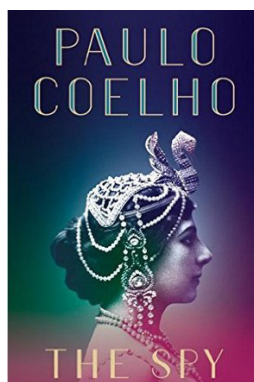


BOOK REVIEW

***The Spy***

Author: Paulo Coelho

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There remains a burning question surrounding the life of Margaretha Zelle: was she a double-agent spy, or was she a mere victim of injustice? Through his latest published novel *The Spy*, Coelho spun out a biographical fiction based on the tale of the life of Margaretha Zelle, therefore known by her self-chosen *nom de guerre* Mata Hari, told through the eyes of Mata Hari herself as she awaits her fate behind prison bars in Vincennes, France.

Zelle, or Mata Hari, was a Dutch courtesan, famed dancer, and alleged emissary during the tumultuous period of World War II. Born into a financially-sounding Dutch family in Leeuwarden, as Coelho noted, money was never a problem for her – the affluent status of her parents was able to afford her formal education and her training as a dancer. Her tale of ups-and-downs began when she was sexually-assaulted by her principal while in Leiden at the age of sixteen, and later accepted a marriage offer, written in a newspaper advertisement, from a young Dutch soldier stationed in Indonesia who is looking for a partner. Afterwards, she married the soldier – a decision which ensnared her within a loveless, abusive union, - a “living hell” contrastive to the paradisiacal, “exotic” islands of the Dutch Indies, where she stayed with her husband and daughter for a few years. A major turning point of event landed her back to Europe, precisely in Paris, in which she marked her debut as a dancer by performing a “religious” dance she supposedly learned back in Java. Little did she know, her artistic fame and the on-going wars would eventually entangle her in the web of espionage, with her sentenced to death for being a double-agent for France and Germany.

In just a year after he spawned his tour de force, *The Alchemist*, Brazilian author Paulo Coelho, one of the most celebrated authors of this era - also known for *Brida*, *Aleph*, and *The Fifth Mountain* – introduced us to the life of Mata Hari, a look into her life seen mostly from the Mata Hari’s own point-of-view.

On the surface, we can see its representative cover page, presenting what Monsieur Clunet, Mata Hari’s lawyer, claimed as Mata Hari’s most memorable picture. The picture – a legacy from her prime years as a dancer – that of her donned in costume and snake headdress, draws our attention straight away to its titular character – the ultimate focal point of this novel – who is none other than Mata Hari herself. Also found in the cover was certainly the title of the book, “The Spy”, imprinted below her photograph, a label which is tied to the mystery of her supposed involvement with espionage.

Instead of presenting an account of her life in a chronological order, e.g. starting from her childhood, Coelho opens up his tale with a *kaboom!* – an impactful scene of Mata Hari’s death sentencing. A nurse was sent to fetch Mata Hari from her cell, before she was paraded along with her jail mates to the ruthless firing squad. Coelho immediately closed his chapter with “*Mata Hari was dead*”, piquing the readers’ interest of what might have happened to this woman at the time of her life. This opening scene also gives its readers an immediate alarm – making the readers aware of direness of her situation from early in the beginning.

The novel continued to follow Mata Hari through her journey as a famed dancer in the bustling city of Paris - one very much well-loved by many, but

“never respected” (Coelho, 2016, p. 155). We watched as Mata Hari propels to stardom as the Parisian audiences were simply enraptured by her exotic, sultry dances, inspired by the dances of Java and Egypt, albeit with profound inaccuracies regarding the true essences of the dances. Then the tale withstand the storm as she tries to steady her grip of popularity, despite the emergence of those less-gifted newcomers claiming to be “the successor of Mata Hari” (Coelho, 2016, p. 75). Still following Mata Hari’s point of view, we witnessed the beginning of the downfall of her life with her encounter with Franz and Kramer, two different figures from two distinct countries who unbeknownst to her, had eventually made her a double-agent and made her suspected, jailed, and put into trial unjustly.

Surprisingly, a shift of its point-of-view occurred in the last part of the story, moving from the incarcerated Mata Hari to her lawyer, Monsieur Clunet, whom she initially described as her “incompetent” lawyer. From this shift in point-of-view to Monsieur Clunet in his letters for Mata Hari, the readers are able to get the grasp of the story from outside of Mata Hari’s standpoint, which had taken the readers for more than two thirds of the entire story, and how another saw Mata Hari as a person. Most importantly, we are given the details regarding the injustices surrounding her allegation of espionage, and how she, although not entirely guiltless, was a mere victim of injustice.

