



Book of Clouds

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Book of Clouds is a haunting, masterfully wrought debut novel about a young woman adrift in Berlin, where a string of fateful encounters leads to romance, violence, and revelation. Having escaped her overbearing family a continent away, Tatiana settles in Berlin and cultivates solitude while distancing herself from the city's past. Yet the phantoms of Berlin--seeping in through the floorboards of her apartment, lingering in the abandoned subterranea--are more alive to her than the people she passes on her daily walks. When she takes a job transcribing notes for the reclusive historian Doktor Weiss, her life in Berlin becomes more complex--and more perilous. Through Weiss, she meets Jonas, a meteorologist who, as a child in the GDR, took solace in the sky's constant shape-shifting, an antidote to his grim and unyielding reality. As their three paths intersect and merge, the contours of all their worlds change, culminating in an act of violence that will leave none of them untouched. Unfolding with the strange, charged logic of a dream, *Book of Clouds* is a profound portrait of a city forever in flux, and of the myths we cling to in order to give shape to our lives.

Book of Clouds Details

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Author : Chloe Aridjis

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From Reader Review Book of Clouds for online ebook

Lynn says

This book freaked me out a bit at parts as I celebrated 5 years in Hamburg while reading about the main character having spent 5 years in Berlin. I enjoyed the parts of life in Germany as I could so closely relate; however, at times it was also tedious because I felt like I was reading about parts of my every day life which I try to escape through reading! A lovely little book though though.

Kerfe says

After a few chapters I thought: a ghost story. And indeed at the end the narrator notes that "there was little difference between clouds and shadows and other phenomena given shape by the human imagination."

Is there any substance to this story? It's not just that Tatiana sees and feels and hears ghosts; every action, every thought, every word seems haunted by the past and the horrors of humanity. There is no anchor, no context to make anything real. Changes are too vast and unpredictable to find a place in. All is disguise, smoke and mirrors, chalk on the wall.

In some respects the unresolved narrative reminds me of another book I recently read, "Event Factory". As with that novel the writing is crisp, precise, simple, yet also eloquent, creating tension with atmosphere rather than action.

Tatiana is going back, attempting to escape to a solid past, but her ability to reconnect and fit into its substance is elusive and unknown. Clouds both surround and fill a formless future of uncertainty.

Kasey Jueds says

Admired this without loving it... though some pages/passages I really did adore. It's definitely not everyone's cup of tea: extremely interior and meditative, and not big on plot. I usually like those things, and, like I said, I was swept away by some sections; the narrator's voice is so strange and unlike anything else I've ever encountered in fiction; she's believably and (to me) sympathetically neurotic and obsessive and all her emotions are thoroughly ambiguous. And the descriptions of Berlin are just as meditative and odd and other-worldly as the speaker's thoughts; it comes across as a city full of ghosts and hidden spaces and mystery and a very-much present past. So why didn't I fall in love with this book? I'm puzzled about that... maybe it just wasn't the perfect time for me to read it. But even so, I'm glad I did.

Sam says

"Book of Clouds" is one of the must-reads of 2009. As Wendy Lesser wrote in The New York Times, "First novels by young writers who see the world with a fresh, original vision and write about it with clarity and

restraint are rare enough to begin with. When you add in the fact that Chloe Aridjis' "Book of Clouds" is also a stunningly accurate portrait of Berlin, as well as a thoughtful portrayal of a young Mexican Jew drifting through her life abroad, this novel becomes required reading of the most pleasurable sort." The Los Angeles Times reviewer noted that "Magic and poetry are everywhere in "Book of Clouds," and the reader who can appreciate 'the fogs of time and the obfuscation that surrounds them' will find here an unsettling atmosphere unlike anything in recent fiction."

And Eileen Battersby, Literary Correspondent of The Irish Times, has written: "AND NOW for something completely different: Chloe Aridjis brings a bit of realism, a bit of wonder, a hint of darkness and true originality to this sharp, lyric and beguilingly strange tale of a life in flux...this book is irresistible... "Book of Clouds" soars and shimmers through its assured writing, whimsical observations and its sheer ease. It is a story about thinking concerned with questioning life and drifting through it; it's about knowing that sometimes even trying to take control is a waste of time....,Aridjis, at this early stage of her career, has learnt the value of less is more. Every nuance counts in this virtuoso performance. You feel yourself transported to Berlin, more importantly you feel as if the narrator is addressing you because she believes you will understand...Aridjis knows all about conveying the complex inner life of the mind. Her feel for characterisation is instinctive and true. "Book of Clouds" is what happens when a gifted writer heeds her masters and also listens to herself...memorable offbeat, engaging and compelling narrative with its wry intelligence and grasp of the darker fears of the imagination."

