

# GELLHORN

A TWENTIETH-CENTURY LIFE



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*Caroline Moorehead*

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## **Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life** Caroline Moorehead

The first major biography of legendary war correspondent Martha Gellhorn, whose life provides a unique and thrilling perspective on world history in an extraordinary time

Martha Gellhorn's heroic career as a reporter brought her to the front lines of virtually every significant international conflict between the Spanish Civil War and the end of the Cold War. The preeminent-and often the only-female correspondent on the scene, she broke new ground for women in the male preserve of journalism. Her wartime dispatches, marked by a passionate desire to expose suffering in its many guises and an inimitable immediacy, rank among the best of the twentieth century.

A deep-seated love of travel complemented this interest in world affairs. From her birth in St. Louis in 1908 to her death in London in 1998, Gellhorn passed through Africa, Cuba, China, and most of the great cities of Europe, recording her experiences in first-rate travel writing and fiction. A tall, glamorous blonde, she made friends easily-among the boldface names that populated her life were Eleanor Roosevelt, Leonard Bernstein, and H. G. Wells-but she was as incapable of settling into comfortable long-term relationships as she was of sitting still, and happiness often eluded her despite her professional success. Both of her marriages ended badly-the first, to Ernest Hemingway, publicly so.

Drawn from extensive interviews and with exclusive access to Gellhorn's papers and correspondence, this seminal biography spans half the globe and almost an entire century to offer an exhilarating, intimate portrait of one of the defining women of our times.

## **Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life Details**

Date : Published September 23rd 2003 by Henry Holt & Company

ISBN : 9780805065534

Author : Caroline Moorehead

Format : Hardcover 480 pages

Genre : Biography, Nonfiction, History, Womens, Writing, Journalism, Travel

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# From Reader Review Gellhorn: A Twentieth-Century Life for online ebook

## Janis Mckay says

Martha Gellhorn, one of the best war correspondents this country has ever seen. She witnessed almost every major international conflict from the Spanish Civil War to Vietnam. How is it that I am only just learning about her now? This biography is, in my opinion, ruthlessly fair. She is not pictured as a saint, far from it. Like many driven and talented people who focus intently on one thing, she sometimes exhibits a callous disregard for the feelings of others, even those closest to her. She has unfortunately been too often defined by her relationship with Ernest Hemingway, much to her disgust, and this writer puts their relationship back in its proper context.

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## Mary Morgan says

As a journalist who grew up in the internet age, I find it extraordinary to read about the lives of genuine correspondents - sent to be real witnesses, to document history, and to send back their despatches to people far away who would otherwise be in the dark.

I have such admiration for Martha's interest in people rather than politics and military movements, and (even though I work for the BBC, the home of balanced and objective reporting) her upfront dismissal of "all that objectivity shit". There are some instances - the Spanish Civil War, she felt - where there is a clear right and a clear wrong and that a conscientious journalist can and should take sides.

Martha isn't always likeable - I think I'd have been afraid to meet her, in case she dismissed me as boring like she did with so many others - but she is brave to the point of reckless, and persistent, and strong. She was also an obsessive letter writer - where did she find the time? - and Moorehead mines her letters, diaries and notes to create a vivid picture of a unique character - who I could almost idolise, despite her flaws.

This book suffers the same failing as so many biographies, though: the author is so fascinated by her subject, has learnt so much about her and has so much rich material, that she can't bare to leave anything out. The biography is over 500 pages long and would have been better shorter BUT Martha Gellhorn led such a fascinating life that I can't criticise Moorehead too harshly for that!

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## Jim says

Martha Gellhorn, journalist, writer and world traveler, is one of the most interesting women of the 20th Century. She was a good friend of Eleanor Roosevelt (and stayed in the White House) and rubbed elbows with the likes of Leonard Bernstein, Adlai Stevenson, and H.G. Wells among others as well as being Ernest Hemingway's third wife. She lived the life of a liberated woman long before the women's liberation movement.

