



Marlene Dietrich: The Life

Maria Riva

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***New York Times* Bestseller: A “greatly entertaining” biography of the glamorous, mysterious German-born actress, written by her daughter (*The New York Times*).**

With intimate detail, author Maria Riva reveals the rich life of her mother, Marlene Dietrich, the charismatic star of stage and screen whose career spanned much of the twentieth century. Opening with Dietrich's childhood in Schöneberg, Riva's biography introduces us to an energetic, disciplined, and ambitious young actress whose own mother equated show business with a world of vagabonds and thieves.

Dietrich would quickly rise to stardom on the Berlin stage in the 1920s with her sharp wit and bisexual mystique, and wearing the top hat and tails that revolutionized our concept of beauty and femininity. She comes alive in these pages in all her incarnations: muse, collaborator, bona fide movie star, box-office poison, lover, wife, and mother.

During World War II, Dietrich would stand up to the Nazis and galvanize American troops, eventually earning the Congressional Medal of Freedom. There were her artistic relationships with Josef von Sternberg (*The Blue Angel*, *Morocco*, *Shanghai Express*), Colette, Erich Maria Remarque, Noël Coward, and Cole Porter, as well as her heady romances. And in her final years, Dietrich would make herself visibly invisible, devoting herself to the immortality of her legend.

Capturing this complex and astonishing woman, Maria Riva's insightful profile of her mother has the depth, range, and resonance of a novel, and takes us on a journey through Europe and old Hollywood during an era that is gone but not forgotten.

Marlene Dietrich: The Life Details

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From Reader Review Marlene Dietrich: The Life for online ebook

Sam says

Truly amazing biography worthy of its reputation. An 800-page examination of the life of a sociopathically narcissistic nymphomaniac from her glamorous forty-year prime through her falling-off-the-stage alcoholism to her final decade (!) spent entirely in bed with a hot plate and a Limoges pitcher to pee in. It's impossible not to feel bad for the daughter who spent her entire life as a servant and punching bag for a glittery, undeniably fabulous monster.

Laurie says

This is an absorbing biography of Dietrich by her daughter, Maria Riva. We are given the star's life in detail, from her birth until her death. Riva's life was closely twined with her mother's from the day she was born- her mother used her as constant companion (who needs school when you can be your mother's dresser?) and servant- so she was there to see and hear what Dietrich did and said for decades. From an early age, Riva was aware of her mother's constant sexual escapades- sex and performances are the main themes of the book, along with Riva's attempts to escape her mother's life and have a life of her own. Dietrich had no concept of boundaries, and said and did the most atrocious things in front of her daughter, and then her son-in-law (when Dietrich returned from having sex with John Kennedy, she pulled her used panties out of her purse and thrust them to her son-in-law's nose, encouraging him to smell the scent of the president!) and then even her grandchildren. She lied about her age, which meant she had to lie about her daughter's age, too. When Riva was in her teens, she was still being dressed as a little girl, to enforce the illusion that Dietrich had only given birth to her a few years before. Dietrich drank heavily (especially late in life) and was her own pharmacist, in the years when amphetamines and downers were easily gotten. As far as I could tell, she never gave a thought to anyone else unless they could do something for her.

But she was beautiful, and could enthrall audiences. She was smart- she learned from wardrobe, lighting people, directors and anyone else and applied what she learned to her art. Josef von Sternberg, the man who made her a star in 'Blue Angel' and with whom she had an on again, off again affair for years, taught her the most- mainly, how to light herself for the effects she wanted. Thankfully, most of the people she worked with were willing to take her orders. She was a hard worker; she spent money like it was water- supporting herself, her daughter, her husband with whom she did not live (most of the time), her husband's mistress, and giving extravagant gifts to her lovers- so she had to work almost all the time. She was strict with herself when working, and had bulimia, which allowed her to eat the rich foods she loved and still lose weight. Sadly, in her old age, she developed some dementia and that, along with her alcoholism and drug use, made her last years sad indeed.

