



**T H E  
L I L A C  
P E O P L E**

*A Novel*

**M I L O  
T O D D**



*Praise for* THE LILAC PEOPLE

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“With exquisite attention to historical detail and deep compassion, Milo Todd brings to life a story that feels both urgent and timeless. From the streets of prewar Berlin to the isolation of rural survival, we follow characters forced to choose daily between truth and safety. Through Bertie’s eyes, we witness how quickly hard-won freedoms can vanish, and how the bonds of chosen family become both sanctuary and salvation. A profound and riveting story of identity and resilience, *The Lilac People* reclaims a powerful piece of trans history.”

—CHRISTINA BAKER KLINE, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Orphan Train*

“In *The Lilac People*, Milo Todd brings to life the hope, joy, and complexities of trans identity and community in Weimar Berlin and beyond. At once a celebration of what becomes possible when humans truly accept one another and a stark reminder of the precipice between personal freedom and catastrophe, the story of Bertie Durchdenwald’s fight for autonomy, dignity, and love cuts through history to underline what’s at stake in our present moment.”

—JASON LUTES, creator of *Berlin*

“Through deft world-building and astute characterization, Milo Todd’s *The Lilac People* transports readers to WWII-era Germany, where queer and trans people were subjected to a world that worked overtime to snuff them out, eerily similar to the world we live in today. Through this book, I was

reminded of the timely history that it depicts, and I was delighted by Todd's intentional, careful prose. If you want to read a book that accurately depicts trans people of this period wholly, pick up this book."

—KB BROOKINS, award-winning author of *Pretty*

"Remarkable and urgently needed. Milo Todd breathes life into erased histories, resurrecting trans history with heart, humor, and love, showing not only how people survived, but offering hope for how we will today. Meticulously researched and enchantingly written, *The Lilac People* is a book I will cherish."

—ALEX MARZANO-LESNEVICH, award-winning author of *The Fact of a Body*

"*The Lilac People* is at once a poignant ode, a powerful testimony, a rousing anthem, a timely warning, and a gripping heart-in-throat novel that is as richly rendered as it is urgent. All fiction should aspire to as much."

—NAWAAZ AHMED, author of PEN/Faulkner finalist *Radiant Fugitives*

"Todd's debut is a moving and poignant reminder that, even if we imagine ourselves finished with history, history is never finished with us. *The Lilac People* is a bravely, brutally perfect companion for those desperate to survive our darkening century."

—PATRICK NATHAN, author of *The Future Was Color*

"With *The Lilac People*, Milo Todd brings to life an almost-forgotten chapter of World War II. With this remarkable story rooted in history, the author speaks to the urgency of our times where the rights of trans individuals are steadily being robbed by right-wing extremists. It's a stunning feat of storytelling."

—S. KIRK WALSH, nationally bestselling author of *The Elephant of Belfast*

“From its thrilling first pages to its elegiac yet buoyant close, *The Lilac People* is a fully immersive reading experience filled with indelible and achingly human characters. A masterful debut, and a treasure of a novel.”

—CHRISTOPHER CASTELLANI, author of *Leading Men*



*the*  
**Lilac  
People**







*the*  
**Lilac  
People**

A NOVEL

Milo Todd

COUNTERPOINT  
CALIFORNIA



*To Jeff*

*Das war ein vorspiel nur, dort  
wo man bücher verbrennt,  
verbrennt man am ende auch  
menschen.*

*That was but a prelude;  
where they burn books,  
they will ultimately burn people as  
well.*

HEINRICH HEINE (1820),  
plaque at the Sunken Library  
in Bebelplatz, Berlin



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*Notes from the Author*

*“Das Lila Lied” (“The Lilac Song”)*

*Acknowledgments*



*the*  
**Lilac  
People**





Please note that all terms used in this novel reflect the story's era. Terms such as *transvestite* are outdated and should be avoided when referring to transgender people of today.

*We've received word that the liberation of the camps is not the celebration we'd hoped. The Allied forces are sending all pink triangles and any qualifying black triangles to jail to start the sentence for their crimes. All other categories of identity, crime, or marker have been liberated, for the Allies feel they have suffered enough.*

*We repeat. All inverters, transvestites, and lilac people who survived the camps have been sent to jail. If you avoided detection during the War, you are still not safe. We repeat: you are still not safe.*

*To any left out there, be safe, be well, and look after one another. Our sun will shine after this night. Thank you and goodnight.*

*I*  
—

## 1 • ULM, 1945

IT WAS SUNDAY NOW, NEARLY TWO WEEKS SINCE THE WAR ended, a breezy-aired morning in mid-May. Bertie had been harvesting the potatoes, pulling them up by satisfying fistfuls when Sofie heard it over the radio, calling out as she ran to him. She left the cow half-milked, he the last row unharvested, as they dislodged the flag from their doorstep. They tore it that night, burning the scraps in the fire pit behind the house. She wondered if the news was false, more propaganda spread by the Nazis to punish those who were not true believers, who were hiding in plain sight like them. He wondered if they could soon use their real names again in public.

They had ridden out the length of the War in Ulm on a little farm that was not theirs, less than two morgen large, and in an arguably undesirable spot. They were in the hilly part, more than half of their ground useful only for heartier crops, and a quarter of it ended in a forest of five-meter conifers that ate both space and sunlight. Oma and Opa had surely built the house by the edge of those trees as a way to content themselves. But what that contentment was, Bertie was still not sure.

It was a Schwarzwaldhaus, what they had built, a wohnstallhaus cowshed made of dark wood from the Black Forest. The shingled roof was steeply hipped and near black, sloping down to the ground floor. When Bertie first arrived, he felt it all gave the look of a foreboding fairy tale, sticking out oddly dark against the sunshine and rolling hills, the chirping birds and greenery. But he had learned the intelligence behind it all. The wood was