



Reading Group Guide

Lee Miller: The Inspiration behind Jessica May

As I mention in the Author's Note at the back of *The Paris Orphan*, I first heard of Lee Miller when I was researching my previous book, *The Paris Seamstress*. There was a throwaway line in an article that mentioned Miller and other female war correspondents who, after World War II had ended, had not been able to continue working as serious journalists because the men had returned from overseas and taken all of the available jobs.

It caught my attention. What would it have been like to report on a war and then come home to America and be assigned completely different work? After the war, Lee Miller was relegated to photographing fashion or celebrities during the winter season at Saint-Moritz. She was also an occasional contributor of recipes for *Vogue*.

That article was the start of my fascination with her. I went looking for more. And I found a story so incredible I couldn't help but be inspired by it.

Miller the Photojournalist

Miller was a photojournalist for *Vogue* during World War II. She took some extraordinary photographs: she stumbled upon the battle for Saint-Malo in France and photographed the U.S. Army's first use of napalm there. She reported from Paris, Luxembourg, Alsace, Colmar, Aachen, Cologne, Frankfurt and Torgau, among other places. She was one of

the first to document the horrors of the Dachau concentration camp. And she was the subject of an iconic photograph, bathing in Hitler's bathtub in his Munich apartment, having left her filthy boots to drop the dirt of Dachau, as she put it, all over the Fuhrer's pristine white bathroom.

Miller the Model

But Lee Miller started on the other side of the lens. She was discovered by Condé Nast on the streets of Manhattan and became a famous model for magazines like *Vogue* during the 1920s. I decided to use this as the starting point for my character, Jessica May, as I was fascinated by that transition. How did a woman who was so obviously beautiful manage in the male and often chauvinistic environment of an army during a war?

Just as Condé Nast discovers Lee Miller, he also discovers Jess in *The Paris Orphan* and Jess is one of his favorite models, as Miller was. However, to suit my story better, I moved time forward to begin Jess's modeling career in the early 1940s.

Miller's modeling career ended when a photograph of her was used by Kotex in an advertisement for sanitary pads. It's so hard to imagine that this could end a career, but it did. To be seen as the "Kotex Girl" was a stigma so dreadful that no magazine wanted to use pictures of Miller again. So Miller moved to France, where she became Man Ray's lover. He helped her develop her photography skills and she became a well-regarded surrealist photographer.

I used these elements when creating Jess's character too. Jess has to stop modeling after a photograph of her is used by Kotex, Jess has a French photographer as a lover, and solarization is a trademark of her work, as it was Miller's.

The Intersection of Fiction and Reality

Miller actually reported for British *Vogue* during the war, although many of her pieces appeared in American *Vogue* too. For ease of the story, I have Jess working for American *Vogue* in *The Paris Orphan*.

Jess follows in Miller's footsteps in *The Paris Orphan*, working out of a field hospital when she first arrives in France after D-Day. I have given the room used by Lee Miller at the Hotel Scribe in Paris to Jess, complete with a balcony piled high with fuel cans and an acquaintance with Picasso. Miller is called *la femme soldat* by the joyful Parisians after the city is liberated, as is Jess. Miller stays at Hitler's apartment in Munich and is photographed in Hitler's bath, as is Jess in *The Paris Orphan*.

After the War

One of the most heartbreaking parts of Miller's story is what happened to her after the war. She suffered from post-traumatic stress after viewing and recording so many horrors, and she tried to forget that she was ever a witness to war and all its atrocities. So effective was she at excising this from her past that, when she died at age seventy, her son, Roland Penrose, had no idea of what she had done during the war. Her work was largely forgotten.

One day, Penrose's wife found boxes of photographs and films in the attic at Farley Farm, Miller's home. They contained Miller's correspondence with her *Vogue* editor and wartime paraphernalia. Penrose immediately understood that he had made an incredible discovery, that his mother had been a true artist, and that her words and pictures had—once upon a time, until she let the world forget them—meant something.

He resurrected Lee Miller and her work. She is now widely regarded as one of the world's preeminent war correspondents and photographers. The idea that she had been all but forgotten haunted me, and this inspired the scenes set in contemporary times in *The Paris Orphan*, when D'Arcy Hallworth finds an attic full of photographs and an extraordinary legacy that should never have been lost to the past.

From Chateaux to Battlefields: Walking the Paths My Characters Tread

Next to writing, research is my true love. When I stand in the spaces I want my characters to inhabit, I can feel them and see them and bring their lives and their stories out of my imagination and into the structure of words and sentences.

The Hotel Scribe, Paris

To research *The Paris Orphan*, I started in Paris at the Hotel Scribe, where Lee Miller stayed during World War II and where Jessica May, my character, also stays. The hotel was used by the U.S. Army as the press office, and the hotel's exterior is largely unchanged from that time.