Moorehead's biography draws heavily on written records and Martha's massive number of letters which she

seems to have written by the thousands. While she presents a good chronology of Gellhorn's life, at times it gets mired in Martha's self doubt and depression without quite getting a feel for the flavor of her life or the times. With so much to draw from, she often includes information simply because it exists although it provides no real insight into Martha or the progression of her story. Despite being dry and dragging at times, Moorehead's account still provides a great deal of information regarding a remarkable life which ended in suicide in her 90's.

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### **Fiona says**

Excellent biography of an extraordinary woman.

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### **Janis Mills says**

A fascinating woman. She had the balls to sneak on a hospital ship and land on Omaha Beach on D-Day. She snared Hemingway away from his wife and lived to regret it. Adopted a child after she got rid of the UC and Seemed to struggle with all relationships that tied her down. She had a love him/leave him relationship with all others husband or child. Great story about a woman who would not bond to anyone.

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### **Mikey B. says**

This is a very moving and passionate biography of an independent 20th century woman. Martha Gellhorn was a writer of both fiction and non-fiction – and much more successful as a journalist. She wrote constantly and intimately to family, friends, and lovers. She was a compulsive traveler and lived in many different parts of the world – France, England, Kenya, Cuba, and Mexico. Even though she grew up in St. Louis, U.S. she rejected her home country and only returned for visits with her family, especially her mother.

Martha Gellhorn was drawn to war and conflict starting with the Spanish Civil War in the 1930's – and ending with Vietnam. Her war reporting was searing and focused on ordinary lives that were physically and morally torn apart. A transformative experience for Martha was when she accompanied U.S. troops in Dachau in 1945. Her outlook on the goodness of humanity became shattered. After the Holocaust she forever looked upon government and authorities with suspicion, seeing them as being complicit in evil.

Martha Gellhorn knew scores of people – Eleanor Roosevelt, Adlai Stevenson, H.G. Wells, Leonard Bernstein, Diana Cooper, Robert Capa... And of course she was married to Ernest Hemingway, this led to a very heated break-up and divorce.

This book provides us with an exciting journey of the era, of a woman who was a world traveller. It is very well written giving us a full portrait of Martha Gellhorn – and some of it is very unpleasant. She had friendships that she could end abruptly with her caustic comments. She was never afraid of expressing her opinion on a friends' personal behavior. I found the way she treated her adopted son to be abominable. He was all joys and rhapsody to Martha until he reached the age of five – then after she constantly nagged and berated him for being overweight and not meeting her standards of intellect. She would also leave him for long periods of time in the care of nannies, knowing full well that he craved her attention and companionship.

Martha Gellhorn was a solitary person who would tolerate others only for a short period of time. This is a penetrating story of a driven woman and her quest for both love and intellectual fulfillment.

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### **Sande says**

Who knew this amazing woman existed!!! Leading the life of a war correspondent from the 1920s all the way up to the 1990s inspiring generations of women to take their talent and view point into war zones of today and the past 30 years. A real eye opener for me and I wish it hadn't taken an HBO movie which just focused on 5 years of her amazing life for me to discover her. Moorehead had incomparable access to all of Gellhorn's papers and the collection of her letters written over six decades to friends detailing her experiences and thoughts.

It is indeed a Twentieth Century Life, with Gellhorn born in 1908 living fearlessly in a man's world in which her beauty opened doors that allowed her vast intellect and ferociousness to know and tell the stories of humanity in conditions unfathomable in her/our time. In a recent Vanity Fair article, I read that American War Reporter Marie Colvin, killed in Syria this past February, carried Gellhorn's writings with her. Colvin often focused on the plight of women and children in wartime, as did Gellhorn, she also lived this same hard scrabble loner life though 50 years separated them in age.

Reading Gellhorn's own books, especially the only semi biographical book "Travels with myself and Another," (the book the HBO movie was based upon the Another being Hemingway whom she married in 1941 for five years, a mere blip in her existence) brings her to life in her own words. I truly loved that book whose whole premise is to write about trips over four decades that were out and out disasters -- for who wants to hear about the good things that happen on someone's trip . . . we all love hearing what went wrong on a trip rather than what went well and Gellhorn writes with full candor and great humor often at her own expense.

