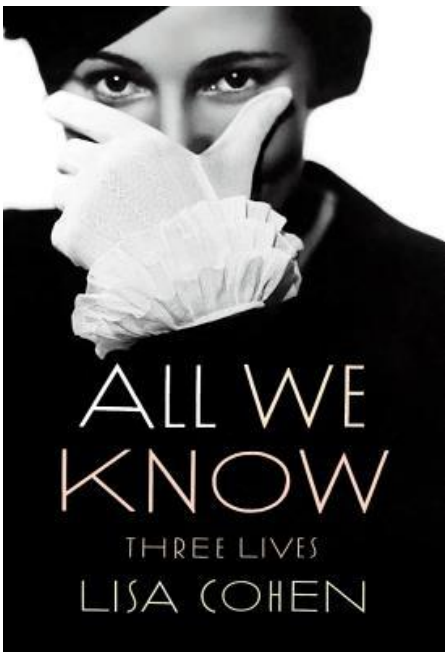


# All We Know: Three Lives

*Lisa Cohen*

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**All We Know: Three Lives** Lisa Cohen
**A revelatory biography of three glamorous, complex, modern women**

Esther Murphy was a brilliant New York intellectual who dazzled friends and strangers with an unstoppable flow of conversation. But she never finished the books she was contracted to write—a painful failure and yet a kind of achievement.

The quintessential fan, Mercedes de Acosta had intimate friendships with the legendary actresses and dancers of the twentieth century. Her ephemeral legacy is the thousands of objects she collected to preserve the memory of those performers and to document her own feelings.

An icon of haute couture and a fashion editor of British *Vogue*, Madge Garland held influential views on dress that drew on her feminism, her ideas about modernity, and her love of women. Existing both vividly and invisibly at the center of culture, she—like Murphy and de Acosta—is now almost completely forgotten.

In *All We Know*, Lisa Cohen describes these women's glamorous choices, complicated failures, and controversial personal lives with lyricism and empathy. At once a series of intimate portraits and a startling investigation into style, celebrity, sexuality, and the genre of biography itself, *All We Know* explores a hidden history of modernism and pays tribute to three compelling lives.

## All We Know: Three Lives Details

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# From Reader Review All We Know: Three Lives for online ebook

### Claire McMillan says

I'm not a biography nut, but I couldn't stop reading this. All these hazy thoughts that have been knocking around my brain about feminism and fashion and style and women and life and society were distilled by the author and passed through the structure of these three women's lives. I adored this book. I'm recommending it to people like a zealot.

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### Amanda Mecke says

When I came out in the 1970s, it was not easy to find biographies and history our early 20th Century "foremothers." Biographies and memoirs of Romaine Brooks, Gertrude Stein, Marlene Dietrich, Janet Flanner, and Sylvia Beach began to fill in background for these first women able to live independently and love other women, but until then most of what was written came from the snide comments of Fitzgerald or Hemingway about Paris before WW II.

Lisa Cohen's biography gives us more background about three women who were not as famous as the writers and actresses who were the subject of gossip for decades:Esther Murphy (ugly duckling, brilliant sister of Gerald Murphy), Mercedes De Acosta (screenwriter and Garbo's lover, along with other theatrical celebrities) and Madge Garland (who became one of the most important designers of her time). Each was an important member (if not a star) of this first generation of women who could support themselves (albiet not always well or without family money), travel freely, and live with the women they loved, (even though they could not be "out," or always avoid a "marriage of convenience.)"

Lisa Cohen has done a fantastic job of resurrecting the difficult history of these remarkable women, survivors who may not have "changed the world," but who certainly are partly responsible for why it has changed for the better now.

After finishing I must say I found the last section on Madge Garland them most informative and complete, both for it's portrait of her and it's account of women taking control of women's fashion. What a survivor Garland was -- the War years and the 1950s, when she founded the Royal School of Arts Fashion department in particular. Had no idea how much work the British had to do to a) save money on clothes during WW II and b) rebuild British exports to pay for War debt in the 1950s.