Of course this is the biography of Riva, too. As long as her mother was alive, their lives were entwined. Riva did carve out her own life, though, becoming a television star for many years and raising a family. I was entranced by this biography- I couldn't stop reading because every time I figured Dietrich couldn't do anything worse, of course she would!

Sherrie says

One of the very best Hollywood memoirs - actually quite well written, full of genuine respect but also packed to the brim with often sordid displays of utter selfishness. Dietrich orchestrated every single moment of her life - there's something very...not human about that. Was Dietrich from another planet!? Conspiracy theory.

Tam May says

This book should really be called "Marlene and Me" because it's as much about Riva as it is about Dietrich. The book is definitely entertaining and Riva does have writing talent and a wicked sense of humor (apparently, like her mother had). However, in reading this, I kept making comparisons to Christina Crawford's "Mommie Dearest". Riva describes in detail the emotional abuse she suffered at the hands of her mother (and her father in a different way, but mostly her mother) and paints a demonizing portrait of Dietrich that is clearly highly colored by her point of view. I'm not saying I don't believe most (if not all) of the ills Riva suffered at the hands of her mother (who, without trying to be too psychoanalytical, seems to me to have clearly had some major personality disorders) really happened - I have no doubt that they did. But like many celebrity biographies written by abuse survivors, it has an element of revenge, of wanting to completely break down the idealized image of the Hollywood star that the studio system created, to the detriment of many such stars. While disillusionment can be good, it can also become almost like a fairy tale of a wicked witch, a complete villain that becomes dehumanized. Many other reviews have commented on Riva's unreliable narrative and I tend to agree with this. I accept that Riva creates many dialogues (or, in Dietrich's case, monologues) that clearly could never have taken place word-for-word but I felt that, too often, Riva positioned herself as the martyr, the desired savior of others who fell victims to her mother and father's emotional abuse (like her father's mistress Tami) and there were also areas where it felt almost like Riva's sole purpose was to justify her own actions or what she makes clear that she viewed as her own weaknesses. So if you're looking for a biography of Marlene Dietrich, this is definitely not where you want to look, as it is terribly bias and questionable on facts, despite it being humorous and entertaining.

Dylan says

Being a huge movie buff/nerd, this book is a really great, though somewhat exhausting chronicle of La Dietrich's life, told from the point of view of her daughter, Maria Riva. Refreshingly, Maria's not coming from a "Mommie Dearest" kind of place, although neither is she shy about showing the not-so-glam points of her famous, sometimes cold and very German mother. Every film she did is chronicled, and it's so fun to learn about the trivia that went into making each one, especially her relationship with her mentor/lover Joseph Von Sternberg. He and Marlene created "Dietrich" as we know her, but eventually she was no longer his, she became her own creation. There are endless tidbits and morsels of info about costuming; she was extremely involved in coming up with the look of her characters, which she felt was more important than the script, her "motivation", her co-stars, or anything else.

The problem I find as I digest this endless trivia is that it IS endless! Maria Riva really must have an amazing memory to remember all of this stuff. It makes for a fun guessing game to try to figure out which unnamed star is the subject of a scandalous or embarrassing story. Still, I'm starting to hanker for this saga to move forward. The tedium of being an extremely famous diva is really shown, along with the excitement. I'm looking forward to the part where WWII starts and she throws herself into the American war effort, touring

with the USO and earning the enmity of her German countrymen in the process. And so, onward!

Samantha Glasser says

There are great autobiographies or memoirs written by friends of celebrities that consist of personal information and small tidbits that greatly interest readers. Then there are biographies, often more informational and objective than autobiographies. This book is composed of both which makes it one of the best books about a celebrity around.

