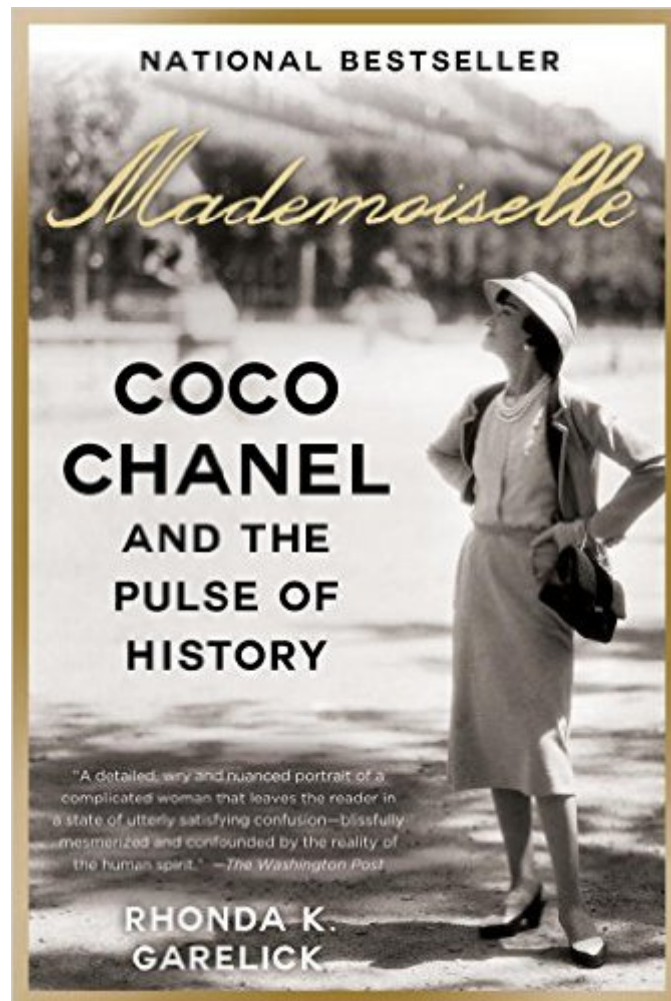


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Mademoiselle: Coco Chanel And The Pulse Of History



Synopsis

NATIONAL BESTSELLER Certain lives are at once so exceptional, and yet so in step with their historical moments, that they illuminate cultural forces far beyond the scope of a single person. Such is the case with Coco Chanel, whose life offers one of the most fascinating tales of the twentieth century—throwing into dramatic relief an era of war, fashion, ardent nationalism, and earth-shaking change—here brilliantly treated, for the first time, with wide-ranging and incisive historical scrutiny. Coco Chanel transformed forever the way women dressed. Her influence remains so pervasive that to this day we can see her afterimage a dozen times while just walking down a single street: in all the little black dresses, flat shoes, costume jewelry, cardigan sweaters, and tortoiseshell eyeglasses on women of every age and background. A bottle of Chanel No. 5 perfume is sold every three seconds. Arguably, no other individual has had a deeper impact on the visual aesthetic of the world. But how did a poor orphan become a global icon of both luxury and everyday style? How did she develop such vast, undying influence? And what does our ongoing love of all things Chanel tell us about ourselves? These are the mysteries that Rhonda K. Garelick unravels in *Mademoiselle*. Raised in rural poverty and orphaned early, the young Chanel supported herself as best she could. Then, as an uneducated nineteen-year-old café singer, she attracted the attention of a wealthy and powerful admirer and parlayed his support into her own hat design business. For the rest of Chanel's life, the professional, personal, and political were interwoven; her lovers included diplomat Boy Capel; composer Igor Stravinsky; Romanov heir Grand Duke Dmitri; Hugh Grosvenor, the Duke of Westminster; poet Pierre Reverdy; a Nazi officer; and several women as well. For all that, she was profoundly alone, her romantic life relentlessly plagued by abandonment and tragedy. Chanel's ambitions and accomplishments were unparalleled. Her hat shop evolved into a clothing empire. She became a noted theatrical and film costume designer, collaborating with the likes of Pablo Picasso, Jean Cocteau, and Luchino Visconti. The genius of Coco Chanel, Garelick shows, lay in the way she absorbed the zeitgeist, reflecting it back to the world in her designs and in what Garelick calls "wearable personality"—the irresistible and contagious style infused with both world history and Chanel's nearly unbelievable life saga. By age forty, Chanel had become a multimillionaire and a household name, and her Chanel Corporation is still the highest-earning privately owned luxury goods manufacturer in the world. In *Mademoiselle*, Garelick delivers the most probing, well-researched, and insightful biography to date on this seemingly familiar but endlessly surprising figure—a work that is truly both a heady intellectual study and a literary page-turner. Praise for *Mademoiselle*: "A detailed, wry and nuanced portrait of a complicated woman that leaves the reader in a state

