



The Many Lives of Miss K: Toto Koopman - Model, Muse, Spy

Jean-Noël Liaut , Denise Jacobs (Translation)

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A life of glamour and tragedy, set against the watershed cultural and political movements of twentieth-century Europe. "Toto" Koopman (1908–1991) is a new addition to the set of iconoclastic women whose biographies intrigue and inspire modern-day readers.

Like her contemporaries Lee Miller or Vita Sackville-West, Toto lived with an independent spirit more typical of the men of her generation, moving in the worlds of fashion, society, art, and politics with an insouciant ease that would stir both admiration and envy even today. Sphinxlike and tantalizing, Toto conducted her life as a game, driven by audacity and style. Jean-Noël Liaut chases his enigmatic subject through the many roles and lives she inhabited, both happy and tragic. Though her beauty, charisma, and taste for the extraordinary made her an exuberant fixture of Paris fashion and café society, her intelligence and steely sense of self drove her toward bigger things, culminating in espionage during WWII, for which she was imprisoned by the Nazis in Ravensbruck.

After the horrors of the camp, Toto found solace in Erica Brausen, the German art dealer who launched the career of Francis Bacon, and the two women lived out their lives together surrounded by cultural luminaries like Edmonde Charles-Roux and Luchino Visconti.

But even in her later decades, Toto remained impossible for anyone to possess. *The Many Lives of Miss K* explores the allure of a freethinking and courageous woman who, fiercely protective of her independence, was sought after by so many but ultimately known by very few.

The Many Lives of Miss K: Toto Koopman - Model, Muse, Spy Details

Date : Published September 3rd 2013 by Rizzoli Ex Libris (first published October 13th 2011)

ISBN : 9780847841295

Author : Jean-Noël Liaut , Denise Jacobs (Translation)

Format : Hardcover 244 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Biography, History, Historical, Spy Thriller, Espionage

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From Reader Review The Many Lives of Miss K: Toto Koopman - Model, Muse, Spy for online ebook

Sarah says

Interesting woman, but read like a string of anecdotes and a who's who of rich mid-century socialites. There wasn't enough first hand information.

Lucy says

Miss K. stands for legendary icon and more, Catharina "Toto" Koopman. Born in Indonesia in 1908- her father was Dutch and her mother was half Indonesian with Chinese ancestry. And although at the time this was cause for much prejudice and segregation, Toto did not seem affected by this at all. In fact, she became to be the first- and very acclaimed bi-racial celebrity model. Under the tutelage of Coco Chanel, Toto became famous in her own right, spearing ahead to become more than just a glamorous model.

Not only was Toto gorgeous and exotic, she was also very strong-minded with exceptional optimism even at the harshest of times in her life. Her beauty and wits- not to mention her flaunting independence- made Toto notorious as a woman who made her mark in 20th century Europe. She spoke several languages, was well-versed in the arts (a muse for one of the most important galleries from the 40's to the 70's that launched famous artists), was a fashion enigma, a spy for the resistance during World War II – and she survived the Holocaust!

This adventuress woman, whose quest for independence had no limits, lived an outrageously unconventional life- even her romances had no sexual boundaries or gender preference. Toto really was unique and outstanding in all that she lived- almost to the point of it sounding surreal were it not for the true historical accounting for it all.

The Many Lives of Miss K., by Jean-Noel Liaut is a fascinating read. There is nothing missing in terms of accuracy and delicious recounting of the history itself. And although at times it reads quite factually, the book is chock-full of very personal, insightful, brow-raising, shocking, and extremely interesting information, that I just could not put this down.

The Many Lives of Miss K.: A definite page-turner that unfolds the life of a spectacular individual whose life could not be more incredible if it were fiction!

Alyssa says

Toto Koopman. Quite honestly, someone I'd never heard of before, and I felt like I should have known about her already. (And I'm a bit annoyed with myself that I didn't!)

I was utterly staggered by the range of her experiences, her cosmopolitan life... She seemed to have done and experienced more than a dozen people would in the same number of years.

For me the most interesting sections of the book were her concentration camp experiences, and how it affected her afterwards. It's a miracle that she didn't become one of the dead, and that she managed to do so well afterwards. I was also interested in her bisexuality, and that she maintained a lesbian relationship for a considerable portion of her life, seeming to have not a care in the world as to whether anyone approved.

Actually, my only complaint about the book is that it wasn't longer. I could have read about her for another couple of hundred pages at the very least. Fortunately, there is a bibliography included with the book, and I have a feeling that I'll be reading more about Miss K. and her contemporaries very soon.