Maria Riva is the daughter of legend Marlene Dietrich, an androgynous star of the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s. One would believe that a daughter would be the most biased person to write a biography but this is not the case with this book. Riva shares personal information but she always cites when she does so as to not confuse fact and observation. She includes diary entries, letters from lovers, and a bevy of other sources including other acquaintances of Dietrich. She reveals things that her mother made up for the press and what her mother really thought about things like films, other stars, and sex.

Riva always remains objective and portrays her mother respectably even in embarrassing or hateful situations because she is aware of the multitude of Dietrich fans. She does not praise simply to praise though; she seems to understand the adoration of the facade Marlene Dietrich showed the world. Riva talks about how she had to trick her mother into being treated for the cancer she swore she didn't have. She writes about her mother forcing her to get fitted for a diaphragm before she traveled overseas to entertain the troops during the second World War. Even when she speaks of when Dietrich told Riva's sons that their mother had stolen them from her, she does not try to persuade readers to hate her mother.

This is an incredible book. Enjoy this jewel of writing.

Gaber Highbrow says

I'd like to spend few words about this book, because I'm appalled by Maria Riva's will to destroy the myth her mother was, and still is, by telling outrageous stories and secrets she'd better have took with her into the grave, the day she'll die. I'm not saying that Marlene was flawless, but I think the role of a biographer is that to write about a human being, about the good and the bad moments this particular human being had lived and actions made, but always with respect of the dead. There are secrets that need to remain untold, even if you, biographer/daughter/son/nephew/et caetera, have been part of, for the sake of those who love the public figure; or at least, if the urge of discrediting the famous figure is too unbearable, just to write them once in the entire book, not every other page. As I thought at the start of my reading, this book is mostly a rant about this oh-so-cruel mother who needed constant nursing throughout her entire life, a child who never grew up, this vitiated snob always craving for more fame, a crazy nymphomaniac until her very last breath. Luckily enough, I'm not part of those people that get their ideas easily changed, so my enthusiasm for Marlene Dietrich remains alive, after this torture.

I'm awarding this abomination three stars just because of the magnificent cover, for a nice story that made me laugh now and then, and for Marlenah herself.

Future plans: to read another biography about her, lest I live with the heavy memory of this volume for too long.

Irene Xandra says

First of all, the book has a wonderful literary style, entertaining, easy to read, but never simplistic. The tone of the writing is very often ironic, in a very skillful manner. Good irony needs to be built up and carefully placed, like a cherry on a cake and Maria's book does that, wonderfully.

As far as the content of the book, Maria chooses to disclose the mystery and to break the Dietrich legend. In a way, this is a healthy choice, because Marlene took herself so seriously that she managed to build a powerful myth, that hid all her flaws. She gives an honest opinion about her limits as an actress and singer, but also recognizes her technical, artistic merits and her determination, that she used to her advantage.

It must have been very hard having her as a mother and the weight of the Dietrich legend appalled her, so she chose to reveal the truths behind it, and probably for the first time to really say to her mother what she thought of her and didn't have the courage to tell her alive.

The image she paints of Dietrich is of an egocentric, whose manner of expressing love was to own the persons around her and control them in her own idea of their good interest, which was not necessarily the right one.

However, one senses that there were some feelings behind her actions, but they were hidden behind her self-imposed armour, which didn't allow her to show her vulnerabilities and sentimentalism. The most common way of expressing it became the material way, of buying things and paying things for people. This led to a lot of miscommunication and eventually resentment in Maria's life, who felt her mother didn't care for her (and the others).

The only question that remains is the ethical one, if Maria should have disclosed so many things from Marlene's life... There are a couple of things from Dietrich's last years, that I wished I hadn't read about. Maybe I didn't need to feel pity at the end of it. Maybe some of the myth should have been perpetuated.

Kristine says

Marlene Dietrich: The Life by Maria Riva is a free NetGalley ebook that I read in early June.

