

Allan Massie

## Children of a genius

Allan Massie delves into an account of Thomas Mann's children

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In the Shadow of the Magic Mountain

Andrea Weiss

University of Chicago Press, pp. 272

The subtitle is ‘The Erika and Klaus Mann Story’, and the shadow is that cast by their father, Thomas Mann, the greatest German novelist of the 20th century.

Erika and Klaus were the oldest two of his six children, and, while it is fair to say they lived in his shadow, they were not obscured by it, being extraordinary people in their own right, Klaus at least a remarkable writer himself also. Andrea Weiss, an American film-maker as well as writer, an associate professor at the City College of New York, tells their story with enthusiasm, sympathy and insight, in a style mercifully free of the clotted jargon we tend, not always unfairly, to expect from American academics.

There was a year between them in age, Erika the elder, but they were so close to each other that they were often taken for twins and seem indeed to have thought of themselves as such. Enemies — and they had plenty — accused them of an incestuous relationship. This is unlikely. Both were predominantly homosexual, Klaus almost exclusively so. But each was indeed for the other the most important person in the world, until in middle-age Erika transferred her intense devotion to her father.

They enjoyed what is now called a privileged upbringing and also a liberal one, surprisingly liberal perhaps in view of Thomas’s reputation for high-minded and self-conscious rectitude. They flourished in the adventurous freedom of the Weimar years, Erika as actress, cabaret artiste, sketch-writer and what have you, Klaus as journalist, dramatist, novelist and occasional actor. Erika was briefly married to the actor Gustaf Grundgens, previously Klaus’s lover. Gustaf would later become a star in Nazi Germany, Goering’s pet, appointed Director of the State Theatre. His corruption forms the theme of Klaus’s most famous novel, *Mephisto*, published in 1936 but banned in Germany.

They were early opponents of the Nazis, writing against them, mocking them in cabaret (Erika ran a satirical cabaret called *The Peppermill*). Klaus, observing Hitler in a Munich hotel, found ‘his inferiority truly striking’. They exiled themselves as soon as he came to power, not, Klaus insisted, because of their Jewish blood — their mother Katia’s parents were Jewish, though converted to Lutheranism — but because they were democrats and liberals. In exile they continued to write and speak against the Nazis, Klaus editing a literary-political magazine. They were deprived of German citizenship. Erika made a marriage of convenience with W. H. Auden to secure a British passport. Klaus was stateless for years.

Andrea Weiss is very critical of Thomas Mann’s reluctance to burn his boats. Though he too lived abroad after the Nazi takeover, he remained loyal to his German publisher and hesitated for three years to make a public denunciation of the regime. His children were critical too, but Thomas’s hesitation is understandable. He had much to lose, not only his property, but a large part of his income if his books were banned in Germany. The whole family, including Erika and Klaus, was financially dependent on him. Eventually he spoke out after Erika, his favourite child, threatened to break off relations with him if he didn’t. Subsequently he would be the most formidable and committed intellectual enemy of the regime.

Weiss, who gives the impression of disliking Thomas, also criticises his failure, or inability, fully to appreciate Klaus and his work. Fair enough: she is reflecting what Klaus himself felt, even though he always admired the work of the Magician (the name by which the children referred to their father). Certainly once Thomas’s infatuation with the boy’s adolescent beauty faded — ‘I find it very natural that I should be in love with my son’, he wrote in his diary — he was often exasperated by Klaus’s fecklessness, his drug-addiction, his financial dependence. (It was however usually Katia who subsidised Klaus, the child she doted on.) But many fathers would have been less tolerant of such a wayward son, and he did tell Klaus, ‘come home whenever you are unhappy or forlorn’. It may be that he was irritated by Klaus’s open and guilt-free homosexuality, or rather perhaps jealous of it, given how closely he guarded and suppressed his own pederastic inclinations.

They moved to America, which represented to them the land of the free. Erika had a good war, as a journalist, in London during the Blitz for instance; Klaus a more difficult one, before eventually being accepted into the American army and being granted American citizenship. Both were spied on by the FBI, in its usual disgusting fashion, suspected as sexual perverts and, as ‘premature anti-Fascists’, thought to be Communists. Neither was, Klaus rejecting Communism on account of its materialism and the Soviet Union’s persecution of homosexuals.

The defeat of Nazi Germany was their victory, but left them bereft of the cause to which they had sacrificed their adult lives. Erika devoted herself to Thomas, managing his public life, editing his books, but poor Klaus was at a loss. He had always felt the temptation of suicide — a temptation to which several of his friends had succumbed — but fought against it for 20 years. Eventually loveless, distanced even from Erika, made wretched by his addiction to the drugs he had once taken so cheerfully, unable to write, he killed himself in Cannes in 1949.

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Andrea Weiss finds Erika admirable, the vulnerable Klaus lovable. One can see why; he is very appealing. Too little appreciated in his life — either Auden or Auden’s boy-friend Chester Kallman (one hopes it was Kallman) dismissed him as ‘the subordinate Klaus’ — he now enjoys a “*celebrated cult status in Germany. Dissertations are written about him in universities and the recent centennial of his birth was commemorated with radio broadcasts and photography exhibitions.*”

Post-war Erika found a role in the shadow of the Magician; she died in 1969. Klaus has at last emerged from that shadow, a star in his own right. Most of his books are in print. Here Hesperus has just brought out his 1929 novel, *Alexander* (£8.99, pp. 213, ISBN 97811843914419) another study of the corrupting consequence of power. His reputation is high. His determination to be his own man, valued for his own work, not as his father’s son, is justified. Too late of course to bring him the satisfaction he deserved to enjoy.

LINK to review: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/children-of-a-genius/>

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