of utterly satisfying confusionâblissfully mesmerized and confounded by the reality of the human spirit.ââThe Washington PostââWriting an exhaustive biography of Chanel is a challenge comparable to racing a four-horse chariot. . . . This makes the assured confidence with which Garelick tells her story all the more remarkable.ââThe New York Review of BooksââBroadly focused and beautifully written.ââThe Wall Street Journal

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Customer Reviews

A riveting and engaging biography of one of the 20th centuryâs preeminent fashion icons, Rhonda K. Garelick brings us the biography of Coco Chanel, a rags-to-riches story about one of the most carefully contrived personas ever. Born into the lowest class, with few to no options for climbing the social ladder, her image reworking started very young. Her struggles for legitimacy, her discounting or paying off relatives who may discount her new âbackgroundâ and her rather prickly personality all would have failed with someone less talented and skilled. But the young Gabrielle, soon to blossom as Coco Chanel, would use her single-minded determination and her eye for the avant garde style that would become the hallmark of her clothing designs, she was soon the toast of the young and fashionable Parisiennes, then later became a name to covet and aspire to. From her drastic rewriting of her own history, through her many lovers in search of a marriage to a titled man, Chanel was completely loyal to two things: herself and her designs. An anti-semitic, she was in league with the Nazi philosophy, even involving herself with an SS officer as part of a clandestine âsurrender and capitulateâ meeting with Churchill and the Britons. Dictatorial and wholly unsympathetic to any concerns but those in line with her often changeable personal

interests, her only true "friend"™ was Boy Capel. A fan of her millinery creations and supporter of her talents when hats were all she made, Capel was the one person that clearly saw the human side, if not really knowing her story. I cannot say that I found a woman who was particularly likable, even if I could admire her determination: but I only could find myself asking if she ever truly found happiness.

Though extensive and seemingly exhaustive in its details and depth of research, almost half of the 600 pages is devoted to hammering it into our heads the fact that Coco Chanel was a fascist Nazi sympathizer. Garelick attempts to subtly separate Coco Chanel the fascist woman from Chanel the powerhouse fashion brand of today, so as not to offend the current owners nor damage their profits in any way. The author easily glosses over the fact that Coco had to gain the favor of the Nazis in order to rescue her nephew (or most likely son), who was dying in Nazi captivity and whom she loved dearly. The author quickly glosses over the fact that the Wertheimers royally screwed Coco by setting up their own, separate Chanel corporation in America during the war, and profited enormously from perfume sales, all the while sharing none of it with the woman herself. The first thing Garelick does is insinuate that the interlocking C logo is a fascist symbol much like the swastika, and how Coco's own fascist tendencies enabled her fashion brand to dominate. There are a good twenty pages or so where the author lectures the reader on fascism and the evils of the German Nazis. It is repetitive, completely unnecessary, and only serves Garelick's purpose in imprinting a very negative image of Coco in the readers' minds. Many of those who were wealthy or had much to lose during the war were Nazi sympathizers, including the British royal family and almost everyone in the upper echelons of European society, but the particularly harsh focus of the author on Coco, as well as Garelick's own personal insinuations (which she weaves in many paragraphs stealthily) on Coco's™ thoughts or motives, are just plain annoying.

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