

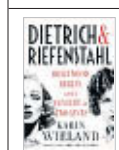
BOOKS

Notes on how to be a star

Marlene Dietrich and Leni Riefenstahl overlapped in Berlin, but ambition took them down different paths. By *Gaby Wood*

DIETRICH AND RIEFENSTAHL

by *Karin Wieland*,
tr by *Shelley Frisch*



612PP, LIVERIGHT,
£22.99, EBOOK £17.93

★★★★★

In turn-of-the-century Berlin, two girls were born a year apart. They would grow up to be glacial paragons of glamorous disdain: Marlene Dietrich and Leni Riefenstahl. Both women attempted to escape their conservative families through art – as a violinist, in Dietrich's case, and as a dancer in Riefenstahl's – but what they were really after was stardom, and it came to both, by forking paths.

Karin Wieland's dual biography, *Dietrich & Riefenstahl: Hollywood, Berlin, and a Century in Two Lives*, suggests itself as a story of roads not taken. What if Dietrich had stayed in Berlin – would she have sympathised with the Nazis? What if Riefenstahl had gone to Hollywood – would she have volunteered for the US Army? Though radical as a proposition, the book is rather classical in scope and style. It puts together cradle-to-grave biographies of two women who hardly met, offering admirably researched accounts that leave

barely a telegram or plot summary returned.

In truth, the heart of the story lies in a short sequence of crossroads. Its most critical juncture came in 1930, when Dietrich and Riefenstahl were both actresses – Dietrich playing floozies in decadent Weimar-era revues, and Riefenstahl starring as a sparsely clad skier in films that glorified the Alps. They vaguely knew each other: at that time, they lived on the same block – Riefenstahl could see into Dietrich's windows from her roof garden – and they had crossed paths at various night spots.

Until she died, Riefenstahl denied any collaboration with Goebbels

Riefenstahl told the filmmaker Josef von Sternberg that she had once met Dietrich at the Schwannecke's café, and found her "a bit vulgar". No sooner had she made that remark than Dietrich was chosen by von Sternberg to be the heroine of his film *The Blue Angel*. Riefenstahl had felt sure she herself would get the part. She later claimed that he only took Dietrich with him to Hollywood because Riefenstahl did not want to leave Berlin and had already turned him down.

For the next decade, Dietrich became Galatea to von Sternberg's

Pygmalion. They made six great films together, the process of which was in some measure sadomasochistic. She left behind an open-minded husband, who warned her not to come home: "Political situation terrible," he cabled. When she returned to Europe, they met in Paris. Meanwhile, Germany emptied itself of artists and Riefenstahl was quick to see an opening, insinuating herself as official filmmaker to the Third Reich. Though there is no reason to suppose her relationship with Hitler mirrored the qualities of Dietrich's with von Sternberg, she was certainly in thrall to him – or, as she later put it, "afflicted".

One of the most intriguing differences between Wieland's subjects is the relative reliability of their memoirs. Dietrich's *Ich bin, Gott sei dank, Berlinerin* ("I am, thank God, a Berliner") is eloquent and frank about her insecurities. Riefenstahl's self-mythologising *Memoiren* is undermined at every turn by Wieland's systematic efforts to corroborate its claims. Both books were published in Germany in 1987. When Riefenstahl's was serialised in a magazine, Dietrich wrote in to point out the lies. If Josef von Sternberg had been alive to read her claims, Dietrich said, he would have died laughing.

According to Riefenstahl, she didn't know about Hitler's racial politics. Or, she did know and she told him straight away she didn't agree with them. She had never heard of concentration camps until the Allies interrogated her. But she had been terrified that Goebbels would send her to a concentration camp. Which was it? The packed houses she reported for her performances, the rave reviews, her significance in the lives of others: all of this is contradicted by Wieland's research. Did Riefenstahl know who she was dealing with when she approached Hitler? Wieland barely pauses before concluding that she must have. Well, of course. All the build-up suggests that Riefenstahl could smell a source of power no matter how far away it was. She could climb a ladder to self-advancement, no matter how dirty the rungs. It was a quality she shared with Dietrich.

There are at least two mitigating – or complicating – factors. One is the specific crucible from which both women came. Wieland vividly describes a Weimar Germany in which the only way to get by was to try to get rich quick. Hyperinflation altered everything; the money you had in the morning might be worthless by that afternoon. What's more, women had few options if they wanted to escape convention. In a world of decadence and new money, Riefenstahl and Dietrich both slept their way to the top – it's just that they differed in their interpretation of where the top was.

Second, many of the ideas that seem proto-fascist in retrospect were not necessarily doomed to be taken up by the National Socialists. The exponents of expressive dance followed by Riefenstahl were



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also admired by the Left. Their notions of health and strength were not in themselves politically offensive. Nor, as Wieland points out, were mountains inherently objectionable, though Riefenstahl's Alpine films were adored by Hitler, and the title of her book about making them, *Struggle in Snow and Ice*, is indebted to *Mein Kampf*, which she studied in detail.

None the less, the story that Riefenstahl was a talented filmmaker who had been forced to work for the wrong side – the very argument that exonerated her at her denazification hearing in 1948 – is laid to rest here. It's painful to read about her lies, and about the excruciating amount of time it took for them to be exposed. Until she died, Riefenstahl denied any close collaboration with Goebbels, and claimed only minimal contact with Hitler. Goebbels's diaries, not found until copies were discovered in an archive in Moscow in 1992 (10 years before her death), reveal that she was a regular guest at the Goebbels home – flirting with Göring and dancing until four in

the morning. She had picnics with Hitler, and entertained him at her own apartment; she went to the opera with Goebbels and his wife. "She is the only one of all the stars who understands us," Goebbels wrote. After the war, Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* was singled out by American producers who had worked with Dietrich in Hollywood, and used as evidence at Nuremberg.

