive, and, sadly, refused all attempts by biographers to chronicle her amazing life until she died in 1982.

The book's style is deceptively simple, and I think deceptively is the operative word. Keun actually shows great sophistication in creating her portrait of a seemingly simple character and her naive dreams. Doris relates her tale in the first-person, ostensibly as a diary but also as material for an imagined screenplay about her life, a screenplay that will be in demand, once she is famous, of course. Doris' tale is told with staccato breathlessness, wrought as real stream-of-consciousness thought and real-time conversation; including interrupted and resumed thoughts.

One of the weird criticisms I've read about the book is that Doris is too shallow, or that her concerns are too slight to be of use to those interested in feminism or early feminist lit. But Keun is obviously smarter than her lead character. It requires great skill to "write down" to capture the voice of a girl simpler than the writer. And the book includes plenty of explicit and implicit criticisms of the patriarchy and its oft-fascist tendencies, as well as power issues in male-female relationships. Even though Doris complains about being nonpolitical throughout the book, it's clear that her everyday observations reveal the state of things and the seeds of fascism all around. Of course, Keun and her character were not third-wave feminists; expecting them to be is anachronistic and unreasonable. But Doris does represent a form of fledgling liberation, outsmarting men within the context of her limited options.

In its tone and its more surface concerns, *The Artificial Silk Girl* has been compared, somewhat accurately, to *Sex and the City* (and Doris, to Capote's Holly Golightly or Isherwood's Sally Bowles). Doris is a gal who flaunts her style and uses her wiles to survive, while seeking some kind of love or attaining some kind of goal while engaged in the flow of life. Doris mixes lovely little insights between frets about how her shoes and attire match her skin tone and hair color.

The most amazing section of the book, for me, occurs about halfway through the story, when Doris comforts an upstairs neighbor, a blind war veteran who is confined to a wheelchair and mistreated by his wife for being useless. The section is remarkable for two reasons:

1.) Up to this point in the story, Doris has not described herself physically in any clear way, though we know she is pretty and irresistible. Keun's strategy for rectifying this is ingenious. Doris is attracted to the neighbor, Herr Brenner, and allows him to stroke her silky legs while his wife is away. At the same time, Brenner asks Doris to describe herself. She starts out with a clinical description, assuming the theoretical position of a medical doctor; then, as she writes and her voice becomes more her own, her description morphs without apparent consciousness back into the first-person "I". It's bloody marvelous.

2.) Captivated by Doris' tales, Herr Brenner goads her, for page after page, to keep describing what she has seen and done in Berlin. At this point, Keun's Doris is given free reign to dish out a vivid, breathless, impressionistic kaleidoscope of Berlin nightlife. It's a beautiful passage that one could read over and over.

The only thing in the book that rang false for me pertains to some aspects of the translation. To capture the original spirit of a book and put it into proper context, it seems most correct to me to find words that serve as rough equivalents to words that would have been used in translations that would have been made at the time of publication. There are some points in the book -- not many, but enough to give me pause -- where some of the original German words have been translated into English words or phrases that seem too contemporary. At one point, for instance, Doris refers to being drunk as being "hammered," a term I think is of fairly recent origin. It's not enough to dismiss the book by a long shot, but is something to consider. There is an earlier English translation out there, somewhere, but it is not available for me to make the comparison.

Although I really think this is, at best, a four-star book, I'm rating it higher because it is in many ways a rare bird -- its voice and style are highly individual -- and because I think almost anyone can enjoy and appreciate it. It deserves to have a wider readership.

(KevinR@Ky 2016)

(*Post-review addendum:

I'm re-reading the second half of the book, and perhaps feeling less indecisive; I'm inclined to give this an unqualified five-star review).
