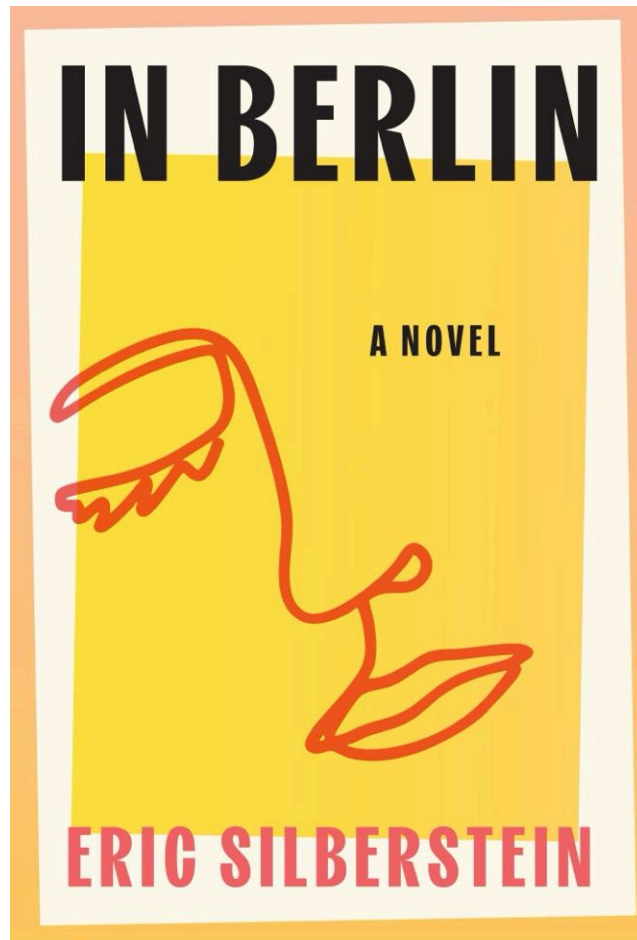


Book Club Kit

In Berlin



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Q&A with Eric Silberstein

By Susie Felber

Q: What is *In Berlin* about?

A: It's about two women who become friends in a Berlin hospital in 2014. One is an energetic, athletic software engineer early in her career. She's commuting home when she gets struck by this extremely unlikely medical event—a stroke in her spinal cord that causes paralysis. The other woman had been a med student in Syria until her family left the country in the face of escalating violence. Now she's in Germany and learning German in the hopes she can resume med school there. In the meantime, she's working a minimum wage job in the same hospital where the engineer is undergoing rehabilitation. The novel is about how these two kindred spirits meet, grow close, and help each other regain mobility.

Q: What inspired you to write this book?

A: I absolutely did not set out to write this novel, and nobody would look at me and say—yes, this is the guy who should write this story. I started out with a novel about an engineer from Boston who, on a trip to Berlin, becomes friends with a recent Syrian immigrant. But following my interests and just the creative process led me somewhere totally different.

What happened was that after two drafts and positive feedback from early readers, I traveled to Berlin to flesh out a few details. As part of that, I visited a hospital where one of my characters might have been treated after a bike accident, and there I met a woman who had been recently paralyzed by a spinal stroke. We spoke for like two hours and it was one of the most perspective-changing conversations of my life.

We stayed in touch, became friends, and later, after she read my first novel from her hospital bed, she began to share even more about her experience so it could shape my fictional character. Over time, I found more meaning in her journey than in my original protagonist. After discussing with her, I decided to throw out my manuscript and start over with a main character who suffers a spinal stroke, while retaining some of my Syrian characters.

Q: But why choose Berlin in the first place?

A: Yeah, it's funny. My younger self wouldn't have gone in this direction. My grandparents were Holocaust survivors and my father was born as a stateless displaced person in Munich. I grew up hearing stories of my family coming to the United States as refugees. I also heard stories about the "good" Germans and "bad" Germans who controlled the fate of my grandparents, working as slave laborers in a munitions factory.

But the world is not static. In 2015, when huge numbers of refugees were coming into Europe, Chancellor Angela Merkel made her famous statement "Wir schaffen das" – "We can do this," talking about rising to the challenge of accepting refugees. Those words moved me and planted a seed.

Q: The novel includes descriptions of mouth-watering Syrian dishes, and your book club guide has recipes for some of them. But be honest—did you actually cook them?

Yup. I made, or at least tried to make all of them. One of the Syrian women who helped me with the novel is an excellent cook. She told me what dishes my characters would eat, pointed me to recipes, and even gave feedback on the photos I sent back.

I made baklava at least five times and got pretty good at it. I love the crackling sound when you pour the syrup over the hot, just-baked sheets of phyllo. I tried a bunch of the kibbeh dishes and what came out was tasty but not attractive. It takes some serious skills to handle the bulgur-and-ground-lamb dough. Here's a photo from a meal at the home of a Syrian friend in Berlin.



Q: You started and sold two software companies, one of which had to do with translation and the other with medical research, so I see the subject matter interest. But is there a connection between starting a company and writing a novel?

A: Startups, software, and novels might seem pretty different—but in my mind they're closely related because they're about creating something from nothing. Each requires following threads to uncertain destinations. Each involves the highs and lows of putting yourself out there: one minute thinking you have something good and it propels you forward, the next day deciding everything you did was crap.

Something I've done as a novelist that I definitely copied from building companies and software is aim to get honest feedback. This is why I think I've had more beta readers than most. I also research intensely because I love seeing through the eyes of others, whether a customer with a problem to be solved or the model for a fictional character.

Q: Are you available to join book club discussions?