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### Cathy says

This is a very well written group biography about three women born in the late 19th century who influenced the arts in the first half of the 20th century. All three were lesbians who moved in the same social circles in New York, London, and Paris. Esther Murphy was the daughter of "Mark Cross" owner Patrick Murphy, Meredes deAcosta was from a wealthy, stylish family in New York, and Madge Galand an Austrailian who was an early editor of British Vogue. They lived during a time when being gay was a curse socially and a hindrance in the job market. All three married for the social cover a married name provided. I enjoyed this book with a curiosity about why the author choose these three women to write about.

### Rebecca Wilkins says

This is a biography of 3 women who were on the border of fame in Europe from the 1920's through the 1950's. These women were a failure, a fan and a fashionista or another adjective the author uses failure, irrational and trivial. I chose it because I wanted to know more about Esther Murphy, sister of Gerald. She was always on his bad list and asking for money. Apparently she was supposed to write books but instead all she did was talk about the books she was writing. The description of her is "She was a huge and rather clumsy tank or juggernaut car on which was mounted a loud-speaker which blares forth brilliant ideas no one can refute and which everyone wants to listen to for just so long." The smallest section is on Mercedes De Acosta who was the lover of famous women including Garbo and a collector of all kinds of minutiae about famous people. Biographers are dependent on these collections. The quote about her is "Amassing material about her famous friends, she amassed proof that she had existed; proof that she had participated in worlds that she loved and admired; proof that she too had been loved and admired."
The third biography is on Madge Garland who was in the fashion writing business being an editor of British Vogue in the 30's. She knew Virginia Woolf who apparently coined the phrase "frock consciousness". She was in fashion she said not because she loved it but to support herself. These were all single women in a time when it was difficult to not depend on a man or family for money and they all struggled in that regard. Through these 3 lives Cohen is studying that period in history called modernism and what it was like for women on the border of fame. They all knew each other and they all knew the famous people of their time in books, movies and fashion and yet they were not famous and would be largely forgotten were it not for women's studies professors like Cohen. Not quite the diaries of everyday women but ones who moved in circles of celebrity.

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### Sharon says

This book has been so raved about in my bookish circles, and rightly so - it is intriguing and thoughtful, preserving three women hitherto slightly hidden from history without shrinking away from their less appealing qualities. The author is fascinated by the "boths" and "betweens" of these women, the paradoxes that surround each of them (and by extension, anyone who moves in history or who attempts to have an influence on their era and those to come), and communicates the questions and answers of her fascination to the reader. She is a strong writer, if slightly academic.

A few complaints - I felt that the middle portion, about Mercedes de Acosta, didn't quite "go" with the book. It is significantly shorter than the other two, and her similarities to them end at being a vaguely cultural figure and closet lesbian in roughly the same time frame. I felt her story could have been told in pieces through the other two and does not earn out its own section.

In the final section, focusing on the life of Madge Garland - which I found the strongest, both in pure interest and in proving the significance of the subject on her time - the author doesn't offer explanation of Madge's first firing from Vogue, merely stating that Nast decided to, rather than analyzing the reasons, as she does with later rehirings and firings. I also felt that the discussion of Madge as an author came too late and too cursory.

And finally, in the opening section, on Esther Murphy, I would have liked a bit more explanation of

how/why Murphy truly mattered to history. The discussions of the idea of failure in American myth and reputation was very interesting, especially as it pertains to writers and Esther as a failed writer. And I also enjoyed the depiction of her fascination with history and how she interacted with its personages and literary characters as her friends, and vice versa. But the section lacked the larger context of the ways in which Esther DID matter to history, if any, other than being friends with and talking to notable cultural figures. This context was generously provided in Madge's section but lacking from Esther's.

Still, this was an enjoyable and substantive read, recommended for those interested in feminism, in the history of gay rights and gay culture, or in the cultural life of English-speaking countries between the wars.