It begins with a third-person narration of Marlene's early life (when she was Maria 'Lena' Magdalena prior to age 13 when she chose her new name) amid much discipline, different languages, journaling, emotional relationships with both men and women, attending the Max Reinhardt acting school, and going on go-see's and screen tests. She marries Rudolf Sieber in May 1923 and, later, gives birth to her one and only child, a daughter.

From then, it takes a dip into first-person narration from her daughter's perspective. It struck me as being a little unusual, but it took awhile for me to realize that the author, Maria Riva, is Marlene's daughter. So, in switching this narration, she's recounting her own life (in the theatre, on USO tours, behind the scenes on Hollywood sets, and caregiving for her mom) alongside Marlene's (love affairs into her 40s and 50s, working in Las Vegas, equipping WWII troops overseas on her own dime, working with Alfred Hitchcock).

Inez Parra says

this book is so goddamn long it feels as though you've lived life right alongside Marlene! but what a life, eh?

she makes me sad with all of the fur she wears, but other than that this book is the height of glamorous entertainment! it's very obvious that her daughter has some deep issues with her, but it isn't overbearing in a trashy "Mommie Dearest" kind of way....even though i love that stuff i know it's not for everybody.

Don LaFontaine says

This book described the life of Marlene Dietrich through the eyes of her daughter. It made for some interesting insights into the life and actions of this acclaimed actress. Reading about the unconventional marriage, relationships, and beliefs of this movie star kept me shaking my head. Though I have not seen too many of her films, one gets the impression that she did not make too many good ones. Most of them seemed to be described as fair to poor. Maybe she lasted long because of her beauty, or maybe it was because of her willingness to sleep with many, many people. Her resilience can not be denied as she lasted in a form of show business for many years. Some of her life is described via letter and telegrams she sent and received. Though after a while I felt this was overdone and the reader did not need this to understand the author's point, it cannot be denied that overall this add to the understanding of a woman who had a unique life.

This book is interesting, though the reader can feel the bitterness throughout it's pages. It is a gossip book, with some parts seemingly belonging on a supermarket tabloid. As this is the first biography of Marlene Dietrich I have read, I think it was a good one to start with, and makes me interested in what others had to say about her. If a person is interested in classic Hollywood personalities, one with gossip, kiss & tell stories, and how a particular persona is created and maintained, they will enjoy this book.

Julie says

Marlene Dietrich: A Life by Maria Riva is a 2017 Pegasus Books publication.

Recently I read 'Marlene' by C.W. Gortner, which falls into the 'biographical novel' category. It was well done, for the most part, but I couldn't help but wonder, what parts were fact, what parts were fiction. So, I set out to find a non-fiction biography of the legendary actress, and stumbled upon this one, written by Dietrich's daughter, Maria Riva. This book was originally released, I think in 1992 or 93, but has been reissued and is also available in digital format.

I put this book on hold at the library, as pre-release, and received a copy much quicker than I expected. I didn't want to read two books on the exact same subject, this close together, but in this case, it may have worked to my advantage.

Still, I was a bit concerned because this is a book written by Marlene's daughter, Maria Riva, and not a professional biographer. I'm not crazy about 'revenge' books written by embittered children of Hollywood stars. 'Mommie Dearest' seemed to start a trend which I found rather distasteful, but people can't seem to get enough of it.

But, this book was very well received for the most part, so I decided to give it a shot.

So, how did it measure up?

First off, this book draws from so many personal documents, such as diaries, telegrams, letters, and photographs. They are included here, unedited, and speak for themselves, but Riva adds her personal memories of these events, giving the reader an intimate look at the woman behind the legend.

Having some prior knowledge about Marlene did help me navigate through the book a little faster, since I was already familiar with some of the topics covered, but this is a very hefty book and will require a little bit of time to go through. However, I found it to be an easy read, and it appears to confirm much of what was covered in the Gortner book.

Maria did portray her mother in a realistic way, exposing the darker side of growing up with a famous and a glamorous actress for a mother, while paying homage to that incredible era of time, and all those incredibly talented people, trends, and of course, a few scandals.