First of all, Coelho deserves a mention for bringing to light the life of a woman often exempt from history books or major historical accounts, but with a life story certainly worthy of the interest of his readers. Through the Coelho-esque success in employing metaphors and fluidity in his words, he reminded us once again of a peculiar female figure named Mata Hari who once lived during the years of World War along with the conundrum surrounding her life, and provided his own take on the life of this alleged undercover.

Coelho set just the right pace for this story, each pages flowing in a pleasant rhythm, making his novel a page-turning tale which transports its readers to its final stop. Along with that, the desire to obtain the complete explanation regarding how Mata Hari ended up in such a miserable fate in the opening chapter made it less likely for the readers to drop the book in the middle until Mata Hari, and later her lawyer, successfully concludes her tale. Upon that question, Coelho tries to provide his own answer for his readers

in the end – to him, Mata Hari was a scapegoat, sentenced for a mere fault of being “an independent woman” (Coelho, 2016, p. 13) among the clutches of men. All of these are told in a concise manner while still maintaining the simplicity, the fluidity, and the nice flow of words as the random pieces of the tale started coming together to portray her story.

However, apart from its fluidity in language, the weakest point of *The Spy* lies within its meagre character development – none of the character in his novel truly has depth, even its titular character Mata Hari. Much later in his Author’s Note, Coelho claimed to have read four books on Mata Hari’s life, one of which written with an exclusive access to unpublished materials as its author is a direct descendant of a character in the novel. Yet Coelho could not manage to delve deeper into the characterization of his main character and instead delivered a shallow depiction on the real Mata Hari. One thing we know for certain is that Mata Hari was a real person – therefore, alike every other human being, she should have come with quirks, habits, or basically anything else which could possibly enrich Mata Hari as a character. That being said, several biographies and accounts have been made about her, some of which Coelho employed as his sources of reference. Therefore, in my opinion, Coelho should have used his extensive collection of references to spice up his story in terms of the characterization of Mata Hari. This lack of depth in Coelho’s Mata Hari makes the reader unable to thoroughly understand her as a character, much less to capture the complexity of the real Mata Hari in his novel.

Also, although we know that throughout the story Mata Hari had withstood various obstacles, even the ones which allowed her dignity to be shamefully degraded – I somehow found it hard to sympathize with the character Mata Hari. The Mata Hari in Coelho’s novel, in my view, was a shallow, overtly naive, self-obsessed, clueless, and reckless woman who unknowingly thrust herself into an entangled, jumbled mess, with practically no way out in which no arguments from her lawyer could possibly spare her from the gun firing squad. Added up with her delay in realizing the direness of the situation she was in, along with her propensity to simply rely and wait for her powerful connections to pull her out from her misery, contributed to conceive a not-so-sympathetic depiction of Mata Hari. Not much is to be said on Coelho’s original intention in creating his version of portrayal of Mata Hari, but I definitely did not see, or

barely found, any attempt in making her sympathetic for his readers, despite his view that Mata Hari was a mere pawn who was put to death out of injustice. Mata Hari, as Coelho's character, was far from being a sympathetic or likeable character. If anything, she came across as a self-centered and even dense as she ignored the tell-tale signs of actions that put her life in danger. And when she was convicted, according to her lawyer, this Mata Hari "did not help much" (Coelho, 2016, p. 154) to save herself from the situation.

The problem in his depiction is that Mata Hari's flaws actually outweighs and kind of takes away Coelho's entire point about Mata Hari being an independent woman, something very crucial as it, as Coelho underlined, lead to Mata Hari's framing and death sentencing. Twice Coelho asserted Mata Hari's independence by stating that her "only crime was to be an independent woman" (Coelho, 2016, p. 177) and "the crimes (she) did commit ... was being an emancipated and independent woman in a world ruled by men" (Coelho, 2016, p. 13). In one point of the story, however, Coelho did briefly touch upon the subject of her independence, that she was an "exotic bird", "a swan" without a fear of the unknown and is independent from men - "alone, with no one to hold (her) hand" (Coelho, 2016, p. 98), as she never actually and would never fell in love. But this lack of "fear of the unknown" - the fact that she got involved in dangerous affairs without actually crumbling down in the process, especially regarding the fact that she was a woman of that period, was barely highlighted as the other aspect of her being an independent woman. Other than her bravery to escape from her abusive husband, I unfortunately found nothing else remarkable regarding her independence that is properly emphasized in this novel. As been said before, in writing a fiction artistic license always comes into play. However, a biographical fiction like *The Spy* involves the life of an actual person, and representations of a figure in fiction could affect the image of and could possibly mislead one's understanding of the person, especially, in this case, for one not initially well-acquainted with Mata Hari's life story.

