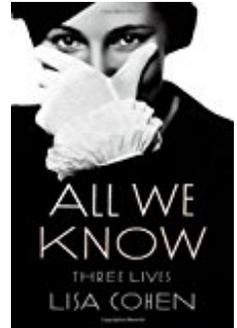


Jenny McPhee

Eluding Magnificent Monuments: The Stylish Lives of Esther Murphy, Mercedes de Acosta, and Madge Garland

In trying to come to terms with what she perceived as her friend Esther Murphy's colossal failure of a life, the novelist Dawn Powell wrote to Esther's brother Gerald, "Some people don't want to be the action -- they really want to be spectator." In *All We Know: Three Lives*, Lisa Cohen's mind-stretching book about three early 20th-century women who dwelled on the margins of celebrity, Powell's division becomes specious. All three women -- historian and conversationalist Esther Murphy; writer, feminist, and consummate fan to the stars Mercedes de Acosta; and fashion journalist Madge Garland -- were both actors and spectators, contributing to and observing the world they inhabited with equal fervor. "Each one constantly memorialized herself and colluded in her own invisibility," Cohen writes. Though she wanted to make these women's lives visible again, Cohen notes that "none of them thought herself in need of rescue."



These three almost famous women knew each other, were an integral part of the cultural elite, and belonged to a tantalizingly open yet constrained gay and lesbian subculture; their profiles merge into a sumptuous portrait of the era. The brilliance of Cohen's study, however, lies in her meditations on what we mean by failure, irrationality, and triviality when considering a life -- especially the lives of women. She questions the genre of biography itself, suggesting that, like the reputation of any "great woman," the form is inherently insecure and lies precariously "at the intersection of history and literature, of fact and imagination."

In answer to any question, Esther Murphy would notoriously begin "All we know is..." then launch into a panoptic account complete with nuanced digressions. Her father, Patrick Murphy, was a renowned public speaker and wealthy owner of a luxury leather goods store in Manhattan. Proud of his daughter, whose verbal genius was notable from a young age, he favored her over her brothers. Being eclipsed by a sibling was unfathomable in her lifetime, yet, Cohen writes, "if she is remembered at all today, it is as Gerald Murphy's eccentric, pathetic sister, a marvel who became a spectacular disappointment."

When Esther, an avid reader, was unable to attend Bryn Mawr due to her mother's health, Patrick arranged for her to follow the Harvard curriculum at home. It was assumed by her family and friends, and publishers who gave her advances for biographies and histories, that she would transfer her rhetorical precocity onto paper. She did publish essays and books, was

vigorously on the lecture circuit, and had a regular stint as a panelist along with Eleanor Roosevelt, Margaret Mead, and Fanny Hurst on the ABC radio program *Listen -- The Women!* But the magnum opuses -- projected biographies of Lady Blessington, Madame de Pompadour, and Madame de Maintenon -- never materialized.

Six feet tall and awkward, she drank and smoked heavily, and was never shy about her eloquence. She held forth at any opportunity, of which she had many, both at the numerous parties she attended -- three per evening, never home before dawn -- and at official engagements. With psychological astuteness, Cohen describes how Esther "became a figure whose inability to complete her planned long works both pained her writer friends and reassured them about their own productivity and success." Esther's inner circle included Edmund Wilson, Dorothy Parker, Dawn Powell, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and many more literary luminaries -- and by the mid-1920s she was very much part of "sapphic New York and Paris." When in Paris, she spent much of her time with Janet Flanner and Solita Solana, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Oscar's niece Dorothy Wilde, and poet Natalie Barney, Esther's passionate obsession. Sybille Bedford, a young European refugee and aspiring writer when they met in 1945, became the love of Esther's life. Their affair lasted only a few years but they remained lifelong friends.

So what exactly does it mean to be a failure? A lack of acclaim, fame, sales, no magnificent monument, no Wikipedia page? (Esther doesn't have one though I imagine she will soon.) Esther had a Catholic's appreciation for profound uselessness, a historian's appreciation for wasted efforts and lost causes, a woman's appreciation for namelessness, and a writer's dread of the written word. Her deep knowledge of the past allowed her to revel in the impermanence of the present, the spoken word, the moment. By not adhering to the definition of what constitutes "success," by remaining in the realm of the ephemeral, the always becoming, the unstable but fantastical world of potential, she made those around her terribly uncomfortable raising "the specter of one's own vulnerability." To have concretized her ambition in some permanent form would have meant failure, but not to do so also meant failure. "Hers," Cohen states, "was the authority of failure."

Cohen's second essay reflects upon Mercedes de Acosta's identification of herself as a fan to famous actresses and collector of their memorabilia. "Being a fan is itself a performance," writes Cohen, "individual and collective, intensely personal and outrageously public." Though she published several books of poetry, a novel, wrote plays and screenplays, and was a feminist activist, it was her ability to bask fully in the gilded fame of other women that most fulfilled her. For Marlene Dietrich, she was "mon grand amour." Isadora Duncan claimed she would "follow her to the ends of the earth."

A flamboyant personality of striking appearance, Mercedes was nicknamed "Countess Dracula" by Tallulah Bankhead because of her white skin, jet-black hair, and her fondness for capes. With an extraordinary sense of style, she wore costumes designed to turn heads. Renowned as a seductress, she wrote a memoir *Here Lies the Heart* coyly describing her love affairs with her famous friends -- a "mildly coded history of a corner of twentieth century gay and lesbian life," Cohen writes. Fittingly, Andy Warhol drew the invitation to her book party.

Madge Garland, fashion editor of British *Vogue* in the 1930s, was the founder of London's first school of fashion design, consultant to the textile industry, government advisor on art and industry, and author of numerous books. "She was undoubtedly a fascinating person," a friend commented after her death, "I mean really fascinating, but she has left no monument." Extraordinarily thin and waifish, Mercedes de Acosta called her a "kitten," Rebecca West "an exquisite piece of porcelain," yet her drive, strength, and resilience saw her rise from a barely educated girl from Australia to become one of the fashion industry's key figures in Britain.

Soon after Dorothy Todd became editor of British *Vogue*, she and Madge began a long, tumultuous affair. Together, according to Madge's lifelong friend the writer Rebecca West, they transformed *Vogue* from "just another fashion paper to being the best of fashion papers and a guide to the modern movement in the arts." Echoing Virginia Woolf, whom she had hired to write, Madge wrote, "There is a tendency in England to regard everything which concerns the lighter moments of men (sport, for instance) as important, while the more mundane occupations of women are universally condemned as frivolous." Nevertheless, Madge insisted she "was never really that interested in fashion, but I wanted to be financially independent." She enjoyed her many accomplishments and when she died in 1990 was hailed as "a key figure in the history of British fashion journalism, the British fashion industry, and the training of fashion designers." But, never interested in "vaunting or validating what she did," she left behind "no monument."

Cohen compares Madge's story to a dress -- it offers "something that a monument cannot: some mixture of the texture of daily life and the vertigo of history, with all of their immediacy and loss, and all of their distortions."

That stylish gown splendidly fits all three of the women in Cohen's wondrous book.

Jenny McPhee's most recent novel is [A Man of No Moon](#). She lives in London where she runs the Upper Wimpole Street literary salon, but mostly she resides at www.jennymcphee.com