

Charity Girl

by Michael Lowenthal

About the Book

During World War I, seventeen-year-old Frieda Mintz secures a job at a Boston department store and strikes out on her own, escaping her repressive Jewish mother and marriage to a wealthy widower twice her age. Determined to find love on her own terms, she is intoxicated by her newfound freedom and the patriotic fervor of the day. That is, until a soldier reports her as his last sexual contact, sweeping her up in the government's wartime crusade against venereal disease. Quarantined in a detention center, Frieda finds in the Home's confines a group of brash, unforgettable women who help her see the way to a new kind of independence.

Charity Girl is based on a little-known chapter in American history that saw fifteen thousand women across the nation incarcerated. Like *When the Emperor Was Divine*, Lowenthal's poignant, provocative novel will leave readers moved - and astonished by the shameful facts that inspired it.

Praise for the Book

"Lively and illuminating . . . marr[ies] the facts of history with the details that make a fictional life come alive."

—Anita Shreve *The Washington Post*

"Even while capturing the great sweep of the period, Charity Girl celebrates most the depth of the characters' lives."

—Matthew Pearl

"Harrowing yet inspiring . . . Rich in period detail, swift paced prose, and deserved political outrage."

—Kirkus Reviews

"Through the hardships of a fictional girl at a detention camp, Lowenthal skillfully lends voice to these women, while raising issues that feel relevant and immediate today."

—Boston Magazine

Courtesy of Houghton Mifflin

About the Author

Title: Michael Lowenthal

Known As: Lowenthal, Michael Francis; Lowenthal, Michael
American Novelist (1969 -)

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PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Born May 9, 1969, in Washington, DC; son of Abraham F. (a college professor) and Janet (a public interest activist and consultant) Lowenthal. Education: Dartmouth College, B.A., 1990. Memberships: PEN American Center, Authors Guild, PEN New England. Addresses: Home: Boston, MA. Agent: Mitchell S. Waters, Curtis Brown, Ltd., 10 Astor Pl., New York, NY 10003. E-mail: michael.lowenthal.90@alum.dartmouth.org.

CAREER:

Writer and educator. Ironhorse Music Hall, Northampton, MA, dishwasher and bartender, 1990-91; University Press of New England, Hanover, NH, acquisitions editor, 1991-93; freelance writer and editor, 1993-99; Boston College, Boston, MA, lecturer in creative writing, 1999-2006; Lesley University, Cambridge, MA, instructor in MFA Program, 2003--.

AWARDS:

Fellow, New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, 1995-96, Bread Loaf Writers' Conference, 1999 and 2004, Massachusetts Cultural Council, 2000-01, Wesleyan Writers Conference, 2003, and the Hawthornden International Retreat for Writers.

WORKS:

WRITINGS:

NOVELS

- *The Same Embrace*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1998.
- *Avoidance*, Graywolf Press (St. Paul, MN), 2002.
- *Charity Girl*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA), 2007.

EDITOR

- *The Best of the Badboys*, Masquerade Books (New York, NY), 1995.
- (With John Preston, and contributor) *Flesh and the Word 3: An Anthology of Gay Erotic Writing*, Penguin (New York, NY), 1995.
- (With John Preston, and contributor) *Friends and Lovers: Gay Men Write about the Families They Create*, Dutton (New York, NY), 1995.
- John Preston, *Winter's Light: Reflections of a Yankee Queer*, University Press of New England (Hanover, NH), 1995.
- *Gay Men at the Millennium: Sex, Spirit, Community*, Putnam (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Flesh and the Word 4: Beyond Porn*, Plume (New York, NY), 1997.
- *Obsessed: A Flesh and the Word Collection of Gay Erotic Memoirs*, Plume (New York, NY), 1999.