How about the other characters? Most of them unfortunately acted as mere passers-by who came and went throughout the course of Mata Hari's life. While they all do have their own role to play in shaping the course of the story, readers are given minimum opportunity to get to know each of them as characters. Take for instance, Kramer, whose sole purpose of existence in this story is to entrap Zelle into espionage

and make her a double-agent, was pulled out from the story right after his purpose is done. However, considering the length of the novel - which made it impossible to squeeze everything within around 200 pages - made it explicable, although this does not apply to Mata Hari's characterization as she is the central focus of the story.

Moreover, interestingly, for whatever reason this novel did not manage to explore her relationship with her only daughter. Mata Hari's daughter, left in the hands of her abusive soldier husband as Mata Hari lost the custody over her after the divorce, simply vanished from the course of storyline almost without a single mention after her mother's divorce - save for an occasion where Mata Hari told Clunet that her letter should be given to her daughter when she is "old enough to understand" (Coelho, 2016, p. 137). This novel makes it seem as if she had forgotten almost entirely about her daughter, therefore portraying her as a negligent, unfeeling, and unemotional mother. A hint on how she feels about being away from her little girl would add some zest to her character and the storyline.

Other than that, Coelho's novel does contain some minor historical inaccuracies, such as the birth order of her children - a common occurrence in fictional adaptations of a person or historical events to better fit the narrative of the novel. Despite these minor historical alterations, Coelho manages to retain the accuracy for the majority of Mata Hari's life story. However, a major problem occurred - if one has managed to read the biography of the historical Mata Hari, they would know that her initial involvement with espionage still left a room for her own will, rather than a result of being tricked and thrown into the world of espionage without her knowledge through a chance of encounter with two men. In short, the real Mata Hari *knew* what she was doing, - even believed to be a cunning and manipulative *femme fatale*, something which I personally think was fairly out of stretch - unlike the fictional character Mata Hari who had little knowledge of her own state. Certainly, this could be attributed to a novelist's artistic freedom; however I found it niggling that Coelho took his freedom to paint her in such a way which undermines her character. Quite possibly, such alteration in the depiction of Mata Hari was favoured to support his line of reasoning that Mata Hari was a scapegoated victim, by drawing an I-knew-nothing naiveté from the character Mata Hari.

Despite the points where it lacks, Coelho was certainly successful in elaborating the unjustness in

Mata Hari's sentencing through this novel. The shift in point-of-view from Mata Hari to her lawyer enables the reader to have an detailed picture on the unfair trials for Mata Hari's case, starting from the lack of substantial evidences to righteously sentence Mata Hari, a list of nonsensical accusations pinpointed towards her, the refusal coming from her powerful acquaintances to testify for her in the trial, and a preconceived notion among the judges regarding Mata Hari that she was a liar with a bogus background; all of which did nothing to free her from the grasp of the firing squad. On top of that, Coelho added an epilogue containing a confession from the prosecutor on how the evidences to sentence Mata Hari was "so poor that it wouldn't have been fit to punish a cat" (Coelho, 2016, p. 186), showing Coelho's consistency in reaffirming his standpoint regarding Mata Hari's position as a victim of injustice.

To sum everything up, Coelho's latest work *The Spy* is highly-recommended for anyone looking for a relatively quick reading on the life of an enigmatic, yet extraordinary woman figure during the era of the First World War. However, I do not recommend this book for anyone seeking for an in-depth look on Mata Hari – for which I suggest reading her biographies written by several authors instead of this novel. But, apart from that, it is nevertheless a page-turning read – sure to keep its readers captivated until the very end by offering us a glimpse of a woman out of her time, along with the mysteries surrounding her life.

REFERENCE

Coelho, Paulo. (2016). *The Spy*. Penguin Random House LLC.