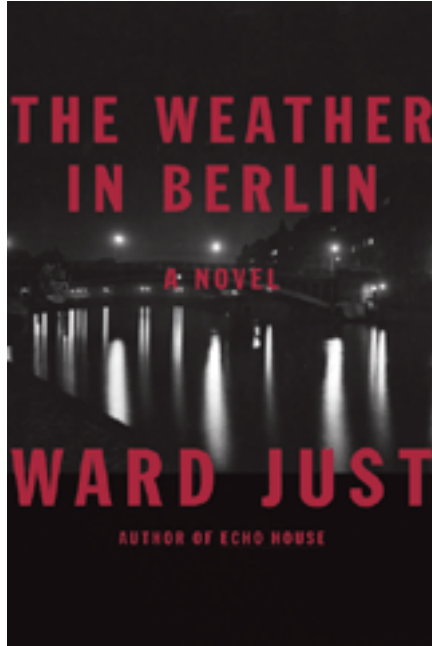


Press Release



The Weather in Berlin

by Ward Just

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"Just's provocative novels combine sharp journalistic observation with an unsentimental view of human behavior, expressed in economical prose taut with ironic implications." — *Publishers Weekly*

"A symphony of reverie, vivid symbolic statement, and unsparing sociohistorical and self-analysis. Just has never done anything better." — *Kirkus Reviews*

Introduction

BOSTON, MA - April 23, 2002 - The exiled American has long held the interest of readers of fiction. From Henry James to Hemingway, the idea of the American outside our isolating, fast-changing culture has fueled the creativity of many of our finest novelists. No writer today examines the exile's situation better than Ward Just. In his newest novel, *The Weather in Berlin*, he adds another level to the cultural riddle by placing his protagonist, Dixon Greenwood, in the world of Hollywood filmmaking. The result is a multilayered story in which fact and fiction meld, creating a history that is at once true and untrue and which Dix struggles to decipher.

For decades, the director Dixon Greenwood has been immersed in the L.A. scene — the glitter and sunshine, the maze of freeways, the onslaught of aspiring actors trying to find their place in Hollywood. For Dix, his one truly successful film, *Summer, 1921*, is now a distant memory, and he fears he has lost his ability to read the times, and hence his audience. When an old friend, the Rektor of a Berlin think tank, offers him a three-month residence, he decides to go, hoping a stint there will rejuvenate him and his waning career. In Berlin he meets the producer of a television series, the most popular in Germany, and agrees to direct an episode. He also meets Jana, the young actress — now a middle-aged

woman — who mysteriously disappeared from the set of *Summer, 1921* thirty years before. Dix believes that Berlin and Germany represent the dawn of the modern world, meaning the murderous twentieth century. He is interested in how things have played out since. And so he and the elusive Jana collaborate once again.

The Weather in Berlin, like Ward Just's previous books, examines the vagaries faced by Americans abroad. They are not innocents, far from it, yet they are citizens of a young society in conflict with older ones. These Americans often believe they will find stability and certainty in a Germany or a France, less restless places, altogether more settled. But ghosts abound, and it is the ghosts that haunt and keep haunting the people of the new world.

Ward Just is the author of twelve previous novels, including the National Book Award finalist *Echo House*. Just was awarded the 2001 James Fenimore Cooper Prize of the Society of American Historians and was a 1999 PEN/Hemingway finalist for his novel *A Dangerous Friend*. Just and his wife, Sarah Catchpole, divide their time between Martha's Vineyard and Europe. He was recently a Berlin Prize Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin.

A conversation with Ward Just, author of *The Weather in Berlin*

Q) You chose to set this novel primarily in Wannsee, the place where the Nazis' "final solution" for the Jews was devised. Why did you choose this location?

A) In 1999 I was a fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, located at Wannsee. For the novel I used the exact location for my own Mommsen Institute, which, incidentally, bears no relation to the American Academy. I could see the Wannsee Conference Center from my window; it was across the lake. The atmosphere of Wannsee is peaceful and suburban, not unlike Winnetka, Illinois, except of course for the weather. Much horror went on behind the stately face of the mansion that housed the conference center. Faces are often deceiving.

Q) Your protagonist, Dixon Greenwood, is a Hollywood film director whose artistic peak is well in his past. Why did you choose someone from filmmaking as a character?

