



## GRAND HOTEL

by Vicki Baum

Translated from the German by Basil Creighton  
with revisions by Margot Bettauer Dembo

Introduction by Noah Isenberg

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A bestseller upon its first publication in 1929, *Grand Hotel* is prolific German author Vicki Baum's celebrated novel about the inhabitants of a grand hotel in 1920s Berlin. *Grand Hotel* is considered to be the book that introduced the "hotel novel" genre to readers.

### ABOUT THIS BOOK

**Vicki Baum** (1888–1960) was born in Vienna. One of the world's best-selling authors, she is credited with inventing the "hotel novel" genre with *Grand Hotel*.

**Basil Creighton** (1886–1989) was a writer and prolific translator of German literature.

**Margot Bettauer Dembo** has translated numerous works by German authors, including *Transit* by Anna Seghers, published by NYRB Classics. She was awarded the Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator's Prize in 2003. She lives in New York City.

**Noah Isenberg** teaches at The New School. His most recent book is *Edgar G. Ulmer: A Filmmaker at the Margins*. He lives in New York City.

A grand hotel in the center of 1920s Berlin serves as a microcosm of the modern world in Vicki Baum's celebrated novel, a Weimar-era best seller that retains all its verve and luster today. Among the guests of the hotel is Doctor Otternschlag, a World War I veteran whose face has been sliced in half by a shell. Day after day he emerges to read the paper in the lobby, discreetly inquiring at the desk if the letter he's been awaiting for years has arrived. Then there is Grusinskaya, a great ballerina now fighting a losing battle not so much against age as against her fear of it, who may or may not be made for Gaigern, a sleek professional thief. Herr Preysing also checks in, the director of a family firm that isn't as flourishing as it appears, who would never imagine that Kringelein, his underling, a timorous petty clerk he's bullied for years, has also come to Berlin, determined to live at last now that he's received a medical death sentence. All these characters and more, with all their secrets and aspirations, come together and come alive in the pages of Baum's delicious and disturbing masterpiece.

### FOR DISCUSSION

1. How would you describe the tone of the novel, and why do you think Vicki Baum chose to write the book in that style?
2. In the introduction, Noah Isenberg includes a quote from the Norwegian crime novel *Death Enters the Hotel*: "Once again it is confirmed that a large hotel is a world unto itself and that this world is like the rest of the large world. The guests here roam about in their light-hearted, careless summer existence without suspecting anything of the strange mysteries circulating among them." In what ways is Baum's hotel a "world unto itself"? Did you feel that the characters in the story viewed the hotel in that way?
3. Several of the characters in the novel are old or aging. In what ways does the theme of decay play out in the book?

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4. In the introduction, Noah Isenberg writes, “The city has a distinct life of its own, like another character among the human beings who circulate within it.” In what ways does Berlin function as a character in the novel?
5. On page 157, Kringelein asks the Baron, “But what is life, Herr Baron? You see, Baron, I am no longer young, and besides I am not in good health, and then you suddenly feel afraid—so afraid—of missing life altogether. I don’t want to miss life, if you understand?” The Baron replies: “You can’t very well miss that. It’s always there. You live—and that’s all there is to it.” How do these differing philosophies about life develop in the book? Which characters ascribed to each man’s understanding of life?
6. What was your impression of the stenographer Flämmchen? Did you find that she was a particularly modern character?
7. Describe the Baron Gaigern. How did your impression of him change when he fell in love with the ballerina Grusinskaya? What does the Baron’s friendship with Kringelein reveal about him as a character?
8. What role does the veteran Dr. Otternschlag play in the novel? Did you find that his character represented something larger, socially or politically? On the last page of the book, Baum writes, “Doctor Otternschlag sat in the middle of the Lounge, a fossilized image of Loneliness and Death. He has his regular place so he stays on. His yellow hands hang down like lead, and with his glass eye he stares out onto the street, which is full of sunshine that he cannot see. . . .” Why do you think Baum chose to conclude the novel with an image of Otternschlag?
9. Did you find the end of the novel satisfying?

#### IDEAS FOR READING GROUPS

##### To watch:

*Grand Hotel*, directed by Edmund Goulding, starring Greta Garbo, John Barrymore, and Joan Crawford (1932)

*Metropolis*, directed by Fritz Lang, starring Brigitte Helm Alfred Abel, and Gustav Fröhlich (1927)

*Berlin Alexanderplatz* (TV miniseries), directed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, starring Günter Lamprecht, Hanna Schygulla, Barbara Sukowa, Elisabeth Trissenaar, and Gottfried John (1980)

*The Grand Budapest Hotel*, directed by Wes Anderson, starring Ralph Fiennes, F. Murray Abraham, Mathieu Amalric (2014)

(Wes Anderson’s *The Grand Budapest Hotel* was inspired by the books of Stefan Zweig. NYRB Classics publishes Zweig’s *Beware of Pity*, *Chess Story*, *Confusion*, *Journey Into The Past*, and *The Post-Office Girl*.)