



Stanwyck

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In this fascinating portrait, Madsen reveals the complex, lonely woman behind Barbara Stanwyck's iron facade. He examines her Dickensian childhood, her violent first marriage, her painful estrangement from her son, and the troubled sexual dynamics of her marriage to Robert Taylor.

Stanwyck Details

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From Reader Review Stanwyck for online ebook

Matt Merkl says

Very interesting. Reads like a history of Hollywood.

FrankH says

Recommended for fans of this versatile actress or for those like me who can't get enough of the stories about the old studio system and Hollywood's golden era. This is a wide-ranging book that showcases the many producers, directors, co-stars, and Hollywood married friends (the Bennys the Macmurrays) that came to influence Stanwyck, usually at just the right time in her career. She was in just a ton of films in the thirties, mostly because she always wanted to work (regardless the quality of the script) and directors liked the fact she was always well prepared and knew her lines.

There were hardships in her life: Madsen reports on her early years as a chorine, the marriage to Frank Fay that ended in divorce, her incompatibility with the second husband, star Robert Taylor, and the strange and callous non-relationship she had with her adopted son Dion. The author notes that at the beginning of the fifties, all of the great female stars of the forties -- Crawford, Davis, Tierney and others -- had fallen on financial hard times. Stanwyck, however, was a multi-millionaire and still being chosen for good projects. Madsen offers a number of reasons for her success, but I'd like to think it all came down to the fact that she was a very quick study and, as an actress, simply smarter than her peers.

(I don't know about Madsen's many conjectures on sexual proclivity. Was Stanwyck really a lesbian? Was Taylor gay or Joan Crawford, a late close friend of Stanwyck? Madsen cites the lesbian friends in Crawford's circle, then casually drops the fact she also had four abortions. They lead complicated lives in Tinsel Town).

Brent Calderwood says

This is by far the most rigorously researched and unsalacious biography on Barbara Stanwyck. The few pulpy ones published during her lifetime avoid the dish about her lesbian leanings, and the ones that focus on her films have been poorly produced and/or written. Very sad, for one of the greatest actresses Hollywood has ever known. As Madsen remarks in his introduction (possibly the best chapter in the book, along with the first chapter about her childhood), Stanwyck was a trooper and a dogged worker--not a grandstanding diva--and as a result, she may have lost some of the plum roles (like *Mildred Pierce*), and has not received the posthumous star worship she deserves more than most.

This book was recommended in a *New Yorker* piece on Stanwyck a few years back. I agree that it's commendable, but I long for a future biography that blends Madsen's thoroughness with just a tad more lusty, shameless idolatry.

Tiffany says

it was good for the most part... very long and had mini bios on everyone she ever knew. very little insight on who she was. it was informative of her movies

