

## BIOGRAPHY

Stefan Zweig (1881–1942), an enormously popular and prolific author, studied philosophy and literature and lived and worked at the center of Vienna’s pan-European culture. A secular Jew, he wrote books and essays not only on fellow Austrians Mahler, Schnitzler, Freud, and Rilke, but also on Magellan, Erasmus, Montaigne, Stendhal, Dickens, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Nietzsche; translated Verlaine and Baudelaire; and wrote books which later became the beloved Hollywood movies *Marie Antoinette* (1938, with Norma Shearer) and *Letter From an Unknown Woman* (1948, directed by Max Ophüls). His most famous books are *Chess Story* and *Beware of Pity*, both published by NYRB, and the autobiography *The World of Yesterday*. He escaped Austria in 1934 and Europe in 1940, but not his despair over the annihilation of everything he believed in—he died in a double suicide with his wife in exile in Brazil in 1942.

## THE POST-OFFICE GIRL

by Stefan Zweig

Translated from the German by Joel Rotenberg

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"Stefan Zweig was a late and magnificent bloom from the hothouse of fin de siècle Vienna...The posthumous publication of a Zweig novel affords an opportunity to revisit this gifted writer...*The Post-Office Girl* is captivating." —*The Wall Street Journal*

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

Stefan Zweig’s searing novel *The Post-Office Girl* is the story of Christine, an ordinary young woman struggling to get by in the economic and social collapse of post-World War I Austria. Her middle-class family life destroyed in the war, she now lives alone with her mother in grinding poverty, until an unexpected letter from a long-lost aunt invites her to an innocent, carefree vacation in the Alps. She adapts with terrifying ease to the glittering new world of wealth and privilege that opens up for her; she loses herself, or maybe finds herself, in a desperate self-indulgence that is “the only way to make up for years and years of terrible hunger” (page 78). But circumstances are as changeable as she is, and soon she is hurled back down from the mountain like a fallen angel, condemned to a hell of self-knowledge and resentment about circumstances that are no longer bearable.

When she meets Ferdinand, an unemployed veteran and ex-prisoner of war, they form a deep connection based on their common feeling that their youth and lives have been stolen from them. Even so, with such a grotesque contrast between the haves and the have-nots, neither of them can escape desperation—until all that remains is the dream of violently breaking the bonds of society altogether.

The vise-like grip of crushing social forces is paralleled, in a way, by the relentless inevitability of Zweig’s narrative: the story of *The Post-Office Girl* powers ahead like a fairy tale, a hardboiled mystery, or a myth. Zweig wrote it in the early 1930s, while Hitler was coming to power and the European civilization of Zweig’s liberal ideals—worldly, compassionate, cultivated, tolerant, sensitive, self-aware, and reflexively ironic—was crumbling around him. The resulting book is despairing and visionary, pitiless and at the same time deeply sympathetic to a lost generation of ordinary men and women brought down by the collapse of a society and an era.

## FOR DISCUSSION

1. The first scene of the book is constructed around descriptions of inside and outside: the worlds behind and in front of the counter in the post office. In the official area, time has stopped: “no visible change is allowed” (page 5). How do these oppositions frame the story as a whole? What happens when you let different worlds mix together?
2. In retrospect, Christine was right to feel scared about leaving her village, and at the end of Part One she thinks “it might be better not to know you’re so poor” (page 145). Is it better not to know? Do you think she should have turned down the invitation and stayed at home?
3. There are many darkly ironic questions during Christine’s stay in the Alps: “Why shouldn’t she have something special for a few days,” Christine’s aunt says (page 45); Christine herself thinks, “Everyone’s so kind, what is there to be afraid of?” (page 77). Did these questions give you a sense of foreboding, or did they seem innocent? Looking back, how would you answer them? Why *shouldn’t* Christine, for example, have something special for a few days?

## OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

**Beware of Pity**

Stefan Zweig  
(translated from the German by Phyllis and Trevor Blewitt and with an introduction by Joan Acocella)

**Chess Story**

Stefan Zweig  
(translated from the German by Joel Rotenberg and with an introduction by Peter Gay)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Willa Cather, *My Antonia*

Alfred Döblin,  
*Berlin Alexanderplatz*

Theodore Dreiser, *Sister Carrie*

F. Scott Fitzgerald,  
*The Great Gatsby*

F. Scott Fitzgerald,  
*Tender Is the Night*

Ernest Hemingway,  
*A Farewell to Arms*

Richard Sennett,  
*The Hidden Injuries of Class*

4. When Christine looks at herself in the mirror in her new clothes, the book says: “This is the beginning of the delirium of transformation” (page 56). (The novel’s original title was *The Delirium of Transformation*.) When does the delirium of transformation end for Christine? Is she still changing, or still delirious, in Part Two of the book? What about at the very end?
5. In her new surroundings, Christine realizes, or thinks she realizes, that a beautiful and charming girl was “inside me all along” (page 64); in Part Two, “everything was ugly, malignant, and hostile when viewed with malignant and hostile eyes” (pages 152–53). Ferdinand also seemed to have “a second face” behind his face (page 188). This is one of the central questions in the book: are your other possible selves inside you already, or created by circumstance? Is Ferdinand the way he is because of his character or his fate? Is the difference between Christine’s brother-in-law and him (pages 168–69) really pure chance?
6. Christine begins to feel noticed by the men around her, and her answering smile says: “So you like me—who are you? And who am I?” (page 78). The scattered clothes on the bed when she leaves are like an “explosion” of her other self (page 136), but when nobody notices she has just been kissing a man, she marvels at “how opaque a life can be, how completely the mask of social propriety can hide the passions” (page 102). How much of Christine’s self really is on the inside and how much comes from her interactions on the outside?
7. Part One of the book has wonderful descriptions of the carefree, high-society life in the Alps, like the Jazz Age glamour of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and *Tender Is the Night*. Do you think the wealth and beauty seem more beautiful in this book because of their contrast with Christine’s earlier life, or do they seem false and fragile?
8. The turn of events which drives Christine back to her village comes from two surprising sources: Carla’s jealousy, and Claire’s anxiety about her past. What do these reactions against Christine have in common? (Claire’s and Carla’s names are almost anagrams of each other.) Is that what you expected to happen to Christine?
9. If Part One of the book is about transformation, Part Two is about the dream of “a little step to climb” (page 159), a chance to work hard and slowly better your position in society. Ferdinand eventually gives up when he no longer believes he will ever “climb the first rung and the second” (page 225). Is there ultimately a difference, for Zweig, between gradual climbing and sudden transformation? Is either possible in the world of *The Post-Office Girl*?
10. What Christine and Ferdinand feel for each other is not “passion or love, but...something like pity” (page 214). Does this define these two characters, or do you think Zweig is making a broader point about modern society, or about people in general?
11. When Ferdinand gives up and decides to commit suicide, do you feel that he is wrong or right to be hopeless? What about when he convinces Christine to steal the post office money—is his argument to choose crime over death convincing? Should Christine choose death or the crime that was literally unthinkable to her before Ferdinand suggested it?
12. “For the first time she was afraid of herself, afraid of people, afraid of things” (page 240). Where does this fear come from? Why is Christine afraid before she does anything wrong?
13. “Maybe it’s the one freedom you can always count on—the freedom to throw your life away” (page 236). Does knowing about Zweig’s own double suicide with his wife change your reading of the end of the book?
14. It is not known whether Zweig finished *The Post-Office Girl* or abandoned it unfinished. How does the ending feel to you? Is this where the book should end, or does it feel inconclusive? If Zweig had continued the book, do you think Christine and Ferdinand would have succeeded or failed? Why?