OTHER

- Work represented in anthologies, including *Men on Men 5*, edited by David Bergman, Plume (New York, NY), 1994; *Wrestling with the Angel: Faith and Religion in the Lives of Gay Men*, edited by Brian Bouldrey, Riverhead Books (New York, NY), 1995; *Best American Gay Fiction*, edited by Brian Bouldrey, Little, Brown (New York, NY), 1996; *Queer 13*, edited by Clifford Chase, William Morrow (New York, NY), 1998; *Neurotica*, edited by Melvin Bukiet, W.W. Norton (New York, NY), 1999; *Lost Tribe: Jewish Fiction from the Edge*, HarperCollins (New York, NY), 2003; *Bestial Noise: The Tin House Fiction Reader*, Bloomsbury; and *Best New American Voices 2005*, Harcourt (New York, NY). Contributor of stories, essays, poems, articles, and reviews to periodicals, including *Kenyon Review*, *Esquire.com*, *Southern review*, *Tin House*, *Witness*, *New York Times Magazine*, *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, *Boston Magazine*, *Out*, *Boston Phoenix*, *Other Voices*, *Crescent Review*, and *Columbia*.

Sidelights

Michael Lowenthal is the author of novels and an editor of numerous anthologies of gay writings. In his first novel, *The Same Embrace*, the author focuses on Jacob Rosenbaum, a young, gay Jewish man whose straight twin brother, Jonathan, cuts off relations with him after catching him engaging in sex with another man. When Jonathan finally returns to the United States after spending time in an Israeli yeshiva, the brothers must once again deal with each other as their grandmother's stroke brings them together. In the process, they learn more about their family's history concerning the Holocaust and the terrible effects it has had on their grandmother and grandfather. Judith Katz, writing in the *Lambda Book Report* noted that the author's "evocation of the Holocaust and the damage it's done to the Rosenbaum family is rendered quite beautifully." Several critics praised Rosenthal for avoiding the traps that snare many first novelists. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor, for example, wrote: "He avoids the clichés of a coming-out novel." Writing in the same review, the critic later added that *The Same Embrace* is "an impressively crafted, moving debut."

Avoidance tells the story of Jeremy Stull, a man whose father died when he was young. The novel follows Jeremy as he works at Camp Ironwood, where he once camped as a boy and is now assistant camp director in the summer. Now in college, Jeremy also studies the strict Amish community as part of his graduate studies. At the camp, Jeremy encounters a new camper and discovers that the boy has lied about his background and life. Before long, Jeremy finds himself falling in love with the boy. When he discovers that another counselor is sexually abusing the boys, Jeremy finds himself implicated despite the fact that he has done nothing wrong. The novel also revolves around Jeremy's understanding of the two very different social structures of the camp and Amish communities, and their unique brands of socialization that can lead to redemption. "Throughout *Avoidance*, Jeremy is obsessed with the idea of belonging and not belonging," wrote Martin Wilson in *Lambda Book Report*. "He realizes how the choices we make in life ripple outward as well as inward. At the end of the novel, when all of his actions and decisions are irreversible, he still doesn't know if his decisions were the right ones, and nor do the readers."

In her review of *Avoidance* in the *Library Journal*, Caroline M. Hallsworth called the novel "at times haunting and disturbing," adding later that it "is not to be missed." Other critics also praised the author for his handling of multifaceted issues and states of mind. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor wrote that the novel's "different elements form a rich, complex narrative that is as inspiring as it is thought provoking."

In his historical novel *Charity Girl*, Lowenthal tells the story of the World War I internment of 15,000 American women because they had venereal disease. The novel revolves around Frieda Mintz, a seventeen-year-old Jewish girl who has fled an arranged marriage and is in love with all the latest happenings, from silent films to the Chaplin wiggle dance craze. She is also interested in boys, which leads to an encounter with a soldier who gives her a venereal disease. This leads to Frieda being accused of prostitution, and eventually she is interned in a camp, where she meets a variety of women, including prostitutes. The story describes Frieda's hardships and growth as she suffers the hard life at the camp.

A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor wrote that *Charity Girl* is "rich in period detail, swift-paced prose and deserved political outrage." Maureen Neville, writing in the *Library Journal*, commented that the author "writes in a tempo that keeps this a spirited and exciting story." Reviewers also praised Lowenthal's depiction of Frieda. For example, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor wrote that the author "ably captures the transformation of a naive adolescent into a woman in his provocative story." Writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, Elizabeth Gaffney noted: "Lowenthal's narrative style is perfect for a heroine who suffers but remains a survivor, striking just the right mix of dark and light, worldly and innocent. Providing Frieda with flickers of humor and joy, he guarantees her our sympathy."