Andrew says

A very quiet, meditative book about a Mexican woman adrift in Berlin. Tatiana is alienated from her family and her friends, cut off from the rest of the city, uninterested in forming a relationship with anyone. She gets a part-time job doing transcription work for a historian, goes on a few lacklustre dates with a fairly nondescript meteorologist, becomes slightly obsessed with a mentally ill woman, avoids her neighbours, develops insomnia. The book meanders along like this for most of the 200 pages, as aimless as the passage of a cloud across the sky, before something quite dramatic happens almost out of nowhere.

History plays a major role in the book, particularly the dark stories that lurk beneath the surface. There are plenty of those in Berlin, both from the Nazi and the Communist era, buildings in which people were imprisoned or tortured, now converted into schools, apartment buildings and water towers. Right at the beginning of the book, Tatiana sees what she believes is an aged Hitler dressed as a woman on an underground train. Then there's the underground Gestapo bowling alley that Tatiana explores late at night and almost gets trapped inside when she runs away from her group to go and rub out the chalked scores from the board. There's the upstairs part of her building, where nobody seems to live but from which strange noises appear. She goes up there, looking for ghosts perhaps, and finds a dark stain on the wall which reminds her of the scores she rubbed out:

"wondering whether this dark imprint was somehow mocking me, reminding me of the inevitable, which was, of course, that nothing can be truly rubbed away or blotted out, and how the more you try to rub something away the darker it becomes."

This, it seems, is a major theme of the book. There's not too much background about Tatiana's life in Mexico so it's never very clear what she's trying to blot out, but she is definitely trying. I read in an interview that an earlier draft of this book had more of the Mexican backstory included, but was cut out from the final version. The effect is to leave much unanswered, which can be a good thing, but it also made it

difficult to understand the character's alienation.

Overall: beautiful, dreamy writing, lots of solitary musing and a good sense of the city of Berlin and its history. But the character is essentially solitary and self-absorbed, which can be frustrating. If you're prepared to let things meander along, enjoy the elegant writing, appreciate the sharp observations and muse on the possible truths hidden in the shapes of the clouds, this would be a good read. But if you want a plot that develops or characters that interact with each other in comprehensible ways, this is probably not the book for you.

Rosamund says

I can sum the book up in one word: implausible.

There's the fact the protagonist has lived in Berlin five years and hasn't met *anyone* who sticks with her. The book is also littered with words nobody uses in real life (at one point a character says 'Look at those noctilucent clouds'. They are a cloud expert, but you wouldn't just drop that into conversation without explaining yourself... this is just one example of the wooden dialogue featured in the book). Then the magical realism bit at the end that came out of nowhere.

Novels don't need to have plots, necessarily, but unfortunately this wasn't written well, either. I give it 2 stars rather than 1 because some of the feelings about making your home in a foreign country were well-described.

Damian says

This book is lovely, it's prose in places as light as the clouds of the title, in places as dark. It's hard to know what other readers would make of it and whether to recommend it due to it's strong reliance on the topography of Berlin to create it's story and moods.

I love Berlin, adore it, and I found myself mentally walking it's pathways whilst reading the book, finding myself in the grey shadow of the Fernsehturm or the more bohemian setting of Prenzlauer Berg. From the Geisterbahnhof (ghost stations) left abandoned during the wall years to the announcements of the U-Bahn it is highly evocative of place. So much so that it's the reason I think some people will enjoy this far less than I have. It's hard to know what someone who has never spent time in Berlin will feel upon reading it, if the names and places will create any kind of feeling or spark as they are clearly intended too. I feel not, and so then drained of the history of place or the joy of recognition; of matching the mood of the city to the mood of the book, will it still be as good as I found it to be? I tend to think not. For this reason I'd say, if you're remotely familiar with Berlin give it a go and if you're not approach with caution and then read it anyway.