Belinda says

Well, where to start? There about as many good things about this book as there are bad things. I have always enjoyed Barbara Stanwyck's acting and lately have been watching more and more of her films. I am a film bio fanatic so of course I wanted to add one about Ms. Stanwyck to my list. I received a ton of giftcards for my nook for Xmas so I purchased this book at a bargain price from Barnes and Noble. It's recent enough to be accurate and well researched and old enough to be cheap. I had a hard time deciding what to rate this book. There were things that were very well researched and interesting and things that were offensive and downright slanderous. I was so appalled by some of the incorrect statements made by the author, that I resolved to spend a good deal of time reading both the footnotes and research notes on the book after I finished. Mr. Madsen made comments about subjects that I happen to be something of an expert on that I knew were completely false and that set my alarm bells ringing. These comments included stories about Marilyn Monroe, Joan Crawford and Carole Lombard that were to be frank, complete and utter untruths and scurrilous gossip. I found when I read the footnotes and research that it was no wonder--this author actually had the gall to cite Hollywood Babylon II (one of the worst pieces of trash ever written about Hollywood by a very angry and bitter Kenneth Anger and filled with grotesque photos and out and out lies that have been disproved over and over again), Mommie Dearest which has also been discredited over and over by both friends and family of Joan Crawford as well as her other children, also (hold onto your seats, kittens) Globe magazine--yes, that Globe magazine--the one that had alien babies and an Elvis sitting a week--a magazine so trashy the National Enquirer looks like the Wall Street Journal next to it. On top of that he also sites The National Enquirer as well as himself(!) in conversations between himself and conveniently dead "Hollywood insiders" to back up some of his most outrageous claims. It's a shame, because he's not a bad writer. The areas of the book dealing with Ms. Stanwyck's politics and filmography as well as her relationship with her adopted son were well researched and intelligent. Unfortunately he wanted to sling mud as well. As is well known by any classic film fan, Ms. Stanwyck and her second husband Robert Taylor were suspected of being gay. The reasons behind the suspicions are ironic and honestly pretty offensive (not that if either of them was gay, that is a bad thing--if anything it would just be another terribly sad story of humans forced to hide themselves due to ignorance and prejudice) but the reasons behind it are generally because Stanwyck was tough and not traditionally "feminine" for her time and Mr. Taylor was beautifully handsome--almost doll-like in his beauty. There was also the fact that they seemed opposite types. That's a pretty obnoxious reason to play guessing games with someone's private life. It is true that Ms. Stanwyck is something of a gay icon, again for her toughness and ability to survive on her own as well as her campy later roles. This does not in and of itself mean she was gay. Throughout the book, Mr. Madsen only mentions one person as a possible lover for Ms. Stanwyck and he gives no proof of any sort, just a lot of speculation and innuendo, which was quite easy as the possible lover was her long time publicist Helen Ferguson who was also her close friend. In Mr. Madsen's mind this makes her Ms. Stanwyck's lover. Ohhkay. Both women were married twice and Ms. Stanwyck (he contradicts himself often and never more than when he is discussing her sexual life as he is forced to make suppositions due to her private nature) was clearly madly in love with both her first husband and Robert Taylor. All of her close friends and confidantes attest to this fact and he quotes them on this but then hints throughout the book that Ms. Stanwyck was gay. Same with Robert Taylor. Now, I am the last person to say who might and might not be gay in Hollywood--even now, actors and actresses often remain in the closet for their career and the world is a harsh place to be yourself--so I do not put forth the idea that a lesbian might not marry a man or gay man might not marry a woman--certainly that is possible and has happened--look at poor Rock Hudson. But what you have in those cases is a certain

amount of proof--Rock Hudson was known to be gay by the majority of his close friends and has numerous lovers who have come forward as well as his wife, who was paid to marry him. Liberace is another example--lovers left behind to tell their stories and friends who knew his personal truth. Montgomery Clift is yet another. There is none of that here--he does not name a single "lover" who spoke of a relationship, for either Ms. Stanwyck or Mr. Taylor. Just gossip--"oh he was friends with this person who was known to be gay" or "people assumed due to their close friendship that there was something more"....that's not proof fella. That actually bothered me a great deal about this book because I had hoped to learn one way or another information that could be backed up. It does not affect my affection for the work of Ms. Stanwyck or Robert Taylor whether they were gay, straight or bisexual--but like any fan, I like to know as much truth about people I find talented and interesting. If it can't be proved one way or another, then don't go on and on about it. I find it very difficult to believe that both of these beautiful people were gay their entire lives (and yes, I believe you are born with a leaning one way or another though I think sexuality can be fluid) and yet never had a relationship with a person of the same sex that could be proven or even made obvious by a preponderance of facts. I just don't. I don't consider it a slur on either of their names, but it's a mischaracterization. I saw one review of this book that praised it for not "whitewashing" these rumors---I would agree if there was an iota of fact behind these ideas.