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### Amanda says

This is a gorgeously-written, witty, perceptive, and elegant book that in the end adds up to less than the sum of its highly-wrought parts. Apart from their sexual preference (all were lesbians), their age (all are roughly contemporaneous), their overlapping roster of friends, and the fact that none seemed to have achieved what Lisa Cohen believes was her full potential, what unites these women? Their stories are told independently, in three stand-alone parts, and seemed to cry out for some kind of summing up that would reveal what was significant about their similarities, and about the unfulfilled promise of their lives. I didn't regret a moment I spent reading it, but in the end I felt vaguely unsatisfied.

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### Jenny McPhee says

ELUDING MAGNIFICENT MONUMENTS: THE STYLISH LIVES OF ESTHER MURPHY, MERCEDES DE ACOSTA, AND MADGE GARLAND

In trying to come to terms with what she perceived as her friend Esther Murphy’s colossal failure of a life, the novelist Dawn Powell wrote to Esther’s brother Gerald, “Some people don’t want to be the action -- they really want to be spectator.” In All We Know: Three Lives, Lisa Cohen’s mind-stretching book about three early 20th-century women who dwelled on the margins of celebrity, Powell’s division becomes specious. All three women -- historian and conversationalist Esther Murphy; writer, feminist, and consummate fan to the stars Mercedes de Acosta; and fashion journalist Madge Garland -- were both actors and spectators, contributing to and observing the world they inhabited with equal fervor. “Each one constantly memorialized herself and colluded in her own invisibility,” Cohen writes. Though she wanted to make these women’s lives visible again, Cohen notes that “none of them thought herself in need of rescue.”

These three almost famous women knew each other, were an integral part of the cultural elite, and belonged to a tantalizingly open yet constrained gay and lesbian subculture; their profiles merge into a sumptuous portrait of the era. The brilliance of Cohen’s study, however, lies in her meditations on what we mean by failure, irrationality, and triviality when considering a life -- especially the lives of women. She questions the genre of biography itself, suggesting that, like the reputation of any “great woman,” the form is inherently insecure and lies precariously “at the intersection of history and literature, of fact and imagination.”

In answer to any question, Esther Murphy would notoriously begin “All we know is...” then launch into a panoptic account complete with nuanced digressions. Her father, Patrick Murphy, was a renowned public speaker and wealthy owner of a luxury leather goods store in Manhattan. Proud of his daughter, whose

verbal genius was notable from a young age, he favored her over her brothers. Being eclipsed by a sibling was unfathomable in her lifetime, yet, Cohen writes, “if she is remembered at all today, it is as Gerald Murphy’s eccentric, pathetic sister, a marvel who became a spectacular disappointment.”

When Esther, an avid reader, was unable to attend Bryn Mawr due to her mother’s health, Patrick arranged for her to follow the Harvard curriculum at home. It was assumed by her family and friends, and publishers who gave her advances for biographies and histories, that she would transfer her rhetorical precocity onto paper. She did publish essays and books, was vigorously on the lecture circuit, and had a regular stint as a panelist along with Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Mead, and Fanny Hurst on the ABC radio program Listen -- The Women! But the magnum opuses -- projected biographies of Lady Blessington, Madame de Pompadour, and Madame de Maintenon -- never materialized.

Six feet tall and awkward, she drank and smoked heavily, and was never shy about her eloquence. She held forth at any opportunity, of which she had many, both at the numerous parties she attended -- three per evening, never home before dawn -- and at official engagements. With psychological astuteness, Cohen describes how Esther “became a figure whose inability to complete her planned long works both pained her writer friends and reassured them about their own productivity and success.” Esther’s inner circle included Edmund Wilson, Dorothy Parker, Dawn Powell, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and many more literary luminaries -- and by the mid-1920s she was very much part of “sapphic New York and Paris.” When in Paris, she spent much of her time with Janet Flanner and Solita Solana, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Oscar’s niece Dorothy Wilde, and poet Natalie Barney, Esther’s passionate obsession. Sybille Bedford, a young European refugee and aspiring writer when they met in 1945, became the love of Esther’s life. Their affair lasted only a few years but they remained lifelong friends.

