

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

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THOMAS MANN HAD just turned 30 when the first of his six children was born in November, 1905. Four years earlier, with the success of *Buddenbrooks*, his epic fictional chronicle of his own family history, he had taken a decisive step on the path to literary greatness and international renown.

That their first-born should be a daughter was a disappointment that neither parent tried to hide. “It turned out to be a girl, Erika,” wrote Mann’s wife Katia. “I was very annoyed.” The novelist put a more artistic spin on things, telling his brother Heinrich that “I find a son more full of poetry, more a continuation and new beginning of myself under new circumstances.”

The longed-for boy came a year and nine days later, when Klaus Heinrich Thomas Mann was born. He and his sister became inseparable, so close that they could pass for the twins they sometimes pretended to be. Klaus was an author before he could even write, dictating plays and stories for his older sister to set down. Erika was a mischievous mimic, a confident performer in the shows the children devised.

In their late teens, the emotional bond between them stronger than ever, the siblings left Munich for Berlin. There they immersed themselves in avant-garde theatre, radical cabaret, decadent nightlife, easy sex and drugs. Erika married the actor Gustav Gründgens, while Klaus proposed to Pamela Wedekind, daughter of the Expressionist playwright. But it was Gustav and Klaus who were lovers, and Erika and Pamela.

Pacifist, homosexual, with a mother of Jewish descent, Klaus and Erika were quick to leave Germany after the Nazis came to power, he founded a literary journal in Amsterdam, she running a political cabaret in Zurich. Erika attacked her father for being slow to speak out against the new regime in the homeland he too had left. Klaus lamented the lack of parental support for his work.

Later, brother and sister would tour the USA, lecturing and writing on the European catastrophe they had fled. When the Americans joined the war, Klaus served with the US Army, while Erika, by now improbably married to W.H.Auden, became a war correspondent and covered the Nuremberg trials.

For their pains they were investigated by the FBI, to whom their “premature anti-fascism” smacked of communist sympathies.

These eventful lives were lived, as the title of Weiss’s book suggests, in the shadow of a famous father and his work. However, many novels the prolific Klaus might publish, whatever distinguished audiences Erika addressed, the pair would find themselves billed, time and again, as the children of Thomas Mann.

They never did escape that shadow. Klaus, a heroin addict, much given to thoughts of death, committed suicide in Cannes in 1949, reliant to the end on handouts from his mother. Erika returned home to serve as her father’s assistant and then executor. She survived her beloved brother by two decades.

Weiss has recounted all this before, in a documentary/drama film *Escape to Life* (2000). The book lacks something of the film’s immediacy. Some readers may be unpersuaded by the author’s enthusiasm for her privileged, self-absorbed protagonists, or her unremitting hostility to Thomas Mann. Erika, particularly in later life, could seem more domineering than dynamic, while an American acquaintance of the troubled Klaus dismissed him neatly as “that tragic twerp”.

But theirs is a fascinating tale. Outside the pages of the Manns’ own memoirs and essays, or of Klaus’s deeply personal fiction, it’s hard to imagine it more sympathetically told.

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