Judy says

Why did this get magnificent reviews--a young / pretty author? So much of the writing was not good, the scenes obvious constructs.

Lee Razer says

Essentially a brooding, atmospheric illumination of the city of Berlin. The city is certainly the co-main character of the novel, at least, and it feels here like a dark, dense stain sinking into the fabric of the universe. It is the shadowed spot left on the wall of the empty apartment above the protagonist that is not covered up even when a new tenant arrives to rehabilitate the space. It is the secret underground bowling alley of the Nazis, or the Stasi, it makes little difference which, where the ghosts impatiently wait to reclaim the place.

The tone is brilliantly set from the opening paragraph: "It was an evening when the moral remains of the city bobbed up to the surface and floated like driftwood before sinking back down to the seabed to further splinter and rot." Now there's a sentence to make any city's Chamber of Commerce fall to its knees in pain.

The narrative vehicle for this contemporary analysis of Berlin is the story of Tatiana, a young woman from a Mexican Jewish family, who has lived in Berlin for several years. She muddles along in the post-German reunification haze, working part-time for a historian, transcribing his spoken notes. She has difficulty making any real connection with people or work and bounces along on each path, unable to settle anywhere for long. Berlin's past seems to colonize her imagination, leaving her unbalanced in the present. Ultimately an act of violence (with a resolution from the school of urban magical realism) prompts her to sever ties with the city and return to her family in Mexico.

All in all, a well-written debut novel to be read for its take on the interplay of past and present.

Rachel says

While there are some beautiful passages that I felt read true about my own experiences in Germany, the book lacked momentum and I wasn't fond of the narrators complacency, which oftentimes came across as mopey or listless. Tatiana's clouds or dreams or delusions, or whatever you want to call them, weren't interesting enough to make me feel connected to this "slice of life" story.

Jim Elkins says

When inadequate imagination leads the reader out of the book and to the author

"Book of Clouds" is well enough observed, paced, and structured. It has some ingredients of a good novel: but it's trite, and the reason for its triviality is a strange lacuna in the author's imagination of her main character. The Mexican woman who wanders around Berlin, taking pleasure in riding the S-Bahn, in long walks, and in the weather, is a habitually solitary person. She isn't often lonely, but even after five years in Berlin she has only three or four acquaintances, including a homeless woman who begs on a train platform -- and she only talks to that person once. The lacuna is not the character's solitary life, which is expertly observed. The absence I have in mind springs from two two higher-level absences:

First, there's a lack of anxiety on the character's part that she is so isolated, so without interests. She knows, in the novel, that she has no friends and often does nothing for weeks or months at a time, but she is not

anxious about it: it's almost as if she is on a strong course of antidepressants, so that her condition doesn't affect her.

Second, there's a lack of interest on the implied author's part that her character is isolated and without interests. The character is clearly occasionally delusional, but that does not seem to concern the implied author.

It is, in the end, disengaging to read about a character who does not care to know more about herself, described by a novelist who doesn't seem to notice that there might be more to see.

At the beginning of the book, the character imagines seeing an aging Hitler (as a woman!) on a train, and throughout the novel she remains convinced of what she thinks she's seen. At the end of the book, she hallucinates a dense fog that loosens locks throughout Berlin and causes posters to slip down from the walls. Because the character never doubts either event, the novel creates an opening: I expected the narrator to develop a story about her mildly, occasionally delusional protagonist, and I thought the novel would probably develop into a story about her decline.

But it's as if the implied author herself is unaware of the deeper psychology of her own character. In the course of the novel, the character experiences several other unusual events, and she's uncertain about a couple of things, but nothing comes of them. Increasingly, I thought not of the character or narrator, or even of the implied author, but of the real author, Aridjis. (Even though I know nothing about her.) I had no clear sense that she meant anything by these events, other than the passing whimsy that life is sometimes odd. And I could not -- cannot -- understand how Aridjis didn't experience her own character's inner life as anything except mildly surrealist and entertaining, harmless, ultimately ordinary. That's why in the end I was more concerned about Aridjis (even though as a good poststructuralist I know that she's a projection of the reading experience, and nothing would come of finding out more about her) than her novel.

