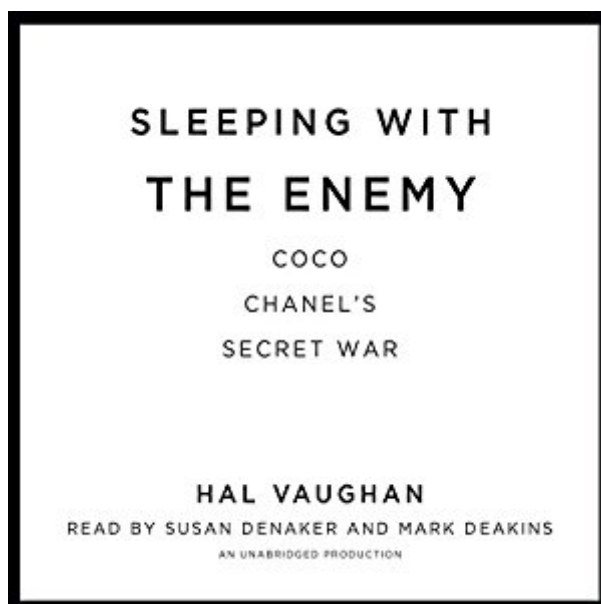


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Sleeping With The Enemy: Coco Chanel's Secret War



Synopsis

"From this century, in France, three names will remain: de Gaulle, Picasso, and Chanel." —André Malraux

Coco Chanel created the look of the modern woman and was the high priestess of couture. She believed in simplicity and elegance, and freed women from the tyranny of fashion. She inspired women to take off their bone corsets and cut their hair. She used ordinary jersey as couture fabric, elevated the waistline, and created bell-bottom trousers, trench coats, and turtleneck sweaters. In the 1920s, when Chanel employed more than 2,000 people in her workrooms, she had amassed a personal fortune of \$15 million and went on to create an empire. Jean Cocteau once said of Chanel that she had the head of "a little black swan". And, added Colette, "the heart of a little black bull". At the start of World War II, Chanel closed down her couture house and went across the street to live at the Hôtel Ritz. Picasso, her friend, called her "one of the most sensible women in Europe". She remained at the Ritz for the duration of the war, and afterward went on to Switzerland. For more than half a century, Chanel's life from 1941 to 1954 has been shrouded in vagueness and rumor, mystery and myth. Neither Chanel nor her many biographers have ever told the full story of those years. Now Hal Vaughan, in this explosive narrative-part suspense thriller, part wartime portrait-fully pieces together the hidden years of Gabrielle "Coco" Chanel's life, from the Nazi occupation of Paris to the aftermath of World War II. Vaughan reveals the truth of Chanel's long-whispered collaboration with Hitler's high-ranking officials in occupied Paris from 1940 to 1944. He writes in detail of her decades-long affair with Baron Hans Günther von Dincklage, "Spatz" ("sparrow" in English), described in most Chanel biographies as being an innocuous, English-speaking tennis player playboy and a harmless dupe—a loyal German soldier and diplomat serving his mother country and not a member of the Nazi party. In Vaughan's absorbing, meticulously researched book, Dincklage is revealed to have been a Nazi master spy and German military intelligence agent who ran a spy ring in the Mediterranean and in Paris and reported directly to Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, right hand to Hitler. The book pieces together how Coco Chanel became a German intelligence operative; how and why she was enlisted in a number of spy missions; how she escaped arrest in France after the war, despite her activities being known to the Gaullist intelligence network; how she fled to Switzerland for a nine-year exile with her lover, Dincklage. And how, despite the French court's opening a case concerning Chanel's espionage activities during the war, she was able to return to Paris at age 70 and triumphantly resurrect and reinvent herself-and rebuild what has become the iconic House of Chanel.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 1998, in *The New Yorker*, John Updike wrote, "All the evidence points to Chanel's total indifference to the fate of her Jewish neighbors - or indeed to the lesser deprivation and humiliations suffered by the vast majority of Parisians." At the age of 58, she was happy with her German lover and cared little for anything that occurred outside of her new perch at The Ritz. This book explores Chanel's rise and success prior to WWII, how she closed her business during the war, and her relationships and affairs with Germans, Nazis, and Vichy. The author asserts that she not only had a German lover, but she helped with espionage. Yet after the war and her nearly decade-long sojourn in Switzerland, she returned to Paris in triumph. The author also explores whether Chanel leveraged the Nazi Aryanization (make companies Jew-free) rules in order to get rid of the Wertheimer's control of Societe de Parfums Chanel (No. 5), so that she could gain full control. I found this to be an interested read and suspenseful, and it also makes you question if the wartime history of the founder affects the brand's image over half a century later.