Brynn says

I was more interested in her spy days than her post war art world days. Unfortunately, very little is known about her activities during the war. Overall, a frustrating lack of details about much of her life.

Jen says

A fast paced story about a remarkable woman's life. An overload of name dropping where most names were completely irrelevant, but still an interesting story.

Michaela says

This woman was incredible. The only thing keeping this from receiving 5 stars is that the author was unable to secure any private correspondence of the somewhat private Toto Koopman. Still, she was a true rebel and it would have been fascinating to know her.

Chrissy says

So much of this book seems unbelievable, and indeed much is unknown or unprovable (Who involved Toto in spying in Italy. If it was official it seems like it could be investigated. And her Hitchcockian death under such mysterious circumstances with her many friends looking on and unable to do anything to help her is so odd.) But just sticking to the absolute facts, the story amazing, that a biracial, bisexual, independant woman could thrive in high society in the midcentury and live just as she chose to, without the support of great fortune or family. This is a great story, well told and dropping in on a host of landmark historical events.

Tamsen says

I thought that this woman had an amazing life but found the writing of the story to be less than engaging. It picked up a bit past the middle but by then I was already a bit turned off. Shame, because this woman's story is exceedingly rich! It just needed all her stories and life experience to be put into a wider cultural context, whether that be lgbtq history, war and the resistance movement, the art scene. Everything is touched on with simple sentences, but not really explored, leaving one to suppose that more research could have been done to

flesh out this woman's remarkable life! In fact, one factoid offered up that intrigued me I looked into further and the author actually got it a bit wrong....leading me to question the book's overall accuracy.

Sarah Hannah says

<http://mclicious.org/2013/09/05/the-b...>

Sanne says

The biography of Toto Koopman, an intriguing woman who lived life to the fullest, is told with contagious enthusiasm by her biographer Jean-Noël Liaut. He takes us to the most vibrant and exciting scenes in 20th century Europe: Paris in the '20s and '30s, the gruesome '40s in Italy and the German camps, London in the '50s and '60s, Sicilian islands where the artistic elite gathers to holiday - the list goes on and on.

The same can be said about the heroine of the story, Toto Koopman; successful model, spy, resistance fighter, camp survivor, society lady, art lover, archeologist, polyglot, biracial, bisexual, sexually liberated, free spirit - she can hardly be described in one word, let alone a list like this. It never seems to feel like a complete portrayal, too closed and narrow to define a woman who lived life the way she wanted, unconditionally.

The author is clearly very much at home in the fashion world, the art world and the cosmopolitan society in which Toto spend her life. This makes for some very interesting insights into that kind of society and the kinds of people Toto rubbed shoulders with, as well as some great anecdotes about the people in her life or the parties and events she attended.

However, the focus on the artistic and fashionable aspects of her life does mean there are some aspects are underexplored. Her role in the Italian resistance and the English counter intelligence services remains vague. The Dutch translation does have an additional chapter in which a Dutch researcher explores her activities a bit more, which I think is a great addition to the biography.

Secondly, there are a lot of gay and bi people in Toto's life. I suppose the cosmopolitan and artistic environment allowed them to be more open about their sexuality. But the book doesn't devote any space to put their lives in context with the wider lgbt community. It also doesn't examine why or how it was possible for Toto to live so openly bisexual, and to be in a long term relationship with another woman. It only comments that "it was so unusual for that time to have an openly lesbian couple". Personally, I would have liked to have that subject explored a bit more.

"The Javanese" - Toto's ethnicity

My one major grievance with this book is the way it handles her ethnicity. Whenever the author refers to it, a racial and offensive term is used. I could understand bringing it up once to underscore the kind of society she grew up in, and how she would have been viewed by white Dutch people. However, the term is used systematically whenever her ethnicity is brought up, right up to the captioning of the photographs.

I cannot understand why the author doesn't use the far more common terms like Indo or Indische Nederlander (basically two terms to refer to Dutch Indonesians). Not only are these regular terms and not offensive, they also give a very precise connotation of the kind of social and cultural environment Toto grew up in.

I also cannot understand the translator not fixing that in their translation which is specifically meant for a Dutch market, with quite likely a lot of Dutch Indonesians being interested in the book. Though considering the translator making a major translation mistake specifically regarding colonial Indonesia (translating the phrase "en malais" - "in Malay", the old word for the Indonesian language - as "in Malaysia". We're not in Malaysia, dear translator, we're in Indonesia), we could safely assume that the translator has absolutely no idea about the history and specific word use related to colonial Indonesia.