So what exactly does it mean to be a failure? A lack of acclaim, fame, sales, no magnificent monument, no Wikipedia page?

Read the rest of my August Bookslut column here: http://www.bookslut.com/the_bombshell...

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### Patrizia says

A really strange book, which I can only suppose was a PhD dissertation at some point. The author examines the lives of three lesbians who were middlingly famous in the first half of the 20th century. The packaging is a Great Mystery since she makes absolutely no attempt to connect these three lives.

The most famous of the women was Esther Murphy. Nothing going *ding dong* in your head? No worries: Nothing ding donged for me either until I realized that Esther Murphy was the sister of Gerald Murphy. American literature might have had many follow-ups to *The Great Gatsby* if only Scott had realized that Gerald Murphy and not Zelda was the Great Love of His Life.

Esther Murphy comes across as a ponderous boor with a strange obsession with Madame de Maintenon -- her King Charles's head,I suppose -- but she *did* seem to know all the interesting people worth knowing in that pre-WW II window of timee, so the book is worth scanning for that.

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### Michele Weiner says

This was a semi-interesting recounting of the lives and social milieux of three lesbian women who were impactful in some way during the '20's and '30's and beyond. Esther Murphy was a daughter of privilege. Her father was the owner of the Mark Cross company, maker of leather accessories. Her brother, Gerald, and his wife Sarah were close to the young Ernest Hemingway. Esther was an intellectual, a brilliant child and woman from whom much was expected. Her curiosity was enormous, and so was her capacity for entertaining with long monologues. In fact, most of her energy for writing was depleted by her tendency to spend all her time talking, drinking, and researching. Her life's work was a biography of Madame de Maintenon, royal mistress of one of the Louis's. She worked on the book for more than twenty years, with no result. Esther's life was a series of bad choices and depression. She had a short-lived marriage to a homosexual friend, then a long but unsuccessful marriage to Chester A. Arthur III, grandson of the president of the same name. In between, she had affairs or friendships with many famous or near-famous women who were also intellectuals and writers. Esther was not wise with money, and relied on a trust fund from her mother and dividends from Mark Cross, which had been rescued from near ruin and run for 20 years by her brother, Gerald. She died alone and nearly penniless, having failed to live up to her early promise.

Mercedes D"Acosta's only claim to fame is her association with famous women like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. She made a living from being a worshipper, saving every scrap of each relationship and later donating, or selling, her artifacts to an eccentric pair of brothers, collectors of all sorts of odd and worthless stuff, in Philadelphia. Mercedes also ended her life alone and flat broke.

The most sympathetic of the characters was the last, Madge Alma McHarg, who later took the name of her husband of a few years, Ewart Garland. Madge was Australian, and felt that wasn't good enough. She wanted to be British, and upper class at that. She wanted a college education, but never achieved either goal. What she did achieve was a remarkable career in fashion, becoming an icon for her own sense of style, but also working to establish British Vogue and later, a school of fashion where she set the curriculum and taught students who wanted to design clothing. During the war, she found a government job in her field, and the chapters describing wartime life in England were wonderful. After the war, Madge developed standards for ready-to-wear clothing, making standard patterns for the purpose of ensuring that dresses were made using a minimum of scarce fabric. It was because of Madge, who had never shopped in a store (she had her dresses made by the Queen's dressmaker), British women who did shop in stores were finally able to buy well-made clothing that fit.

I could not discern why these three particular women were chosen to illustrate the lesbian lifestyle in the middle of the last century - what made these women more representative than the many others who could have been selected? Occasionally, Cohen would drop in a few paragraphs (especially in the Mercedes D'Acosta chapters) to explain why her subjects were important to lesbian history. I found that Esther and Madge were fascinating, if vastly dissimilar, but I cannot understand what Mercedes's supposed contribution could have been. That was a failure, in my opinion, that reduced the effectiveness of the book.

