

In the Shadow of the Magic Mountain: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story

Robert Gillett on Erika and Klaus Mann's bittersweet relationships with family and country

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In their native Germany, "Die Manns", as they are known, have attracted an extraordinary amount of critical and media attention. This is partly due to the enduring popularity of their work, coupled with the suspicion that not all their texts are as purely fictional as they make out. Moreover, the time in which they lived and the circles in which they moved provide ample material for historical voyeurism. And their family romance exerts its own fascination, replete with enough complexes and psychosexual secrets to keep an army of analysts occupied for years.

Andrea Weiss's book about Erika and Klaus, the two eldest offspring of Thomas Mann and his wife, Katja, nee Pringsheim, is therefore part of a long tradition, fostered and complicated by the large amount of autobiographical and apparently autobiographical material the family produced. At the same time, it breaks new ground by attempting to carve out a place for Thomas's children in the North American cultural context.

In this respect it is telling that the book's English original, published by a university press, comes some eight years after the appearance of a German translation now in its third edition with mainstream publisher Rowohlt. The infelicitous English title is a clear attempt to attach to the book something of the aura of the Nobel prizewinner's celebrated novel. And between the German and the English versions, the pictures adorning the book have become fewer, less distinct and less expressive. This is particularly unfortunate because Weiss is a cinematographer, and the medium in which she originally chose to tell this story was film.

These vicissitudes are not accidental. While Klaus and Erika were alive, their parentage was a fact to be faced, even exploited. Subsequently, though, a tendency to view them only in connection with their father has all too often impeded understanding of their work and achievement. Moreover, the biographically central relationship between the siblings and the US was fraught. After an initial welcome, they were spied on, vilified and ultimately rejected. Their extended period of acclimatisation, though, was bound up with an estrangement from Germany. That in turn entailed being deprived of their quintessential medium. In Klaus's case, the loss was acute: his discovery that he could no longer write in German may well have contributed to his suicide. And Erika's obstinate late service to her father, which can be read as a comparable self-abnegation, began with her mediating the Uber-Germanic Thomas to his transatlantic public but did not extend to accompanying him on his controversial tour of his divided Fatherland.

Weiss's account of all these episodes is discreet, understated and moving. The libidinal entanglements of the gay Klaus and the bisexual Erika are likewise described in a way that invites acceptance and comprehension, and the terrible tensions of addiction are woven into the narrative without distorting it. To that extent the book has all the qualities of its filmic origins. It will not satisfy purists, nor those looking for psychoanalytical enlightenment. Nor will it supply the urgent need for a careful account of the literary works of Klaus and Erika Mann. For English-speaking non-specialists, though, it offers a persuasive account of two lives that were both

extraordinary and profoundly representative of their times. It is to be hoped that it will serve to remind Americans of an important episode in their history and two very special visitors to their shores.

In the Shadow of the Magic Mountain: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story

By Andrea Weiss

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