Among the many anthologies that Lowenthal has served as editor or coeditor of is *Flesh and the Word 3: An Anthology of Gay Erotic Writing*, which the author edited with John Preston. In a review in *Publishers Weekly*, a contributor wrote: "The collection successfully includes varieties of class and sexuality." Lowenthal took on sole editorial duties for *Flesh and the Word 4: Beyond Porn*, which features all true stories as opposed to the fictional creations featured in the

three previous volumes in the series. A *Publishers Weekly* contributor noted that the anthology is successful "not only as an erotic anthology but also as a sociological snapshot of contemporary gay male sexual consciousness." As editor of *Friends and Lovers: Gay Men Write about the Families They Create*, Lowenthal presents gay writers writing about their love lives and families. Ray Olson, writing in *Booklist*, called the anthology "a worthwhile addition to popular gay studies."

Lowenthal also served as editor of the late John Preston's *Winter's Light: Reflections of a Yankee Queer*, which features autobiographical sketches, essays and tributes focusing primarily on the acceptance of homosexuality. *Gay Men at the Millennium: Sex, Spirit, Community* is a collection of essays edited by the author and focusing on an examination of various aspects of gay life. Richard Violette, writing in the *Library Journal* commented that "the opinions expressed are mostly thoughtful, sometimes provocative, and never dull." Lowenthal presents a variety of recollections in *Obsessed: A Flesh and the Word Collection of Gay Erotic Memoirs*. *Lambda Book Report* contributor David May noted that the book "is ultimately one of the more satisfying collections of sexual writing it has been my pleasure to read."

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PERIODICALS

- *Advocate*, August 31, 1999, Robert L. Pela, review of *Obsessed: A Flesh and the Word Collection of Gay Erotic Memoirs*, p. 75.
- *Booklist*, April 15, 1995, Ray Olson, review of *Friends and Lovers: Gay Men Write about the Families They Create*, p. 1457; August, 1998, Gilbert Taylor, review of *The Same Embrace*, p. 1966; November 1, 2006, Marta Segal Block, review of *Charity Girl*, p. 29.
- *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, November-December, 2002, Marshall Moore, review of *Avoidance*, p. 47.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, September 1, 2002, review of *Avoidance*, p. 1254; September 15, 2006, review of *Charity Girl*, p. 925.
- *Lambda Book Report*, September-October, 1995, Lawrence Schimel, review of *Flesh and the Word 3: An Anthology of Gay Erotic Writing*, p. 46; September, 1998, Judith Katz, review of *The Same Embrace*, p. 25; July-August, 1999, David May, review of *Obsessed*, p. 27; July, 2001, Martin Wilson, "More than I Asked For," includes discussion of author and writing, p. 29; October, 2002, Martin Wilson, review of *Avoidance*, p. 37.
- *Library Journal*, September 15, 1997, Richard Violette, review of *Gay Men at the Millennium: Sex, Spirit, Community*, p. 92; October 1, 2002, Caroline M. Hallsworth, review of *Avoidance*, p. 128; January 1, 2007, Maureen Neville, review of *Charity Girl*, p. 96.
- *New York Times Book Review*, February 4, 2007, Elizabeth Gaffney, review of *Charity Girl*, p. 18.
- *New York Times*, January 20, 2007, Dinitia Smith, review of *Charity Girl*, p. B7.

- *Publishers Weekly*, April 3, 1995, review of *Friends and Lovers*, p. 51; May 8, 1995, review of *Flesh and the Word 3*, p. 292; July 17, 1995, review of *Winter's Light: Reflections of a Yankee Queer*, p. 212; April 21, 1997, review of *Flesh and the Word 4: Beyond Porn*, p. 61; July 6, 1998, review of *The Same Embrace*, p. 49; April 5, 1999, review of *Obsessed*, p. 229; October 14, 2002, review of *Avoidance*, p. 63; September 11, 2006, review of *Charity Girl*, p. 32.

ONLINE

- *Michael Lowenthal Home Page*, <http://lowenthal.etherweave.com> (April 11, 2007).
- *Nothing More Wonderful Blog*, <http://iread.wordpress.com/> (February 1, 2007), review of *Charity Girl*.
- *Philadelphia Inquirer Web site*, <http://www.philly.com/inquirer/> (March 18, 2007), Sarah Weinman, review of *Charity Girl*.