Some may view Maria's vision of her mother as harsh in some places, but after having read a little more about Marlene, I would say, she was probably pretty close to the mark. I didn't take this as anything but an accurate detailing of life with Marlene Dietrich. Did she fudge? Exaggerate? Probably, to some extent, she painted herself out to be put upon by her overbearing and self-absorbed mother. If I had not already perceived Marlene in a less than flattering light, I may have found Maria's version of events off putting, but I found her to be sincere and believable, despite the uncomfortableness of the situation.

But, nothing here was a shock in my opinion. While Marlene was groundbreaking, unafraid to challenge society's norms, capitalizing on her uniqueness, and building a reputation around her professional life, that kept her protected from the probing of curious fans who only wanted to believe in the glamorous image of her, willing to look the other way or ignore anything that might challenge that carefully constructed impression.

As the title suggests, the book is primarily about Marlene, but it's also about Maria, and her experiences and feelings flow through the pages, so that we see her awe, her love of America, her own struggle for independence from her mother's forceful personality and demands, and the way she managed to create her own identity.

While some may have a different opinion about the tone of this book, I don't think you can read this book without picking up on Maria's resentment, but I think she tried to temper it so that she didn't look like yet another bitter Hollywood child, cashing in on her mother's success. No doubt, Maria's recollections rankled some big fans of Marlene, who would prefer the 'Hollywood' image over reality, while others will take gleeful delight in seeing Marlene's mythical reputation debunked.

My personal opinion of Marlene is that she was all about her own self, and wasn't naturally maternal, but she lived life on her own terms and you could either wither under her power, succumb to it, or fight against it, but it made no difference to her one way or the other. She was the way she was, and well, I didn't feel she was filled with great depth, and was very shallow, and so, this book only deepened that opinion. The one area, Marlene succeeded in giving anything back was the work she did during WW2, which, as far as I'm concerned is the most meaningful contribution she made in her life.

This is an opinion I had formed before I started this book, and I think this book validates that judgement.

Yet, I still admire the contributions Marlene made to film, I loved her image, her style, all the glamour, mystery, and the unapologetic way she approached the stage and film.

But, as they say, Hollywood is mostly smoke and mirrors, and this book will remind you of that old adage, if you ever had any doubts.

Overall, the book is well organized, informative, and while I did know what to expect in some ways, it was still very enlightening, despite the sly 'revenge' factor.

4 stars

4 stars

Sveta says

The pretension of writing about Marlene Dietrich is annoying. It's a book about Marlene Dietrich's daughter's love for the USA and struggle to be "American". The attitude Riva has toward any aspect of her mother's character, any conflict in her mother's life, any aspect of her career or a relationship-- predictable with almost complete accuracy based on whether it's something that seems "European" (such as lascivious behavior with other women) and Riva justifying her hatred for her mother based mostly on her father's horrifying abuse of a mistress named Tami (while her father gets away with almost no criticism constantly, because unlike Dietrich he was happy to spoil Riva with gifts of houses) is annoying at best.

When this book isn't Riva presenting yet another time her mother was a European slut while she was a soft American saint, there are a lot of copies of telegrams and letters and some photos, a sense of Dietrich as having an extravagant generosity comes through, kind of slavish devotion to giving people the best when your only resource is your physicality. Which is what makes this attack on Dietrich's image so difficult to read, it sounds like her image was the only thing she really had for herself. Twisted book...

C.S. Burrough says

I had to read this account of the woman seen through her daughter's eyes. I knew this was no trashy Mommie Dearest act of vengeance, having pored over mainstream reviews. I found Maria Riva's efforts commendable. Marlene was something else, onscreen and off. Imagine a night on the tiles with her, Berlin, circa 1920-something.

Born in 1901 in Schöneberg, now a district of Berlin, Dietrich studied violin, becoming interested in theatre and poetry as a teenager. Her first job, in 1922, was playing violin in a pit orchestra accompanying silent films. She was fired after four weeks.