Ursula says

Book of Clouds is the story of an ex-pat Mexican woman living an aimless existence in Berlin. The writing is poetic at times but often veers in the direction of pointless neurosis. The main character, Tatiana, is mildly interesting but as the story goes on, it becomes obvious that she's loveless and bored in nearly every aspect of her life. The sex scene is described in such exceedingly chaste terms that it appears the author was shy or uncomfortable writing it. There are moments of beauty in the book but overall, it was plot-less and a tad too dreamy. I recommend this book only if you have a free rainy day and a comfortable couch. You could easily read this book from cover to cover in a sitting or two.

Mary Warnement says

I was a little unsure of the chronology, of the narrator's age. She's 14 in 1986 but seemed to write as if in her early 20s in 2009. Perhaps that was the point. She was in limbo. I chose this book for its Berlin setting as well for its excellent reviews and lovely size. It is a pleasure to hold in one's hands and to read. What a contrast to the Dutch author, whose characters' musings seemed so false. Tatiana, a Mexican fluent in German and living in Berlin, is not an academic but every thought sounded genuinely intelligent. Her professor, Doktor Weiss, though past his prime, rang true as well.

Her Jewishness and the Holocaust was easy to forget. Look at reference's to her family's deli in Mexico and pages 182 "the exception of a few unfortunate years" and 187 "the old Jew probably laid a curse on us." The midnight visit to Berlin's monument to the murdered Jews of Europe where she reluctantly plays hide and seek with her date, is it a metaphor for today's Berlin.

17 Xolo, the Mexican breed of dog that in Aztec mythology leads humans through underworld. [He belongs to Doktor Weiss]

33 Doktor Weiss preparing an essay on history and space in Berlin: "Spaces cling to their pasts, he said, and sometimes the present finds a way of accommodating this past and sometimes it doesn't. At best, a peaceful coexistence is struck up between temporal plans but most of the time it is a constant struggle for dominion.

61 Jonas, the East German meteorologist and love interest studies clouds especially.

73-74 The Simpleton of Alexanderplatz. 74 "The smile seemed to get in the way of language."

104 In thinking on her failed friendship with Sonia, a trainer, Tatiana wonders about one's inner landscape. This made me consider my own inner landscape, which I think would be an interior view, looking out. Paintings with views into other rooms--through doors--or outside--through windows--attract me.

139 Tatiana in bed at night: "me, the village idiot from Mexico who actually thought she knew Berlin and its inhabitants well enough to go up and demand answers to mindless questions only a tourist would ask."

143 Tatiana compares fingernails to days: "You would only notice the erosion if my hands were at rest, otherwise the nails still looked elegant, a harmonious blur, just like the days themselves, which passed without consequence unless you pinned one down and examined it too closely."

143 ff Midnight trip to Holocaust memorial: "the 2711 concrete slabs like a stalled army converging from all sides. Despite the hundreds of possible exits and entrances it was hard not to feel an immediate wave of claustrophobia and disorientation, and wherever I looked I saw dark pillars..."

186-194 Fog

198 "The gaps in conversation were not because there was nothing to say but rather because there was too much to say." [with Doktor Weiss in hospital]

203 "Once you decide to leave, you view a city through an entirely different lens."

205 [Going home to Mexico] "The only way to move on is to avoid sentimentality about the past, especially the recent past, which will always try to reclaim you."

Yentl Reynders says

The most uneventful book I've read in a long time.

Ann-sofie says

Min gode vän och följeslagare i Berlin. 4 ?? och tack för det. Den har sina sidor och jag vet precis hur den sista fjärdedelen borde ha skrivits. Men läs den. I Berlin.

Shinelle says

Book of Clouds is well-written, in that it employs some beautiful metaphors and intriguing turns of phrase. The author plays with language to great effect. The story may ring true to anyone who has studied abroad, and certainly I now know more about the German transit system than I ever expected to know. The problem with the novel is conflict. There really isn't any, or at least none sufficiently compelling to necessitate the novel's existence. The only questions posed get answered without ever building any true tension, and so there is never a real climax. In fact, the greatest source of conflict comes from a source outside the protagonists circle of acquaintances, and it is brief and wholly unrelated to anything else that has happened. It may be that the author is using the plot to underline the cloud metaphor: that no matter what we do or how much we attempt to control fate, external forces may blow us off course or change our natures completely. That's fine, but a more urgent conflict, or at least stronger action on the protagonists part, would better convey this idea. Still, the writing is good, and that plus the German background makes the novel worth perusing.

