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Coco Chanel: An Intimate Life



Synopsis

The controversial story of Chanel, the twentieth century's foremost fashion icon. Revolutionizing women's dress, Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel was the twentieth century's most influential designer. Her extraordinary and unconventional journey "from abject poverty to a new kind of glamour" helped forge the idea of modern woman. Unearthing an astonishing life, this remarkable biography shows how, more than any previous designer, Chanel became synonymous with a rebellious and progressive style. Her numerous liaisons, whose poignant and tragic details have eluded all previous biographers, were the very stuff of legend. Witty and mesmerizing, she became muse, patron, or mistress to the century's most celebrated artists, including Picasso, Dalí, and Stravinsky. Drawing on newly discovered love letters and other records, Chaney's controversial book reveals the truth about Chanel's drug habits, her lesbian affairs, and her German lover during World War II. While uniquely highlighting the designer's far-reaching influence on the modern arts, Chaney's fascinating biography paints a more nuanced picture of Coco Chanel than any so far. Movingly, it explores the origins, the creative power, and the secret suffering of this exceptional and often misunderstood woman.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Lisa's Chaney's 'intimate life' of Coco Chanel is terrific, a tour de force that places Chanel in the multiple contexts that informed her life choices, her career and her loves. Sympathetic, even-handed and frank, the book traces the life of a much discussed, and much mythologized, 20th century figure, bringing her into focus as a woman, and treating her faults and her achievements as

part of a desire for security and satisfaction, if not for self-knowledge. Chanel is not self knowing, nor is she always just, charitable or fair. Her strong desires -- to make a mark, to be someone, to fend off competitors, to come out on top, to win and to succeed -- inform Chanel's trajectory through life, but her desires are much more complex than this list suggests, rooted (in part) in her transient early life, the wayward father who abandoned her, and her subsequent education as a seamstress (and presumably as a highly disciplined worker) by the nuns who ran the orphanage in which she and her sister were brought up. Chaney reports Chanel as saying that she needn't necessarily have been a clothes designer. It seems clear that designing and making clothes was merely one of the routes that a pretty, clever and creative French woman from her class, educated in the way that she was, and in need of work that could give her identity and security, could take. What is also clear is her extraordinary talent was not merely for the look and cut of hats (first) and dresses (second). Her real talent was to articulate deeper desires in material form -- the desires of the age in which she lived, and in particular, the desire of women to emerge from the closet of the corset, and into modernity, through the looks she created for them.

I've seen the recent movies and read several of the older biographies as they came out. Still, there is a lot new here, and always more to learn about this extraordinary woman. Focusing only on the intimate life of Gabrielle Chanel, sets this book apart. To understand Chanel you have to consider the actual childhood and the childhood she imagined and the power of her first experience of being in love with Arthur Capel. He loved her too, but her common roots and her growing success made the aristocratic Diana Wyndham a safer choice. His life, his views expressed through his writing, his success and her youth make his marriage and his death are defining moments for Chanel. Subsequent liaisons could not measure up, and the men that possibly could have filled his shoes seemed to want to compete with her as she became more and more successful. Lisa Chaney suggests that Arthur Capel may have committed suicide. I had wondered this, since the accounts of the accident, and the film portrayal of the scene would suggest whiplash and not a burned body. From the newly discovered letters, and his continuing relationship with Chanel after his marriage, he was under enormous strain. Her success makes it hard to believe the first hand reports about Chanel's drug use. The number of sources and their close relationships with Chanel make them credible. That Reverdy, a lover who in 1924 left Chanel citing her addiction as a reason, means that she functioned as an addict for almost 50 years. Chanel's circle includes some of those in the Hemingway-Fitzgerald orbit, but, in this book, these American ex-pats hardly figure. There is only one mention of the Fitzgeralds, a passing reference at that. This book covers one aspect of her life.

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