She instead became a chorus girl, touring with vaudeville-style revues. Also playing small roles in dramas, she initially attracted no special attention. Her film debut comprised a bit part in *The Little Napoleon* (1923). By the late 1920s, Dietrich was playing sizable screen roles.

In 1929 came her breakthrough role of cabaret singer Lola Lola in *The Blue Angel* (1930), which introduced her signature song 'Falling in Love Again'. A success, she moved to the U.S. for Paramount Pictures as a German answer to MGM's Swedish Greta Garbo. The rest, as they say, is legend.

In 1999, the American Film Institute named Dietrich the ninth-greatest female star of all time. Among my favourites of her films were *Witness for the Prosecution* and *Stage Fright*. Marlene's middle years were of great interest to this baby boomer:

Approached by the Nazis to return to Germany, she famously turned them down flat. Staunchly anti-Nazi, she became an American citizen in 1939. Dietrich became one of the first celebrities to raise war bonds. She toured the US for most of 1942 and 1943, reportedly selling more bonds than any other star.

During 1944 and 1945, she performed for Allied troops in Algeria, Italy, Britain and France, entering Germany with Generals Gavin and Patton. When asked why she did so despite the obvious dangers, she replied, 'aus Anstand' ('out of decency').

Awarded the US Medal of Freedom in 1945, she said this was her proudest accomplishment. She was also awarded the French government's Légion d'honneur for her wartime work.

Dietrich performed on Broadway twice in the late 1960s, winning a special Tony Award in 1968. In 1972 she received \$250,000 to film *I Wish You Love*, a version of her Broadway show *An Evening With Marlene Dietrich*, in London. Unhappy with the result, she need not have been.

I have live recordings of her 1960s and 1970s concerts, and what a performer she was. She had no need to sing as such; she was simply a supreme artiste who held audiences around the planet mesmerised.

In her later years, Dietrich's health declined. She survived cervical cancer and suffered from poor leg circulation. A 1973 stage fall injured her left thigh, requiring skin grafts.

'Do you think this is glamorous?' she said in a 1973 interview. 'That it's a great life and that I do it for my health? Well it isn't. Maybe once, but not now.'

After fracturing her right leg in 1974, her live performance career largely ended when the following year she again fell off stage, this time in Sydney, Australia, breaking her thigh.

Her last film appearance was a cameo role in *Just a Gigolo* (1979), starring David Bowie, in which she sang the title song. That same year her autobiography, *Nimmt nur mein Leben* (Take Just My Life), was published.

Dependent on painkillers and alcohol, Dietrich withdrew to the seclusion of her Paris apartment to spend her dotage mostly bedridden. For more than a decade she became a prolific letter-writer and phone-caller, before dying aged 90 in 1992.

It is perhaps unnecessary to hear from Maria Riva about her mother's many affairs and sexual fetishes. Fortunately, this does not lower the book's tone, just pads it out needlessly. That is my only criticism.

A good, solid documentation of a screen legend's ways by her frank and not at all nasty daughter.

Mary Narkiewicz says

I'm reading this biography now.. a bird's eye view of Marlene Dietrich as seen through the eyes of her beloved daughter..

I don't know that I'd like Marlene..who knows.. but I can't put the book down.. She didn't seem to care at all for our animal and bird friends except for having their fur and feathers to decorate her body for her films.. and Maria's dogs kept disappearing..

Still, though this is opposed to everything I believe, I read on because of the amazing revelations about this movie star, the film industry and culture in the thirties, forties..etc. Stories about Mercedes De Acosta, Greta Garbo, Josef von Sternberg, Rouben Mamoulian , Maurice Chevalier..etc.etc..

Once I heard a tape of Marlene D. greeting her mother after being unable to speak with her during the years they were separated because of Nazi Germany.. Marlene's voice was so incredibly tender and loving on the tape..I'll just keep that memory with me..