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Discussion Questions

1. At the center of the novel hangs an ethical dilemma, where the rights of the few are weighed against the health and safety of many. Would you consider the government's moral crusade reasonable, given the circumstances of wartime? In what other way might the need to maintain a healthy army have been addressed? In what circumstances do we face similar choices today? What modern relevance does Frieda's story have?
2. How would you describe Frieda Mintz's personality, and how does Lowenthal bring her to life? Does she seem particularly rebellious or attracted to danger, or is she more a regular girl trapped in a series of bad situations? Did you find yourself sympathizing with her, identifying with her? Were you ever frustrated by her actions? Placed in her situation, would you have made the same choices that she did? How does Frieda change during the course of the book?
3. *Charity Girl* opens in Boston in 1918; at the time, employment choices for women were limited. Why does the prospect of being a shopgirl at Jordan Marsh so appeal to Frieda? Aside from her wages, how does her job benefit her?
4. Frieda moves to a boarding house in the city as a form of self-imposed exile from her mother and their Russian immigrant community. What other instances of banishment and displacement—self-imposed or otherwise—are found in the novel? How do these instances resonate with each other?
5. Frieda's friend Lou explains the rules for the dance: "Getting treated when you pick up guys is one thing...and we're lots of us charity girls. But it's never just for money, straight out." Why did the shopgirls like Lou and Frieda note such fine distinctions? Why was it important to them to set up such boundaries? What irony is there in the fact that Frieda was incarcerated nonetheless? Do you agree with Mrs. Sprague's assessment that the so-called 'charity girls' are more a threat than prostitutes? Were these 'charity girls' exploited, do you think, by their employers, by their suitors?
6. Did you find Felix an honorable character? What clues does Lowenthal give about his true regard for Frieda? Why does Frieda hold such unwavering belief in the rightness of his actions?
7. Frieda meets many vivid women at the Home. Each of her fellow detainees—Flossie, Jo, Yetta, Hattie, Melba, Fleur—has a different response to incarceration. What factors contributed to these diverse reactions? With which woman's response did you identify most? How do you think you might have responded if you had found yourself indefinitely detained?

8. Though the rounding up and subsequent detention of thousands of women like Frieda seems appalling from a modern vantage, some of the characters in the book earnestly believe they are performing a public service by participating in the government's program. What motivates Mrs. Sprague or Alice Longley or Dr. Slocum to be party to the situation? Is their participation defensible?
9. Biology doesn't support Mrs. Sprague's notion that women are more to blame than men for spreading disease. Why do you think only women were targets of the government's detention efforts?
10. The novel is infused with themes of trust—and betrayal of trust. What are some instances of trust being misplaced? When is trust abused? What are the consequences of the many betrayals of trust in the book?
11. Set during a time of intense, perhaps overbearing, patriotism, the novel explores questions of identity and group belonging. Consider Frieda's Jewish upbringing and her relationship to her religious identity. Felix is also Jewish, but from a well-to-do, assimilating family; does Frieda have more in common with him, because they're both Jewish, or with the gentile girls she works with, because they're all similarly impoverished? Yetta perhaps holds out another model of Judaism, that of an agitator for social justice. Frieda seems both drawn to and repelled by her. Why?
12. The novel's epigram reads: "Charity causes half the suffering she relieves, but she cannot relieve half the suffering she has caused." What do you think this means in the context of the novel? In the course of the story, who gives what to whom, and what, if anything, do they expect in return? If charity comes with real or perceived strings attached, can it be true charity?
13. Why do you think the author chose to write about the book's subject matter as an imagined story rather than as a nonfiction account? What information does historical fiction provide that may be absent from works of history or the official record? How is the experience of reading Frieda's story different from reading nonfiction accounts of the time? How, if at all, does the novelist's modern perspective color the way he portrays historic characters and events? What draws you to historical novels?
14. Why do you suppose the historical episode on which the novel was based, which saw some 15,000 women incarcerated, remains so little known in America today? Which, if any, events of our times are in danger of being similarly lost to posterity?
15. Do you think, in the end, that Frieda finds redemption? What do you imagine her life is like after the War? What does the final sequence tell you about her fate? Is it an ending you would have wished for her?

Courtesy Houghton Mifflin