This work is well named. However, the name does not cover Chanel's treachery in serving the Nazis. Having grown up regarding Chanel as a splendid couturier, and Chanel Number 5 as an especially nice scent, I was disappointed in her virulent antisemitism, although she was far from alone in that. It seemed to be endemic in the upper classes of Western Europe and Britain in the 30s and 40s. Also I found her relationships with men like Winston Churchill and the Duke of Westminster quite surprising. That Churchill, knowing of her perfidious relationship with her German

lover, Dinklage, protected her from trial and execution is quite appalling. There is little question that the Russian Revolution and the subsequent murder of the Royal Family horrified those in Europe that such a thing could have happened in any of the countries. Hitler saw Communism as greatly to be feared, as did the British and French. Also, historically Germany and England together have fought France, barring the First World War. There were remnants of that alliance referred to. It was interesting to learn how well the upper classes fared in Paris, and to see the ordinary people looking through the garbage for food. The pictures with which this book is studded are helpful, although very small on the Kindle. The research that went into this book is extensive. The writing is clear and informative. All in all, a good read.

I found this book to be extremely interesting and superbly researched. Although I am a fast reader, this book was very frustrating to read because it's so badly written. There's even a spelling error - the pin that women wear on their dresses or coats is not a broach; it is a "brooch." As an author myself, I am aware that publishers are cutting back on expenses, such as editing and proofreading, but the huge chunks of out-of-place text and the disturbing lack of transitions, which made the reading of this fascinating book such a grueling experience, is something Random House (and the author) should be ashamed of. The author should have hired a good copyeditor and given him/her a couple of months to make this book what it should have been. Do I recommend it? Yes. But if you care about good writing, be prepared for a tough read.

It's a shame that Hal Vaughn isn't a better writer. I've also read his *DOCTOR TO THE RESISTANCE*, which also took an exciting true story and told it with resounding dullness. I'll grant that *SLEEPING WITH THE ENEMY* is well researched, and is a story that deserved to be told, but the life and times of Coco Chanel, and her wartime treason, remain dead on the page, thanks to what I can only describe as an extraordinary lack of sophistication. Although I usually appreciate authors who simply present facts and remain unjudgmental about their subjects, there's something chilling in this author's bland acceptance of what Chanel did, and the fact that she was never punished. But it seems that, with the passage of time, everyone thinks it's no big deal that the phoenix-like chic designer, Coco Chanel, slept with a German spy for several years (even post war); lived quite well in the Ritz while her countrymen died, and actively worked for the conquerors of her country - and got away with it. The author seems to reflect this particularly 21st-century, wasn't there-can't judge, laissez-faire attitude, despite the wealth of detail he provides about Chanel's wartime activities. He even drops in handy excuses for it, such as the illness and imprisonment of

her favorite nephew, and the fact that Chanel was emotionally damaged by abandonment at an early age (repeated at least once per chapter). In the case of Coco Chanel, I'd prefer a little fire, a little righteous indignation. Just so no one thinks I'm being too harsh, either to the author or to Coco Chanel, I can understand the reasons for Chanel's anti-Semitism (while I don't relate to it) because the climate of her times and her own educational background steeped her in it. Treason, of course, is much less easily explained, but the author doesn't come close to making it in the least way comprehensible. He also seems somewhat enthralled by Chanel's international fame, which helped conceal her perfidious behavior during the Second World War from so many. I'm surprised at the rave reviews for this book, and I'm also relieved that I only borrowed it from the library.

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