At a distance, Dietrich made propaganda films for the United States when it entered the war and signed up to entertain the troops. She eventually "pushed into Germany", returning to her homeland after 15 years away as one of the victors. She became the first woman to receive the Medal of Freedom.

Were they each the woman the other might have become? It's hard to conclude that their natural inclinations were similar. But their brand of ambition, born at the same time, in exactly the same place, was identical.

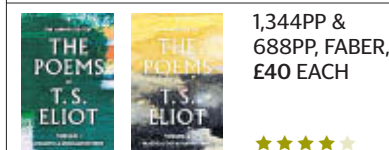
Star turns:
Marlene Dietrich in 1944, and (below left) Leni Riefenstahl filming in Germany in the 1930s

Let us go then, you and I

Duncan White loses himself in an intricately annotated edition of TS Eliot's poems

THE POEMS OF TS ELIOT: VOLS ONE & TWO

ed by *Christopher Ricks* and *Jim McCue*



1,344PP & 688PP, FABER, £40 EACH

★★★★★

Reading this two-volume edition is like falling down a rabbit hole that drops you not into a world of hookah-smoking caterpillars and smug cats but into something much more curious: a textual reconstruction of TS Eliot's brain. The editors, Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue, have built a vast and fascinating world out of their annotations, a world in which you can become lost, only to emerge weeks later dazzled and disoriented by your *Adventures in the Waste Land*.

For example, let's say you want to read "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock", the poem that announced Eliot's revelatory talent to literary London in 1915 when it was published in *Poetry*. You crack open *Volume One* and there it is, the first poem in the book:

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out
against the sky
Like a patient etherised upon
a table;

Excellent: let us go then to the editorial commentary. To get there you follow the instructions at the foot of the page: off to page 374.

Here we discover that the title alone gets a page of commentary. We learn that the title of Rudyard Kipling's "The Love Song of Har Dyal" had become "obstinately stuck" in Eliot's head; that the "J" stands for Joseph; that Eliot apparently got the name "Prufrock" (having dallied with "Proudfoot") from a St Louis furniture dealer, although he had no memory of the dealership. He chose the name, he said, because it sounded "very very prosaic". The attention to such granular detail obviously has consequences for the scale of this project, which teases out every allusion and connection in every line of every poem. Thanks to a small font and much abbreviation, the editors squeeze the entire commentary into just 900 pages, which might be considered a triumph of brevity. About those abbreviations. The short forms of all the different

editions stumped me until I discovered the "Key to Editions" housed in the annex of *Volume Two*, which also contains each poem's textual history, for which the deciphering reader also requires a glossary. Scuttling back and forth between the two volumes, you start running out of fingers and for bookmarks resort to car keys and telephones. It is like reading Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* at the same time.

It comes as some relief that Eliot only published a relatively small number of poems. "They should be perfect in their kind," Eliot wrote, "so that each should be an event." Every release had to be a hit single; he had no time for album tracks. There were B-sides and bootlegs, unpublished poems and juvenilia, but when, in 1963, he compiled his greatest hits – the final version of his collected poetry – it only

The editors tease out every allusion and connection in every line of a poem

contained some 50 poems.

The problem for modern editors is that these "official" poems have been published in an astonishing number of variants. With the exception of "Cousin Nancy", every poem in the 1963 edition exists differently in at least one earlier printing, let alone in manuscript. There are many reasons for this, not least that Eliot himself was evidently a pretty terrible proofreader.

Take "The Hollow Men", Eliot's bleaker follow-up to "The Waste Land". In every edition since *Poems 1909-25*, the last two stanzas of the second section go like this:

Let me be no nearer
In death's dream kingdom
Let me also wear
Such deliberate disguises
Rat's coat, crowskin, crossed staves
In a field
Behaving as the wind behaves
No nearer –

Not that final meeting
In the twilight kingdom

Ricks and McCue point out that when the poem was first published in *The Criterion* and *The Dial* in the winter of 1924 there was a further line: "With eyes I dare not meet in dreams." Why was it then missing from subsequent editions? Had Eliot ditched it? If so, why was there not a full stop after "twilight kingdom", when every other



NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

section of "The Hollow Men" ends with a full stop? Ricks and McCue argue that Eliot simply failed to notice when it was accidentally left out.

The editors' approach to the commentary is not to interpret the poems but to give as much contextual information as possible (which, mind, is a kind of interpretation) and it is an approach to which they stick. Just as rigorous, although less rewarding, is their commitment

Buttuned-up:
TS Eliot in 1926



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to publishing all the poetry. This includes juvenilia the 11-year-old Eliot wrote for his school magazine ("I thought I saw an elephant") and the strange racist poems he inserted into letters to certain friends ("King Bol's big black bassturd kween").

More interesting is the publication, for the first time, of some erotic (in the loosest sense of the word) poems to his second wife, Valerie, which give us further insight into quite how buttoned-up Eliot was. Even in these private verses, he ducks squeamishly behind euphemism: "our middle parts are busy with each other" and, worse, "the swelling of my concupiscence".

So well known is Eliot's poetry that it is tempting to spend time fussing around the margins of his oeuvre. While these volumes certainly enable you to do just that, it is far more rewarding to return to the centre. The real strength of this edition is in its comprehensive treatment of the most important of Eliot's poems; it is a stirring reminder of the multitudes they contain.

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