

Coco at the Ritz

Gioia Diliberto

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In Gioia Diliberto's fascinating historical novel *Coco at the Ritz*, Coco Chanel, the French couture icon, becomes enmeshed with Nazi occupiers.

In 1944, Chanel, who was in her early sixties, was interrogated. She was suspected of having committed treason because of her relationship with Baron Hans Günther von Dincklage, a diplomat and German spy. But as the story opens, Coco is self-assured, even as she's lead away from the Ritz Carlton by the French Forces of the Interior. It's a riveting opening to a rearward-gazing story about how Coco met Dincklage, showing what her Parisian wartime world was like.

Coco's imagined motivations are enlivening. She's developed as shrewd yet vulnerable. She's pained by her childhood experiences as an orphan and by her lack of enduring loves, despite her affairs with prominent men. She's pulled toward Dincklage because he's a powerful figure who rekindles her feminine ego. But she begins to have doubts about his Nazi role. Coco's pride over advancing French culture through her designs and perfumes contends with her passion for Dincklage, whom her friends denounce. Still, she's swept up by her emotions.

Coco's interactions with famous people, including Max Jacob, Jean Cocteau, Misia Sert, and Pierre Reverdy, amplify the book's sense of her contradictory nature: she's generous when it comes to offering financial support, but is prickly about receiving criticism. Though her antisemitism is confronted by others, it's also glossed over at times, even attributed to her unintended temper. Coco's reasons for colluding with the Nazis are chilling, and she acts with subtle ease.

Set during the most controversial period of Coco Chanel's life, *Coco at the Ritz* is a potent historical novel whose opportunistic heroine contends with fear, longing, and a treacherous love.

KAREN RIGBY (November / December 2021)

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