## Cleo says

"A revelatory biography of three glamorous, complex, modern women. Esther Murphy was a brilliant New York intellectual who dazzled friends and strangers with an unstoppable flow of conversation. But she never finished the books she was contracted to write—a painful failure and yet a kind of achievement. The quintessential fan, Mercedes de Acosta had intimate friendships with the legendary actresses and dancers of the twentieth century. Her ephemeral legacy is the thousands of objects she collected to preserve the memory of those performers and to document her own feelings. An icon of haute couture and a fashion editor of British Vogue, Madge Garland held influential views on dress that drew on her feminism, her ideas about modernity, and her love of women. Existing both vividly and invisibly at the center of culture, she—like Murphy and de Acosta—is now almost completely forgotten. In All We Know, Lisa Cohen describes these women’s glamorous choices, complicated failures, and controversial personal lives with lyricism and empathy. At once a series of intimate portraits and a startling investigation into style, celebrity, sexuality, and the genre of biography itself, All We Know explores a hidden history of modernism and pays tribute to three compelling lives."

Although kind of interesting, All We Know wasn't ultimately the best biography/historical expose that I've read in a while, and I didn't read the whole thing. All We Know, The Girl Who Loved Camellias, and Eighty Days all deal with influential but almost forgotten women of different historical periods. And I think I liked them in reverse order of the way they're listed. Nevertheless, the part of All We Know that I read was okay, and the way that Cohen chose to format the biography was well done.

Esther Murphy, Mercedes de Acosta, and Madge Garland were very different women, but they were connected in so many ways; for one, they all knew one another, even though they traveled in varied circles. Each woman has a unique story, and each is wholly forgotten in the 21st century. They aren't really, really important, but each of them hobnobbed with some pretty famous people, and Esther herself was well known at the time for her knowledge and fondness of talking.

An annoying thing is that the plot summary provided by the publisher doesn't actually mention one of the key points of the book: that all three women were lesbian. And that is really, really important to the world that the book portrays, and to the lives that it attempts to illuminate. This was a time when homosexuality was feared, reviled, shunned, and sometimes illegal, and all three of these compelling women were struggling with that in their different ways. Yes, there's Madge Garland's "love of women", but that could mean anything, really; it's not clear at all. Still, I suppose it can be inferred, but it should have been made a bit clearer.

Esther was incredibly intelligent, full of knowledge and constantly testing authority. She was first enrolled at a Catholic school, but left after she challenged the nuns with the paradox of the stone, about God's omnipotence. See what I mean?

The writing, however, was really dense, and I didn't end up finishing the book. I'll come back to it later, and perhaps enjoy it more. Still, it was one of the New York Times's 100 Best Books of 2012, so I'm definitely going to hang onto it for another time, trusting that it's somewhat worthwhile. I also have a signed copy, so...

www.novareviews.blogspot.com

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### First Second Books says

I read this book right after reading Joanna Russ’s _How to Supress Women’s Writing_, which turned out to be an interesting pairing choice – combining a book about how women are generally marginalized and minimalized with a book about some actual women who were marginalized and minimalized at the beginning of the 20th century.

It was fascinating to read about these lives and think about what they could have become if they had had some access to education and societal encouragement. I’m so glad I live in a century where I don’t have to run away from home to get a college education!

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### Jason says

An amazing biography of 3 extraordinary women and an extraordinary time!

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### Zeynep ?en says

An absolutely fascinating portrait of three intelligent, strong and complicated women of the 20th century who have left their mark in history and yet, according to some, have not left a monument behind. This book not only makes one question what a monument is and should be but also draws attention to the hidden figures of history, literature, art and fashion. To be honest, the only reason I'm not giving it 5 stars is because the chapter on Mercedes de Acosta felt thinner than those of Esther Murphy and Madge Garland.