Moorehead's biography fills in the woman behind the words of her reporting for Colliers magazine and her books in a brilliant portrait that is this woman's life ... one in which being on her own, needing complete control and the need to be alone in breath taking parts of the world for long periods before entering into the next war. A life fascinating, heartbreaking at times and one I don't think many would want to have lived themselves, though Colvin certainly did, recounted by Moorehead who had the vantage point of growing up knowing Gellhorn as her own mother's best friend.

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### **Owen says**

Enjoyable read about the life and non-life of a very alive lady, Ernest Hemingway's third wife. How she survived it all is a mystery. It will take you through much of the 20th century's more interesting events, and leave you a bit breathless from time to time. There is also a most satisfactory amount of name-dropping which is presumably due to the author rather than the subject, although I do not wish to be mean. Some will find this of lively interest...

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## **Sandra says**

Wonderfully written, I found this to be informative along with personal. This author tells a consistent story of Martha Gellhorn's life. I had watched a new movie about Ernest Hemingway and Martha Gellhorn, and I was so intrigued about this woman that I started looking for her in books. What I found is amazing. This woman's life and work should be taught in schools.

From a young age Martha Gellhorn was strong and independent. She relied on her self for getting where she wanted to go. One of the bravest women I have ever heard about. One of the biggest war correspondents to ever be. Always on the front of war and the face of war. She was a "honest" reporter. She wrote what she saw and said what she felt. She is what is missing in today's news reporters. She should have been honored while she was alive, and should be honored now that she is gone.

Caroline Moorehead has taken the letters that Ms. Gellhorn wrote and received, and taken the knowledge from family and friends, and the accounts of her past, and made a very readable account of Ms. Gellhorn's life.

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## **Bonnieb says**

While reading this bio, I would, one minute, admire and respect Martha Gellhorn and a few pages later, become frustrated and disappointed in her. This probably means only that Caroline Moorehead did an excellent job of telling Gellhorn's story...the good and the bad, a complex human story. Gellhorn, from St. Louis originally, became a reporter of the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, WWII in the 40s, and even Vietnam in the 60s & 70s, fighting preconceptions, prejudices, bureaucracy and bombs. She was an amazingly courageous person in her career and her travels; she was also amazingly self-centered (perhaps required to be to succeed as she did). One of the simple things I love about reading is how in either fiction or non-fiction, the writers/protagonists provide language to thoughts and emotions I have had in the past. The author's parents, I discovered, were good friends of Gellhorn, and reporters themselves.

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## **Daniel Etherington says**

Gellhorn certainly had a remarkable life, having reported from various hotspots in 20th century global history including the Spanish Civil War, the Second World War and even the Vietnam War, and this biography covers it all. Though in places there is simply too much detail from the less interesting aspects of her - notably quotes from letters that highlight a high level of vanity and self-obsession. Her obsessions with righting wrongs in the world is far richer subject than her self-regard.

Moorehead - whose mother was a friend of Gellhorn, and herself knew the great journalist, author and ex of Hemingway (a taboo subject for Gellhorn, after the conclusion of their half-decade marriage) - could arguably have done with a much tighter edit.

Another problem with this kind of biography, and notably in this case, is that in some ways it reads like a catalogue of dropped names. As well as the connection to Hemingway, Gellhorn was a great friend of legendary photographer Robert Capa, was staying in the White House from her 20s, and was a frequent correspondent with Eleanor Roosevelt, etc etc. Some packed with Gellhorn's high-ranking connections is the book that it threatens to eclipse her own achievements, notably as a war correspondent (time hasn't been so kind to her novels).

Whatever the book's failings, and however much its portrait of Gellhorn might ultimately be somewhat unflattering, it's a worthy effort to celebrate a this passionately humanitarian writer.