A) My characters, especially the protagonists, are always deeply involved in their work. The last few novels of mine have featured politicians, writers, civil servants, and lawyers. In Dixon Greenwood I wanted a character whose work seems to have failed him. He believes he has lost his audience. America has gone one way and he has gone another way, and so Dix hopes that if he returns to the country of his great triumph — a film called *Summer, 1921* — he will find this audience that has eluded him. And perhaps more to the point, the audience will find him.

Q) Are there particular films that might have influenced your writing or how you look at the world?

A) There are many films I admire greatly — *The Godfathers* one and two, *Aguirre*, *Casablanca*, *The Misfits*, and many others — but I look at the world in a writerly way, the words on the page as opposed to pictures on a screen.

Q) The most mysterious character of the novel, Jana, is an actress who disappeared from the set of Greenwood's most successful film, *Summer, 1921*. She is also an ethnic minority, a Sorb, in a culture that is not known for embracing outsiders. What is it that she represents?

A) Often, characters in a novel arrive unbidden. Jana arrived and stayed and for a moment or two threatened to take it over, so I had to rein her in, restrain her, as Rommel occasionally restrained his tanks. Once you choose a minority, you have chosen an outsider, with all the anxiety and hope the term represents.

Q) Jana is not the only outsider in your story. There are those characters from the old East Germany and a Vietnamese waiter at Frau Munn's restaurant. How different is reunified Germany from other Western nations?

A) Someone said that there isn't much difference between one human being and another, but what difference there is is very important. Same with nations. German history of the twentieth century is irreconcilable, yet it must be reconciled.

Q) In what ways was the twentieth century the "German century"?

A) One of the characters in *The Weather in Berlin* believes that Germany represents the advent of the modern world, specifically the murderous twentieth century. Someone else might say it was Stalin's Soviet Union, and I would not disagree. Germany's different in that its people were probably the most talented in Europe. Certainly the most cultivated, in all the arts and sciences, including philosophy. This is worth contemplating.

Q) You often write about the American as an outsider. What is it about American culture that makes this role so full of potential?

A) This has been the theme of American writers from Twain to James to Fitzgerald to Bellow and Roth. This great, sprawling cathedral of capitalism — if you don't rebel against it, you get lost inside it.

Q) You now live full time on Martha's Vineyard. Is the community of writers there particularly social?

A) Not particularly. The only two full-time writers who live full time on the island are me and David McCullough, at least to my knowledge. The true community is the community of painters, of which there are at least a dozen who are extremely talented. So my wife and I tend to hang out with the painters, a very jolly crowd. They take their work more seriously than they take themselves.

Praise for Ward Just's previous books

Echo House:

"Ward Just knows the secret calculus of the human heart." — *Boston Globe*

"Just's reputation for shrewd and worldly fiction has gained momentum with each book." — *Booklist*

"He has earned a place on the shelf just below Edith Wharton and Henry James." — *Newsweek*

"One of the most astute writers of American fiction." — *New York Times Book Review*

"Masterpieces of balance, focus, and hidden order . . . his stories put him in the category reserved for writers who work far beyond the fashions of the times." — *Chicago Tribune*

"A spellbinding experience for anyone who has lived within the savage, weird, occasionally wonderful world of 'real' presidential politics, *Echo House* is Ward Just's own triumph, one of those truly rare books that tempt a nonstop reading." — Leonard Garment, author of *Crazy Rhythm*

A Dangerous Friend:

"A literary triumph that transcends its war story . . . Its greatness will stand the test of time." — *San Francisco Chronicle*

"[An] extraordinary new novel . . . [Ward Just brings] Vietnam alive." — *New York Times*

"There comes a moment . . . when a reader is brought up short by how spectacularly well Ward Just writes fiction . . . Its effect is nearly explosive." — *Boston Globe*

"*A Dangerous Friend* contains Just's most thoughtfully resonant prose — it's beautifully written — and its characterizations are unforgettable in their precision and accuracy. It's a meditation about the Vietnam War as well as an urgent message for the present day. Sometimes a novel of ideas can break your heart, and this is one of them." — Robert Stone

"The evil of banality is revisited in this wise, vibrant novel of Vietnam. Lest we forget, Ward Just portrays — without insistence or sententiousness — excruciating knowingness, and huge incomprehension; the armed presence, and the absence of humility and humanity. This is a story, too, and so well told, of a man's discovery of his true affinities, loyalties, and affections. Witty, thoughtful, thrilling." — Shirley Hazzard