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### AJ says

The lush novels of the 20's - full of fitzgerald and hemingway prose and filled with romantic stories of prohibition era parties and salon's, paris and spain adventures, french mediterrian countryside vacations, and rich and in depth social classes are uncovered by the factual stores of 3 women, all somehow entrenched in it.

The first narrative about Ester, was my favorite. Mercedes' chapter seemed to be an afterthought smacked in the middle of of the other two. But more importantly this is a book that you need to have some background knowledge of the players. I myself am only slightly aware of the personalities involved and it is an exercise in name dropping. I had to sit with my ipad wiki open the entire time.

It's well researched and detailed but the characters never come to life in quite the way I hoped. I learned much about the struggles of a writer trying to write an autobiography and Cohen seems to really get into Esther Murphy's head. Ther other two seem to be add-ons and they never really merge into a complete story. The similarities are there but even Mercedes and ESter, who actually knew eachother, do not really interact or help shape each other's stories. One thing I walked away from was the vulnerability of each woman and I found that it gave credence to their strength. It was a successful retelling of lives that shaped other lives and the parts they played in it. I wanted more though, and i was slightly disappointed that the other two women (Mercedes and Madge) were only felt at a more superficial level.

## Suzanne Stroh says

[This review appeared first as a blog post on my website. That explains its length...]

Time to make room for a new biography in the bookcase. But where do I shelve it?

After *Here Lies the Heart* by Mercedes de Acosta, between Diana McLellan's *The Girls* and *Loving Garbo* by Hugo Vickers? In what proximity to Diana Souhami's sparer *Greta and Cecil* or Maria Riva's spare-no-details book about her mother, *Marlene Dietrich*? Or should it go on the Paris-in-the-Twenties shelf beside *A Moveable Feast*, *Henry and June* and *Living Well is the Best Revenge* by Calvin Tomkins—staying close to Stein's *Picasso* and *Genêt* by Brenda Wineapple, about Janet Flanner?

Maybe it belongs nearer to my deviant Vidals, *Sexually Speaking* in particular. That would house it comfortably close to A.L. Rowse's dated classic, *Homosexuals in History*. It would share a shelf with *The Portrait of Dorian Grey*. But how close should it really get to David Leavitt's biography of suicide Alan Turing, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*?

Oh bugger it. My cataloging system is a mess. I have no idea where to put this fresh take on three Minor Moderns, *All We Know*, by Wesleyan professor Lisa Cohen. More than a decade in the making, benefiting from countless interviews of Greatest Generation raconteurs like the late Sybille Bedford, it's study of **Esther Murphy** the intellectual, **Mercedes de Acosta** the celebrity seducer and **Madge Garland** the fashion director, three eccentrics born in the 1890s.

All three came of age between the wars and took their seats with the chattering classes in New York, London, Paris and Hollywood to survey Modern culture from the Algonquin, from Bloomsbury and the Deux Magots, from Marlene Dietrich's kitchen and other high-status perches. Till now, these tastemakers have been regularly cast as minor historical characters in support roles. Or else, as Joan Schenkar wrote about Dolly Wilde in *Truly Wilde*, their lives "were merely 'noticed', not 'recorded.'"

**Minor League to Major League**

The argument Cohen makes in *All We Know* is that each woman led a life of major significance in the development of Modernism. If history never nominated Murphy or Acosta or Garland for Best Actress to run against Beauvoir or Barney or Stein, it's history's mistake. Blame the Academy, not the performance.

Cohen locates the error easily. History forgets that Modernism never went anywhere without a bent girl on her arm. Women's liberation was at the core of what the Modern era was about, Cohen reminds us. And what women were freer than those like Acosta, Murphy and Garland who risked their status and their livelihoods to love and make lives with other women? Cohen pulls these women off the bench and puts them back on the field as major players.