Speaking of the Indonesian language, I was very surprised not to see it in the list of languages Toto was able to speak. Did she not speak Indonesian? I would find that very surprising considering her childhood spend in Java and her talent for picking up languages.

All in all, I get the impression that Toto's French biographer (and the translator) has very little feel for her Dutch Indonesian roots and exactly what that entails.

The translation

I would not recommend anyone to read the Dutch translation of this biography. Either read the French original or get your hands on the English translation (that one, based on the preview on Amazon, seems to be far better translated).

The Dutch translation is lacking some very basic editing as well as having moments in which it's verifiably imprecise in its translation (the example I've given about Malay, but also when the original English text is given in a footnote).

With regards to editing: at times, it's completely unclear to whom pronouns refer to. There's one paragraph which is so nonsensical that after reading it four times, I still don't know how the sentences are connected to one another. Then there are parts that it is clear that part of the sentence is left out, or punctuation is missing.

Conclusion

This biography, though it has its flaws, is told with such enthusiasm that it leaves you wanting more. Toto was a fascinating woman. I'm rather surprised that she isn't yet the hero in a novel or a movie, because her life does seem to scream for fictionalization.

Patricia Jean says

Fascinating character who deserved a better biographer. In the end it came off as an overlong Vanity Fair article and Toto never came alive.

Jessie says

This woman led a fascinating life of polar extremes.... high personal sexual freedom denied to her gender and race and then the low of persecution and confinement of being a prisoner during the war. The low stars is due to the telling of the story as I wanted details but felt like her stories were glossed over or told in passive prose. I wanted to know more about how she healed from such trauma and less about her later life dealing with a bratty artist.

Catherine Byers says

The hype about the first biracial fashion model was not followed by a good book. Maybe something was literally lost in translation from its original *Drench*. Miss K, Toto Koopman, was a self-indulgent prima donna and social climber. She becomes much more sympathetic when arrested and sent to a concentration camp during WWII. But after the war, she is back to her old tricks. The writing is passably entertaining, but the frequent use of unnamed sources detracts from the book's credibility. It's a short book, so you won't have wasted too much time.

Gale says

In what must have been a herculean undertaking, Liaut manages to provide readers with the essence of Toto Koopman, while presenting that information in a way that we also understand that the subject of this biography was notoriously vague about her past. The child of a Dutch father and a mixed-race Indonesian mother, her early life was spent in Java until she was sent to boarding school in Holland and on to a finishing school in the UK. While the uniquely divided nature of the social classes and attitudes toward those of mixed race in Indonesia was certain to have had some effect on her early years, her recollections are all to the positive and spectacularly unusual and more unique aspects of the time.

This 'creative' or 'selective' recollection becomes a large character within the story, above and beyond the very striking and memorable character Miss K is herself, perhaps her goal was to be the light and life of the party, thus recollections needed to be grander and unique and ever-so delicately exotic, as she was said to have been herself. Tall and willowy, with dark hair and slightly slanted green eyes, cheekbones for days and a rather pointedly amused set of her mouth, she was by all accounts, beautiful. She also used that beauty to her advantage, playing up her interracial heritage when most kept those things silent, and committed to 'no strings' in her sexual relationships. And her conquests were many: male and female, a huge break from the traditional role that a woman of her social status and background would aspire to. A loyal friend, and courted by many, her brains were never a question as she spoke several languages, had a prodigious memory and was admitted into the finest houses and knew the most influential people of the time.

What is even more striking than just her physical being and presence was her determination to avoid the 'ordinary' at all costs. Moving through her life this attention to the new, different and unique. It is a life that encourages your envy: even the less than pleasant parts have you wanting to be there, to see, to hear and to somehow be one in her circle. Not an entirely carefree life, despite her reluctance to discuss the more difficult times, her imprisonment in Ravensbrück for espionage against the Nazis in WWII, her continued determination to live a 'big life' shines through.

It's truly difficult to decipher a life, even more difficult when the subject changes the story to fit their whims or refuses to discuss the details she considered unpleasant or mundane. Despite that, and the occasional feel that information was being loaded in to explain the appeal of some of the people we encounter through her, this was a woman who lived a life that was both enviable and remarkable. It's surprising to me that she isn't more well known, and Liaut adds a series of references that readers can use to find more information. While not as celebrated as some other feminist figures, Toto Koopman certainly deserves her moments to shine, and I encourage anyone who wants a feel of the time, the people and the frenetic life of a social butterfly to pick up this book.

I received an eArc copy of the book from the publisher for purpose of honest review for the France Book Tours

