

Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life

GELLHORN



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"I was never deeply interested in being a child." Twentieth-century war correspondent and novelist, Gellhorn always said these words would open her autobiography if she ever wrote one.

Unfortunately, she never did but Moorehead's deeply researched biography of the writer is so rich with Gellhorn's work, family life, love affairs, and travels that probably not even Gellhorn could have gotten it down with such precision. Also, Moorehead provides a rich tapestry of historical and cultural information for the nine decades of Martha's life.

During WW II, the military refused to give her a pass to Normandy for the German invasion, so Martha sneaked aboard a troop ship and hid in the bathroom until they were well at sea.

Her father, an ex-German doctor settled in St. Louis and married Edna, an intelligent member of the local upper class. Both parents were half Jewish. One of the fascinating things in this book is to discover the lifelong extremely close connection between mother and daughter.

Edna was very political—she became a national figure in the Suffragette's movement. She also ran many of St. Louis organizations and foundations. Martha grew up in a family that expected women to have a role in society. Her father also constantly reiterated the importance of health and exercise, two things that became lifelong obsessions for his daughter. In fact, the first thing I read by Martha was not fiction or a piece about war but a wonderful essay about night swimming.

This book often reads like a novel. Gellhorn left for college at Bryn Mawr but only lasted two years before she set off for a walking tour of the Alps. She paid her way across the Atlantic by writing copy for a shipping company.

In her twenties, Martha actually lived in the White House several times, as the guest of Mrs. Roosevelt. On one of those occasions, she slept in Lincoln's room. The next guest who stayed there, said he was more thrilled to have Martha's bedroom than Lincoln's. For the rest of Eleanor's life, Martha looked up to the president's wife as a role model and inspiration.

Martha was a courageous reporter, who refused to take no for an answer. With persistence, developed connections, and courage she covered six wars beginning with the Spanish Civil War where the site of a woman journalist in the combat area was almost unknown.

Many people know Martha only as the third wife of Ernest Hemingway. The two writers met during the Spanish Civil War, and he grew fond of this independent woman who loved to shoot and hunt and ride horses. They stayed together twelve years, but after they split up, Martha refused to talk about Hemingway or discuss their life together.

Besides writing, her favorite passion was travel. In later life, she wandered the globe in search of glorious places to swim in azure seas set in warmer climes. At various times, Martha had homes in Cuba, the states, France, England, Wales, Italy, Africa and Mexico. By far, Mexico was her favorite, the place that she was the happiest in life. Although a home in Kenya placed a close second.

If summer gives you a case of wanderlust, this book will cure that itch while giving you a highly absorbing portrait of a smart, difficult, brave woman who transformed her life journeys into novels and stories. To discover Martha's own unique voice, try the *Selected Letters of Martha Gellhorn*. Many of these were to famous artists, musicians, writers, and even presidents.

Posted by Dory L. on August 5, 2015

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