Kinga says

Reading this was like lying on the grass and watching clouds. After two hours nothing truly happened, although something beautiful transpired and you feel like a poet.

As the back cover would tell you 'Book of Clouds' is about a Mexican woman adrift in Berlin. I quite liked that this immigrant story did not include the British/American perspective. The world Tatiana came from and the world she came to are both foreign worlds to a regular British or American. Aridjis successfully married off Latin American melancholy and magical realism with German modernism and suffocating history penetrating every street and every building.

Some reviewers said they wanted to know more about the reason behind Tatiana's disconnection with the world and her taste for escaping. It seems to me that those readers are used to those books where one secret explains all. Real life ain't like that. Sometimes you just can't connect with the world, because you can't, and not because your dad accidentally killed your mother, or because your fiance ran away with your sister.

I felt this book like I haven't felt a book in a long while. I felt the bits about the light and the darkness, the bits about sounds invading your sleep, the bits about trying hard to keep your neurosis in check. And the part about wanting to move away and start anew knowing damn well nothing really changes. And of course, the bit about detachable shower heads.

And when the old professor fumbled with a broken Dictaphone looking worried and helpless I wanted to cry and then Tatiana cried too and that's when I decided I would give this book five stars.

Mind the Book says

Debut av nu Londonbaserad mexikansk författare med fett kulturellt kapital. I Frankrike förärad 'Prix du Premier Roman Etranger'.

Ojämn, men är ju svag för melankoliska flanörromaner. Berlinmiljön är mkt bekant och härlig, med S-bahnnörderier och Fernsehturmkärlek. men bjuder också på nya bilder i huvudet, t.ex. molnfantasten som sitter på 18:e våningen i sitt Plattenbau i Marzahn och pratar alltmedan han omedvetet skapar egna mentholcigarettmoln.

#BOTNS-bingo: Självgott fnissande kryssar jag kategorin 'Has water on the cover'!

Ugh says

My missus was given this as a present by a friend who'd recently moved back to London, having spent six months in Berlin. We're not entirely unfamiliar with Berlin ourselves: we spent a few days there a couple of summers ago, and said friend showed us around.

The missus didn't much like the book, and she warned me I wouldn't either, but I wanted to read something that wasn't set in the UK or US, and all of the local bookshops were closed for the extended bank holiday weekend, so I was stuck with what I could find on our bookshelves. This was nice and thin, so it won.

I hated the first chapter, and I don't think it would be too much of a spoiler if I told you what that chapter consists of: the narrator thinking she sees Hitler dressed in drag on the metro on a night in the late 80s. Yes, really. How teenage, how crass, how utterly boring. I very nearly gave up in disgust right then and there.

But, since there was nothing else to take its place, I ploughed on.

Book of Clouds is Aridjis' first novel, and it shows. Some of the early attempts to be all observant and writerly had me stifling snorts of derision, such as:

'The rain made a deafening sound, an uneven pour like the decanting of ten thousand aquariums, and I stood at my window ... watching as the rain washed the dirt from car windows, promises from fulfillment, and a small bird from a nest.'

Many events seem plonked into the novel for no more reason than to justify the shoehorning in of some such writerly observation or metaphor, the vast majority of which are jarringly unilluminating. And nothing that happens ever matters, and none of the imagery comes to anything, and none of it leads anywhere. According to the cover of the copy I read, Paul Auster liked BoC, and I can see why.

But... it's written with such brevity that it flies by in just a few hours, and somewhere along the way I did find myself enjoying it ever so slightly. Not every observation or metaphor is terrible, and not all of the plot points are uninspired, and at least one of the three main characters is fairly interesting. Berlin itself isn't really brought to life, nor is the narrator, nor is the perspective of an isolated foreigner in a city with history,

but when all 209 of these gossamer-thin pages are placed side by side, somehow they combine to make a heftier, more purposeful thread than their initial weightlessness would lead you to expect.

2.5 stars if I could, but 3 not so begrudgingly.

Lisa says

One of those books that is very well written but doesn't really go anywhere ... but makes you think ...
