

## The Adored One: A Novel of Lillian Lorraine and Florenz Ziegfeld

**Susanne Dunlap**

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(280pp)

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*A theater darling comes into her own during a period of artistic transformation in the thrilling novel The Adored One.*

In Susanne Dunlap's mesmerizing historical novel *The Adored One*, a chorus girl comes of age under the watchful eye of a theater impresario.

Lillian is fourteen when her calculating mother ushers her from San Francisco to New York City. Though she is told that she only has her looks to bank on, Lillian is smarter than she's given credit for. She looks for opportunities on Broadway and models for artists and photographers, making connections she can rely on later.

Recounted in hindsight from Lillian's wiser, wry, and worldly adult perspective, this is a potent and emotional tale. Lillian recalls being bright and eager in her youth, dreaming of stardom though she'd already experienced harm before arriving in New York City. And she pays homage to early twentieth-century New York itself with details about its horses, automobiles, ragtime culture, and classic hotels. She's there to witness the city's changing society.

Here, Lillian is positioned as someone who helped to lead the way in the arts during this transformative period—a precarious, sometimes envied position. She shares glimpses of the era's scandals, including the murder of an architect by the husband of a fellow chorus girl. Excitement and danger surround her; she is reckless in her passion. But self-awareness and savvy buoy her somewhat—until Florenz Ziegfeld takes an interest in her.

Florenz is married and over twice Lillian's age. A Pygmalion figure, he is instrumental to Lillian's rise, but he's an elusive lead character. He orchestrates roles for Lillian; he also turns cold. His temperamental attentions confuse Lillian, who appreciates being favored by him but also experiences isolation from the rest of the cast as a result of this attention. In hindsight, she reflects on what might have been in their business relationship; her takeaways are candid ones. The result is a tangled central relationship—one attended to with delicate balance, neither excusing nor pillorying Florenz while also honoring the delicacy of Lillian's childhood emotions.

Lillian's theater life is depicted in its full hedonism, with instances of substance abuse and being fêted in public included. The narrative is calibrated with hard truths about Lillian's choices, too: in the pursuit of stardom, she lies about her age and keeps her mother hidden; her relationship with her mother is complicated by feelings of indebtedness and expectations. However, amid this excitement comes increasing outside speculation regarding Lillian's relationship with Florenz; some momentum is lost in the process. And a late, impulsive decision related to a handsome passerby results in a distracting (if biographically accurate) narrative digression—an event that is covered in terms that are somewhat at odds with the arresting explorations of the ingenue's exploits that precede it.

In the intricate historical novel *The Adored One*, a memorable star of the stage reminisces on her past relationships and her rise in fortunes.

KAREN RIGBY (July 19, 2023)

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