At the same time, the biographer reckons with evidence of underachievement and attention deficit. All three of her subjects were married lesbians who lived complex double (sometimes triple) lives. Did they squander their considerable talents out of wasted energy? All three made marks on their eras and stamped their professions but never achieved their dreams or created enduring artworks. Were they failures? Sure, they all had women lovers and paired off with other dykes, but none of their relationships endured, and it's

sometimes hard to know from these short-form biographies whether sex and love were major driving forces in any of their lives. Were they even gay enough to be truly inspiring? I wonder. What's a lesbian anyway?

This book has gotten high praise from exceptional biographers like Michael Holroyd. Before lauding the meticulous research by Cohen, a serious academic with impeccable credentials, the mainstream reviews try hard to bring readers up to speed on who Cohen's subjects were. Soon enough they've reached the word limit, without enough reflection on what Cohen is really writing about. She's writing about the utility and limits of protecting your private life from public scrutiny, known by that clubby word "discretion." She's writing about the benefits and costs of disguising yourself. She's writing about core competencies like sex and conversation and getting dressed that rise to the level of high art at the hands of master practitioners, but are really hard for biographers to archive and, therefore, to write about. She's writing about really interesting people who are really hard to write about.

**More Wild Girls**

So before you get in the Bugatti screaming for the Hotel du Cap, here's the scoop on whom you'll be riding with. ("It's not who you know," the Mark Cross heiress Esther Murphy scolds you as you slide in, "it's **whom** you know.") Her living art is her intellectual conversation, just as Natalie Barney's living art is her serial seduction. Both are ephemeral; both are hard to pin down on paper; but I see you're in this car, not in that one with Barney and Brooks. So by all means, introduce yourself to Hemingway's pal, FItzgerald's sidekick, Gerald Murphy's sister. She speaks any language you can throw at her, including the dead ones. She will tell you her name is Madame de Maintenon. She'll give her address as Versailles, Louis quatorze. Just go with it. As for her nonstop monologuing, just remind yourself that this is the Modern era, where motoring is like the Slow Food movement. Why not let her seduce you with oratory? Ask her anything, and you know she's into you when she pauses optimally before launching in with, "Well, all we know is…"

Madge Garland, very easy on the eyes, has been the editor of British Vogue since forever. You can tell by the dominatrix subtext and the pearl bracelets. Yes, it's okay to call it "Brogue," darling, but don't even think of getting in the car half-dressed. You may don trousers only on arrival. But deep down, Madge fancies the man in you, and at least she's not drunk, which is becoming a problem with Esther. Mind your pees and queues with Madge, the only woman in her postwar posse who earned every penny she ever spent. Let her give you the 300 level course on sexy runway models (*A Thousand Years of Beautiful Women*). Engage her in highbrow discussions about architecture and design, dazzle her with the university degrees she never attained, flash your ankles, and I predict you'll have a memorable ride. Just don't eat. Don't try to get her to dish about any of her girlfriends. "The person I wish would come live with me doesn't want to do it," she said during World War II. That's about as far as you'll get on her status.

Not so with Mercedes de Acosta. She's got a stamen up your skirt if you're anywhere near starfuckable. My advice is, let her give it to you. Her body is her medium, and sex is her performance art. They say it's a once-in-a-lifetime experience. She'll tell you she's a fan. Just go with it. Worse things have happened on the way to the Riviera. Just don't forget to tweet your publicist with a heads-up on damage control. You'll get down there only to find that every female celebrity known to man is also known to Acosta, and that spells cat fights on the red carpet. No wonder she can't get steady work as a screenwriter, even though she's a Buddhist with a hip yoga teacher. She's collecting Playbills and making notes for a tell-all memoir. Be forewarned.

Lisa Cohen's interesting book lies unopened in the footwell on a ride like this. But keep it by the bedside and take it one chapter at a time. You'll try once again to make sense of a tangled web of social networks linked by three friends who knew one another well. You'll wonder what it's like to spend fifteen years failing to write a book you're the world expert on, like Esther Murphy. You'll watch Madge Garland rise to

prominence in fashion at Vogue, only to get sacked for living with somebody with an Eton crop who's raising her secret daughter as a niece. This will remind you to rent THE KILLING OF SISTER GEORGE again on Netflix.