A: Yes! In fact, I'm indebted to a book club that offered to read my draft. The "International Camberville Book Club" is six friends who originally met in Boston and are now spread out around the world. Their book club is how they stay connected and they've read and discussed a book a month for over six years.

They gave no feedback ahead of time, so I was nervous when I joined their Zoom. I listened to them talk about my characters, debate motivations, and argue over the ending. As an author you invent stuff and transmit it through words. Seeing proof that other people received the transmission is such a good feeling. And I came away from the discussion with insights that shaped my revisions.

If you want to include me in a book club discussion, please reach out via the contact email on my author site ericsilberstein.com.

Discussion questions

By Rose Jacobs

1. The challenges Anna and Batul face in pursuing their dreams can feel extreme, but they are hardly alone in coping with political upheaval or medical emergencies. What personal or family stories do you have about lives interrupted through migration, illness, or other sudden changes in circumstances?
2. Resilience is a revered quality these days, and Anna, Batul, and Yaman all demonstrate an impressive ability to regain footing after setbacks big and small. But how might resilience sometimes underserve the characters, for example by letting them avoid problems that need addressing?
3. Silberstein wrote this novel before the overthrow in 2024 of Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad, more than five decades into his regime's brutal rule. Many Syrian refugees are now returning to the homeland they once fled. Can you imagine Batul and Yaman moving back? Why or why not?
4. Often in literary criticism, a character's depth is measured by their dynamism – how much a "hero" is changed by his or her experience, for example. While Anna has tremendous change thrust upon her, one could argue that she changes very little in terms of how she views the world or operates within it. Do you think this is a weakness of the book?
5. "One can think more lightly and freely in music than language," is Batul's translation of the line by Alfred Döblin, author of the seminal 1929 novel *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. This is not Batul's experience. Instead, food is her language when speaking is too hard. How do Julia, Anna's father, or Anna herself communicate through mediums other than their native tongue?
6. Religious faith is clearly important to Batul, but other characters also orient themselves using (sometimes blind) belief. What do you think Anna's articles of faith might be? Yaman's? Anna's sister-in-law Christina's?
7. Berlin's role in the novel is often aspirational: a setting in which Anna can once again be independent, or where the al-Jaberis might rebuild a life. But the city's dark history during the second world war, and its status as seat of the present-day German government, also enters the plot from time to time. How would the novel be different if set in London or New York?
8. In some ways, this is a workplace novel (even in Anna's apartment, Batul is on the job). Why do you think Silberstein spends as much time as he does on DDB's big project of upgrading its platform? And are Batul, Anna, and even Yaman being naïve or narrow-minded for focusing so much on professional success?

9. How important to her recovery was Anna's logical way of thinking? Leo, the economist who broke his neck trying to save a drowning child, also prides himself on his ability to reason. But he comes to very different conclusions from Anna, even when drawing from similar evidence. Do you think the novel invites us to extrapolate from single cases or warns against it?
10. Spoiler warning: Batul tells Yaman that "it's not that simple" when he asks her if she's "programmed a certain way." She describes feeling relieved when it becomes clear that her parents want her to accept Yaman's proposal. Does this suggest she never planned a long-term romantic partnership with Anna?
11. Spoiler warning: By the end of the book, science and technology have solved many of the problems delivered to Anna on that sweaty August evening in 2014. Did Batul save Anna by turning her observations of axolotls into actionable scientific insights, or much earlier, back in Berlin, with the love that also saved Yaman? Or was Anna always going to save herself?

Recipe links

Here's how to make a few of the many delicious dishes from the novel. The lamb and kibbeh dish, which Batul makes, is challenging. The baklava isn't too bad. Just don't let your phyllo sheets dry out. Keep them covered with a lightly damp kitchen towel.



Savory

- [Kibbeh Safarjaliyeh](#) - Quince, kibbeh and lamb stew
- [Manaqish Za'atar](#) - Flatbreads with za'atar
- [Yabrag](#) - Lamb and rice wrapped in grape leaves

Sweet

- [Baklava](#) - Levantine-style with rosewater
- [Zitronenkuchen](#) - German lemon cake

Author bio



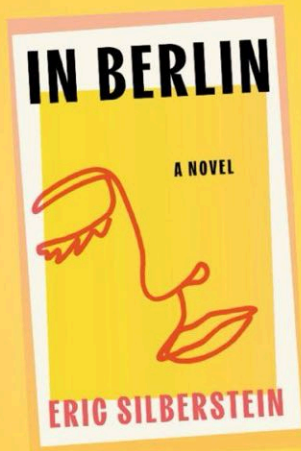
Eric Silberstein is a software engineer, company founder, and novelist. After receiving his bachelor's in computer science from Harvard, he founded Idiom Technologies, a pioneer in translation management software. He then went on to co-found and serve as CEO of TrialNetworks, a software platform to accelerate medical research. His first novel, *The Insecure Mind of Sergei Kraev*, was published in 2021, and his second novel, *In Berlin*, will be released on August 5, 2025. Eric enjoys creating, learning, early morning swims, and writing at his local library.

[EricSilberstein.com](https://eric Silberstein.com)

Audiobook

In Berlin is also available as an unabridged audiobook narrated by Helen Laser, whose previous work includes the audio versions of *Yellowface* by R.F. Kuang and Scott Turow's thriller *Suspect*.

Spotlight image



For fans of Abraham Verghese
and Lisa Genova, an

**"...intriguing, twisted,
non-conventional
love story."**

"An utterly spellbinding journey."

—VIVEK MURTHY, MD, MBA,
19th and 21st Surgeon General of the United States

**"...a fascinating read from
start to finish."**

—MIDWEST BOOK REVIEW

"...a profoundly beautiful novel."

—KAREN ROY, LCSW,
Ms. Wheelchair America 2019