I have to say though, that the thing that bothered me the most was a story the author put forward as fact with the only reference to the story being tabloids, that claimed Ms. Stanwyck, in her later years would "talk" to the late Robert Taylor through her honorary Oscar--that she claimed he spoke to her and told her he would be coming to take her soon and that was her great solace in her later years. I think of all the claims the author makes, this is one of the most offensive. If there is anything Ms. Stanwyck was not, it was fanciful. I believe that story would anger her more than any other told in this book and seeing as the story came from "The Globe" which never made any attempts at hiding it's tabloid and fact-ignoring nature, it's so obviously untrue. The fact that Ms. Stanwyck was bedridden and somewhat helpless at the time (a state she abhorred) makes it all the uglier. It paints her as some nutso Norma Desmond-like person speaking to the dead and his own research makes it clear that this was the opposite of who she was.

Interestingly the things that both Ms. Stanwyck and Mr. Taylor should have been ashamed of was their creepy right wing politics. Ms. Stanwyck was a scab on more than one occasion and also part of a very Nazi-like organization that promised to "hunt" down communists (many of whom she was happy to take advantage of in terms of their talent--mostly writers who wrote amazing films for her)and Mr. Taylor was even worse, actually being the only truly big star to "name names" during the scary McCarthy era. Ms. Stanwyck was also clearly a terrible mother. She adopted a son during her first marriage, kept him from his father (which may actually not have been a bad thing had it been for the boy's own good but it was pretty obvious it was due to the enmities between herself and her ex husband that this occurred.) In doing this, she robbed the child of any hope of a parent. She lost interest in the child after her marriage faltered and literally did not see the child after a certain age when he was shipped off to boarding schools. As a result he became an unhappy and unsuccessful person. He said he could literally never remember her hugging him or kissing him except for in front of cameras. I found this and her right wing extremity to be the most unpleasant aspect of her personality and life. It made it very difficult to like her.

However--I have to say overall in fairness that she was a complicated and interesting person--she may not have had any bond with her own child but she did have relationships with her nieces and nephews as well as godchildren and seemed to be a loyal friend to both Nancy Sinatra Sr. and Joan Crawford as well as a friend, confidante and lover to William Holden, whom she protected and encouraged during the making of Golden Boy. She continued her loyalty and friendship with him her whole life and it was a moving relationship. She also used to send her "Uncle Buck" (a longtime family friend) who lived with her most of her life, out to the scenes of fires and other disasters to hand out money anonymously to victims. Clearly she was a conflicted and complicated person. She had a very unpleasant childhood which probably has much to do with her trouble bonding with her son and her often wary nature. This is certainly understandable. I ended up feeling she was a very strong but wary woman who carved out a niche for herself in a hostile world and did her best to take care of herself (with great success) after a poverty stricken childhood and at the cost of her personal life. No matter her flaws, she has many admirable traits and her talent can never be dismissed.

As for the book, I would NEVER read another of Mr. Madsen's biographies despite his obvious ability

because I would never trust the sourcing. I would however read another biography of Ms. Stanwyck to see if I could find more truths instead of speculation.

Tracy says

Biography ok, not great. Hard to follow because it jumped around and repeated a lot. I liked that author was looking for facts to move her life forward, not dwelling on gossip and speculation, just showing them as a part of subject's total makeup while trying to report the facts.

Stephen says

Stanwyck was not my favorite actress but she sure made a lot of really good movies. From Double Indemnity, The Lady Eve and Sorry Wrong Number, to things like Stella Dallas and A Night to Remember, she was a very very good actress. She played the villainess in a number of films but she did it well. I found her marriage to Robert Taylor to be a sad, frustrating affair but it in no way diminishes her life.

Mark Desrosiers says

I was pretty bored with this one, which can't possibly be because Barbara Stanwyck herself was boring. Dull and thorough (and "objective" -- nothing worse than "objective") biographers are a dime a dozen.

I was fascinated to learn, though, that Barbara's sexual orientation was successfully kept under wraps for so many years because her lover was also her publicist!

Annie Booker says

I was hoping for a little more about her Big Valley days but despite that it was a very good insight into one of my favorite actresses.
