



Deeply Superficial: Noel Coward, Marlene Dietrich, and Me

Michael Menzies

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Michael Menzies has led the picaresque life many of us only dream of, and he sets it down with such wit and grace it's hard to know which to envy more, his wealth of once-in-a-lifetime experiences or his skill with a pen.”—Christopher Lloyd, Emmy Award-winning executive producer/writer of *Modern Family* and *Frasier*

In this dazzling memoir that also serves as a dual biography of stage and film legends Noël Coward and Marlene Dietrich, film and music executive Michael Menzies chronicles in hilarious detail his life-long obsession with the theater in general and these two international superstars in particular. At age twelve, Menzies discovered the autobiography of actor/writer/composer Noël Coward and was consumed by it. Although still only a youth, Menzies identified hugely with Coward—so much so that he came to believe that he must be the star’s love child. But with whom? In a burst of inspiration Menzies worked out that his mother could only be Marlene Dietrich. The author then decides that as soon as he can he will voyage around the world to confront Coward and Dietrich in person and announce himself as their son. Yet even after he finally abandons his plan, Menzies continues his search for them—and their pasts—spending the rest of his life following in their footsteps, traveling to London, Paris, New York, Berlin, Switzerland, and Jamaica. *Deeply Superficial* is at once a warm and witty homage to these two legends and the lasting impact their spectacular careers left on the world—and on a twelve-year-old dreaming of fame in a faraway place. Michael Menzies has lived all over the world, and has worked with rock ’n’ roll promoter Bill Graham, impresario Sol Hurok, choreographer Agnes de Mille, Broadway producer Saint-Subber, and in film with the de Laurentiis family. He lives in Los Angeles.

Deeply Superficial: Noel Coward, Marlene Dietrich, and Me Details

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Ryan Field says

When I first started reading *Deeply Superficial* by Michael Menzies, I wasn't sure where it was going. From the image on the book cover I expected biographical stories about Marlene Dietrich and Noel Coward. I soon found out the book is more of a combination autobiography/biography, with personal accounts of the fascinating life Michael Menzies has led...mixed in with tidbits about both Dietrich and Coward. Weaving different stories into a book is not an easy thing to do, but it's done well in this book. And Menzies makes it real without sounding too over the top like a few other bios I've read this year. He uses an endearing brand of self-deprecation devoid of all pretense, and you will find yourself cheering him on as he travels through life trying to figure "it" all out.

It's clear from the beginning of the book Menzies was fascinated with Dietrich and Coward at a very young age. He grew up in an average home in New Zealand, longing for more excitement, glamour, and sophistication. At one point, he became convinced he was adopted and his real parents were, indeed, Dietrich and Coward. He does this in a clever, tongue-in-cheek way, and returns to this adoption reference throughout the book as his own life seems to be constantly mingled with Dietrich and Coward, usually through no fault of his own. (As a side note, I've been a fan of a book titled "The Magic of Believing" for many years. And when I read about the deep appreciation Menzies had for Dietrich and Coward I thought it was a good example of how the things we love and appreciate the most often come to us if we think about them hard enough...in a positive way.) In spite of his devotion to these two stars, never once did I think of Menzies as a celebrity stalker. He had too much respect for Dietrich and Coward for that. And he always spoke of his real parents (Clive and Mary) with great respect.

"Dietrich understood. Professional commitments always came before personal wishes. This was a law by which she lived her life."

I also like bios where I learn things I didn't know. And the Dietrich and Coward stories Menzies discusses in the book are abundant, from funny to painful. Especially the one part where Dietrich is leaving on a train. No spoilers. But I never knew that happened. I also didn't know that Coward was often tormented with demons all his life. And none of this was done in a dishy way. It was all done with respect and I only came away more interested in the lives of Dietrich and Coward, not to mention gaining a new sense of respect for how hard they worked to achieve the things they did in life.

"Coward knew the affair was so one-sided that it would inevitably collapse. He knew, too, that Traylor was not attracted to him (or any man for that matter)."

Michael Menzies has led a fascinating life in his own right, too. From the time he ran away from home, to the experiences he had with someone dying of AIDS. For a gay man with a limited background and education, living during the closeted time period in which he had to survive, he worked hard and did well in various creative professions. From writing magazine articles to working in production for some of Hollywood's biggest studios, he managed to finally attain a lot of the excitement and glamour he craved so much growing up. And he did it all on his own.

"Eduardo was twenty-seven when I met him, and it was rare to find a man of his age who even knew who Dietrich was. He knew and loved Donna Summer, Grace Jones, Stevie Nicks, and surprise of surprises, he

knew and loved Marlene Dietrich, too. He was a prize. I had to add him to my life, where he remains to this day, still a prize."

I've been lucky enough in my own life to have known several very successful gay men like Menzies who often acted as mentors when I didn't know what being gay was all about. It's a generation of gay men who make dinner an event that never begins a moment earlier than nine at night, with stories of fascinating people they've known, stories of exotic places they've traveled, and stories of interesting things they've done. And while I was reading *Deeply Superficial*, I felt as if I were listening to a couple of old friends of mine who once lived on Sutton Place in NY and designed homes for people who owned fleets of ships and famous NY restaurants. It's a generation of gay men who don't seem to get the appreciation (or respect) they deserve in this new less sophisticated world now where people don't seem to mind wearing sweat pants in public and driving cars shaped like toy boxes.

But I digress. It was nice to read a book like this, written from such an honest, genuine POV. Menzies also talks about his long term relationship with several funny tips on how to make a relationship last for a long time, one of which is separate bedrooms and bathrooms. (As another side note, those of you writing m/m romance might find it interesting to know that a lot of gay men in long term relationships...especially the gay men I've known...don't share the same bedroom.) The book is also extremely well written (and edited) and I did NOT find one single offensive word, sentence, or paragraph that made me cringe...from a writer's POV. The story flows with an even pace, moves fast, and I found myself reading much later into the night than I'd planned. In fact, I read this in two sittings mainly because I wanted to see how it ended.

"When people ask me the secret of a long and happy relationship, I always tell them separate bedrooms, and more importantly, separate bathrooms are the answer."

I would recommend this book to anyone without thinking twice. And I think that if there are any younger gay men who are interested in reading about gay men from this generation, it's the perfect book to grasp what things were like for the gay men who've paved the way...without even knowing it in most cases...for the rest of us.

Lori Perkins says

This is a wonderful book. I love that he couldn't believe that the author was the son of such different parents so imagined that his real parents were Noel Coward and Marlene Dietrich.

Susan says

The names of Marlene Dietrich and Noel Coward - two of my all-time favorite talents and personalities - were responsible for my reading this book. However it is not superficial. This book is definitely like a champagne cocktail, but it is also a serious, life-affirming look at the place of theater, film and entertainment in our lives. Despite the wonderful wit and humor, the author also creates moments for tearful recollection.

Alex Perez says

Half Michael's biography and half a biography of Dietrich and Coward's relationship, thanks to the author's lifelong obsession with his imagined "parents". Laughed out loud a few times. Felt like the stories you'd hear from an old queen in the dark corner of a Hollywood party. A quick, fun read.