Back to the book, Garland's section is the longest, informed by the author's experience as a fashion writer. Sacked again and again, Garland rises from the ashes in Schiaparelli, proving that fashion, far from frivolous, was serious business for women between the wars. And has been ever since.

**Did They or Didn't They**

Keep reading. You'll attend the unsealing of Greta Garbo's letters to Mercedes de Acosta at the stuffy Rosenbach library, only to find that "nothing's there," and you'll wonder why it matters so much to know whether the two were really lovers. Is it because Garbo's heirs seem to fear being tainted by knowing where the star's heart had really lain (or lied, or got laid), if sex and Eros with Acosta can be proven? Or is it because we know, deep down, that no lesbian ruins her life over anything less?

Of Cohen's three subjects, Acosta remains the hardest character to pin down. Cohen defines her as a "fan" and reads her life as one where celebrity obsession fueled compulsive collecting and stalking behaviors that filled her with shame afterwards. Acosta's mysticism and her Romantic virility (both rare qualities in New York society where Mercedes grew up--as rare today as they were then) are explored less, but those who knew her well, like Alice Toklas, never underestimated the appeal.

There may be an argument to be made that Acosta, even more than Garland, knew where history was heading in "the American century" and had a reasonable plan for leading it there. Foresight in business, as in Hollywood, never lacks sex appeal. With this in mind it may be worth rethinking how shrewd Acosta really was in following her instincts. I can almost hear her mentor, Bessie Marbury, advising Acosta to leverage her esoteric assets to pursue power and influence that would trump the strong suit she'd been born with—but would never be able to play out as a New York lesbian. With better life skills, would Acosta have been the lesbian Wallis Simpson? (Like Garland and Murphy, she could not manage herself: fatal for a courtesan, as she should have known from reading Liane de Pougy.)

One thing's for damn sure, as Gertrude Stein would have said. Acosta wasn't the only Hollywood player with a lesbian seduction plan. Cohen quotes Dietrich, exasperated by Acosta's vanity. But Dietrich pursued Acosta shamelessly in 1932, cruising her at a performance then turning up unannounced on Acosta's doorstep, as soon as she learned it was over between Acosta and Garbo.

(Garbo, incidentally, had just been weakened by a bank failure that changed her financial prospects overnight. Instead of looking at the retirement she'd saved for, she was suddenly looking at another decade of brutal assignments to recover stability. Garbo was a hard worker to begin with, plus she was insomniac, hardly a natural at glamour, and it took everything she had to produce the studio image required of her on a daily basis. Anyone under those circumstances needs unswerving emotional support, plus dinner on the table after a rough day at work: idolatry on the order of Pougy in her *Blue Notebooks* phase. Even with the title Princess Ghika or similar, I can't imagine Acosta measuring up to that challenge. Has anyone ever wondered if Garbo left Acosta for cause? Could that possibly be what all the fuss was all about?)

Well, in any case, mystery still shrouds Acosta. She would appreciate the irony.

**Failure and Other Modern Mysteries**

And so, along with Murphy the drunk and Garland the anorexic during the incubation period of what's now our global "celebrity culture," Acosta with her status addiction rounds out Lisa Cohen's portrait of its early victims.

From beginning to end in *All We Know*, you'll read about failure—failure to produce, failure to achieve, failure to exhibit, failure to earn, failure to thrive, failure to sustain love and sexual attraction and lasting domestic narratives. And you'll wonder why there still isn't more discussion about failure, on the part of all three of these women, to bequeath their considerable legacies. Legacies that we all now have to dig in the dirt for like archaeologists. Or novelists.

Why didn't our genius great-grannies raise protégées? Perhaps Prohibition, the Crash and two world wars really did get in the way. Or perhaps the Modern Woman just never had the time.

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