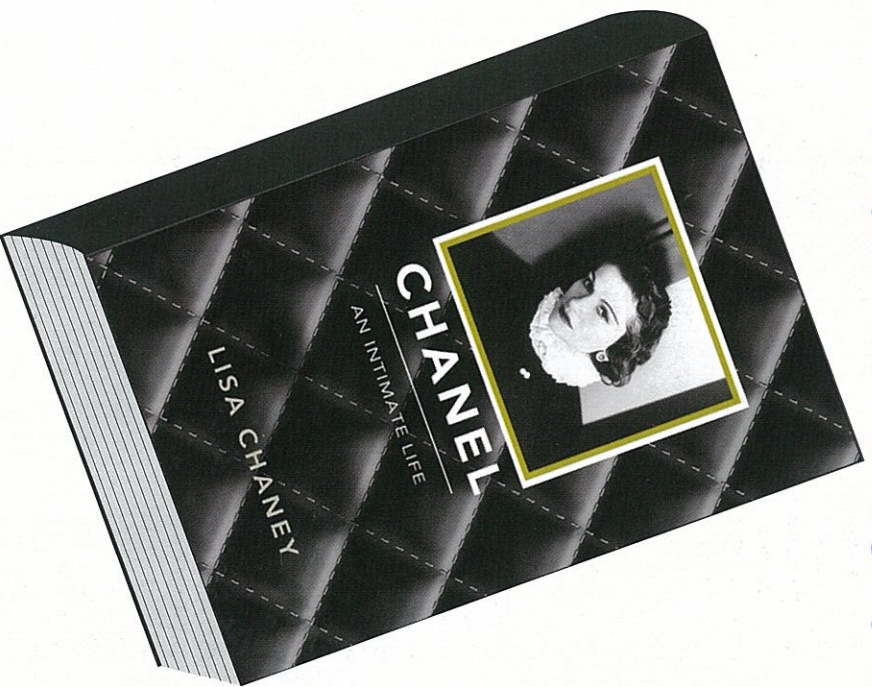


# More than the little black dress

Anne Hogan on an insightful study of the famous couturière's complex character and singular journey



**Chanel: An Intimate Life**

By Lisa Chaney

Fig Tree/Penguin, 512pp, £25.00

ISBN 9781905490363

Published 6 October 2011

The zeitgeist of late has fairly reeked of Chanel, from feature-length films (*Coco Before Chanel* and *Coco Chanel & Igor Stravinsky*) to a biographic overspill of varying rigour, including journalist Justine Picardie's unabashedly sympathetic *Coco Chanel: The Legend and the Life* and Hal Vaughan's rather raggedly retold *Sleeping with the Enemy: Coco Chanel, Nazi Agent*.

Given the glut, the publication of Lisa Chaney's *Chanel: An Intimate Life* risks a disinterested reception by a Chanel-ed out public. That would be a shame, as Chaney is adept at elucidating Coco Chanel's paradoxical character. Chanel spent her adolescence in an orphanage, and

20th-century culture. Chanel's impact was not so much in contributing to Modernism as an artistic genre, as in anticipating fashion as a defining signifier of "modernity". Chanel grasped that the New Woman required – and still requires (vertiginous strketros notwithstanding) – stylish clothes that grace rather than constrict the female form. Designed with her own gamine body in mind, the simplicity of Chanel's meticulously cut jersey suits, her sling-back pumps and the indefatigable "little black dress" allowed freedom of movement allied with chic. "A busy woman", she decreed, "needs to feel comfortable in her clothes." Her look embodied modernity, just as her tempestuous affairs with men and with women seemed to forge a new paradigm, defying both conventional sexual codes and the marginality of the demi-monde. From a young woman kept in leisure by the worldly Etienne Balsan and, in turn, the "captive mistress" of his polo-playing friend, her beloved Arthur Capel, she made quite a journey.

While wealthy lovers helped catapult her out of impoverishment, Chanel's subsequent focus on career jumps the gun on her era. She loved prodigiously, often notorious, as evidenced by her affair with Hans Günther von Dinklage, the Nazi spy who charmed his way into Parisian circles. Yet work remained privileged as a gateway to independence. Neither weekends at the Scottish estate of the Duke of Westminster, with whom she had an affair from 1924 to 1930, nor late-night partying at Le Boeuf sur le Toit with pianist and *salonnière* Misa Sert kept her from her work on the rue Cambon, scissors dangling from her neck. Beginning with the hats she created at Balsan's Parisian apartment, she designed tirelessly until she closed her shop during the war, for which she was reviled. She lived afterwards in Switzerland, lying low in the aftermath of being interrogated as a collaborator. Speculation remains as to the reasons for her prompt release – Chaney suggests the intervention of Chanel's friend, Winston Churchill.

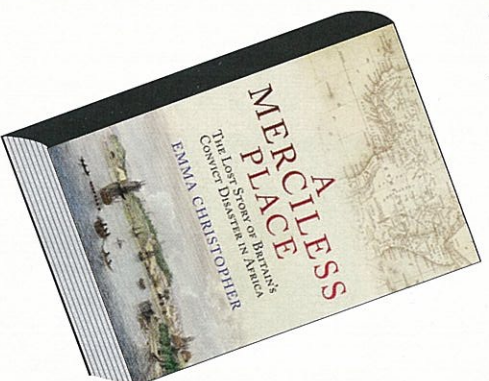
Her vociferously anti-Semitic leanings, like those of the Duke of Westminster and many in the circles she frequented, were widely known and did little to

allay – and still fuel – the spectre of the collaboration charges. The lure of work prevailed, however, and in 1954, aged 71, Chanel crawled back to her milieu. The sleek understatement of her comeback collection initially flopped. It seemed passé in Paris but was embraced in America, and her brand eventually regained its status as the epitome of streamlined élan. Chanel died with a new collection fast approaching.

Her anti-Semitism was no less abhorrent for being widely shared, and some may find Chaney's assessment of her too indulgent. She argues that, while Chanel's association with von Dinklage and other unsavoury sorts was hardly her shining moment, her primary motivation during the Occupation was, like Colette's, a determination to survive. True, perhaps, and I think Chaney means to explicate, rather than to excuse, Chanel's wartime conduct. I am, in any case, pretty much persuaded of the unlikelihood of Chanel spying for the Germans.

Chaney's is a nuanced account of a contradictory, complex, quite extraordinary life, and I hope it attracts the readership it merits.

Anne Hogan is director of education, Royal Academy of Dance. Her most recent book is *Balanchine: Then and Now* (2008).



**A Merciless Place: The Last Story of Britain's Convict Disaster in Africa**

By Emma Christopher

Oxford University Press

448pp, £16.99

ISBN 9780199695935

Published 11 August 2011

A monarchy and ruling elite live in conspicuous excess while the majority get poorer. Financial scams, identity theft and unscrupulous