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### **Czarny Pies says**

From ten kilometres away on a foggy day, one could have easily seen that Martha Gellhorn, one of the great journalists of her age, was also an appalling tramp. In her magnificently researched biography Caroline Moorehead spares the reader none of the sordid details. Having a taste for married lovers, Gellhorn destroyed at least two marriages. She had, at a minimum, four abortions. She was unpleasant with her step children and if we can accept the insinuations of her biographer, her sadistic parenting style was probably the root cause of the three terms in jail of her adopted son. She felt remorse for nothing.

The big question is whether or not one should read celebrity biographies which tend simply to drag our heroes down to our own level. The reality is that we all owe Martha Gellhorn a debt. She was one of the leaders among a great generation of journalists who waged a tremendous battle during the 1930s to make North Americans aware of the dangers of fascism and to convince them that America once again would need to send its children to die on the battlefields of Europe in order to protect civilized society. Gellhorn eagerly sought out danger and endured great physical hardship in order to convey her message. Her voice was always strident for in her view "objectivity was shit."

Gellhorn, however, as Moorehead makes very clear, was not just another left-wing journalist. Her articles were being read in the White House. Before going to Spain, Gellhorn had worked for the Roosevelt administration. She established her credibility with Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) by supporting his job creation programs and his efforts to halt the lynching of Afro-Americans in the US South. She became a close friend of Eleanor Roosevelt. Gellhorn through her public writings and private correspondence with Eleanor unquestionably strengthened FDR's resolve to bring the USA into the war against Fascism in Europe. No other journalist would have had more influence in the Oval Office than Gellhorn during the Roosevelt Administration.

For all her faults, Gellhorn can be ultimately be regarded simply as an individual who took life by the horns and enjoyed it to the fullest. She will be remembered as an early and very eloquent opponent of fascism. Any reader should be delighted by this remarkable portrait of an extraordinary wartime correspondent working in an era of extreme crisis. The one exception would be her first husband Ernest Hemingway who if he were alive today who would be outraged by the Gellhorn's withering criticisms of his performance in bed.

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### **Susan Albert says**

Remarkable woman, excellent biography: fair, balanced, detailed, well-written. Scholars might wish for a more extensive documentation, but there are enough references to take a curious reader more deeply into Gellhorn's life and letters (also collected by the biographer in *Selected Letters of Martha Gellhorn*). This is on my "Roosevelt Research" shelf because Gellhorn was a colleague and friend of Lorena Hickok and a friend of ER. (There's a funny story about ER on p. 81.)

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### **Julie Marr says**

This densely packed biography reads like a history of the twentieth century. Gellhorn was an interesting and complex woman; a writer compelled to report on the world as she sees it, however unpopular that was. While

generally interesting, I did find it occasionally repetitive and tiresome, and it took me quite some time to get into it. All in all, I'm glad I persisted with it, but I'm also glad that I'm finally finished it.

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## **Tilden says**

Martha Gellhorn was a very unusual woman. A war correspondent and writer, who started her career during the Spanish Civil War. I admired her tenacity for getting the story and also for her telling the story of the underdog and trying to obtain justice for the oppressed.

That said, I found Martha a rather unlikeable person. She was very vain (she had facelifts in her 80's!) and used her looks to get access to war zones and people and places to report her stories. She had no compunction about having affairs with married men and breaking up families. She broke up two marriages, (and probably more) one with Hemingway who was married and had 3 children. It appears she also married a man she didn't love because he was rich.

I also found it curious that she adopted a little boy, but then when he was school age, she shipped him off to boarding school.

She moved to Kenya, built a house, and lived there for years but it seems that she didn't have any Black friends. All her friends seemed to be white, upper-middle class or rich people. I was wondering while she lived in Africa why she didn't report on apartheid in South Africa? The country was accessible to her and it certainly was a great story. Right up her ally with oppressed people being treated unjustly.

Another blind spot she had was about the Palestenians. She disliked Arabs and thought they had no right to fight against the Isralies for their rights. Anything that Israel did she approved of.

I do admire her can do attitude and totally understand her need to be alone. She was an interesting person. I did find some of the statements by the author contradictory at times and it would have been better for the book to have interviewed more people who knew Martha rather than take so much from Martha's letters.

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