Staying in the hotel for several nights allowed me to picture more vividly the scenes in my story set there, to see where Miller's room was, and the view from her balcony. The hotel is very proud of its association with Miller.

A Chateau in the Champagne Region

From there I had the very difficult(!) job of staying in a chateau just outside Reims in France's Champagne region, just as D'Arcy does in *The Paris Orphan*. How I suffer for my art!

It was a wonderful experience because I was able to wallow in the richness and lushness of the area. The extraordinarily bright pumpkins that D'Arcy sees from her window are the pumpkins I saw from my room at the chateau, as is the canal, the maze, the plane trees, the *potager*—or vegetable garden—and the butterflies. From inside the chateau, the black-and-white-tiled marble floor, the *salon de grisailles*, the *boiserie*, and the turret all came from the chateau I stayed at.

Crazy Trees—Les Faux de Verzy

I had heard about Les Faux de Verzy, the dwarf twisted beech trees that feature in *The Paris Orphan*, before I left for France. I was determined to see them, as they captured my imagination. When I told my kids we were going to spend the afternoon walking through a forest in search of crazy trees, they looked at me as if I was the one who was crazy!

But we had the perfect day. It was a little overcast and dark, haunting, mystical, magical even. We found the trees, and they were like something from myth. We all felt as if we were walking through an enchanted forest. As we left, my kids said to me that doing weird research things with Mummy always ended up being really fun! There was no way I could leave those spectacular trees out of the book.

On to Normandy

I then traveled to Normandy, which was a sobering experience. Standing on Omaha Beach, as Jess does in the book, deeply affected me. The beach is so very wide, and I could see the difficulty that any soldier would have had, jumping out of a vessel on the water, traversing through waves to the ocean's edge, and then having to forge a way across that vast stretch of sand to safety. Almost impossible. I could feel how Jess might feel, standing there, seventy-odd years ago, a witness to the immense and terrible destruction of human life.

I visited the American Cemetery there, and then drove to Sainte-Mère Église, where there is a museum dedicated to the paratroopers. I knew little about the intricacies of battles and battalions, so seeing a mannequin dressed in a paratrooper's uniform, plus all of the eighty kilograms of equipment they carried, and studying the maps of their campaigns and victories was hugely helpful in allowing me to better understand Dan Hallworth and what he might have faced.

In the museums of Normandy, I saw a lot of the equipment used by the soldiers and the personal items carried by them, which helped me to recreate life as it could have been: everything from U.S. Army jeeps and tanks, to long-tom guns, packs of Lucky Strikes, ration chocolate, Scott paper, and tins of Marathon foot powder—all of which appear in the book.

I was also able to see the accreditation papers, passport, uniforms, telegrams, diary, and war correspondent badge of Virginia Irwin, one of the female correspondents, at the Imperial War Museum at Duxford, England. These were all items Jess would have required, so it was wonderful to view them.

And then it was time to leave Europe and to try to write down the story that was occupying all of my thoughts. It's my favorite of all of my books. I truly hope you enjoy reading *The Paris Orphan* as much as I enjoyed writing it. Thank you.

For photographs and more, visit my blog on natashalester.com.au.

THE PARIS ORPHAN

Discussion Questions

1. One of the author's concerns when writing the book was that the extent and magnitude of the bias and discrimination shown towards female war correspondents was so great that readers might not believe it could really have happened. Were you shocked by any of the sexist behavior, rules or beliefs described in the incidents in the book? Which incidents surprised you the most? How do you think it might affect a woman to have to struggle against such ingrained bias in order to do her job?

2. Had you heard of Lee Miller before you read the book? Have you been drawn to find out any more about Miller since reading it? What do you think of the author's decision to create a character inspired by Miller rather than write a fictionalized account of Lee Miller's life? Which approach do you think you might prefer as a reader?

3. Victorine makes a difficult decision towards the end of the novel when she withholds information from both Jess and Dan. What did you think of her decision? What might you have done in her place? Is it possible to make the wrong decision for the right reasons? How important is it to consider a person's motivations when assessing whether their decision was right or wrong?

4. Both Jess and Dan make different decisions when it comes to Amelia's ultimatum: Dan decides to marry Jess in spite of his battalion; Jess decides to leave Dan so that he has to marry Amelia. Who was the more heroic out of Jess and Dan over the course of the war, and in making that final decision? Which one of them made the "right" decision?

5. For much of the novel, Jess collects information about soldiers sexually assaulting civilian women. She doesn't report on this until after the war. Do you think it was cowardly of her to wait so long? What do you think might have happened had she tried to publish the article while the war was still continuing? Was she guilty of letting other women down, or did she have no choice?

6. Back in London, Jess has the thought: "War makes us monsters or angels, but so too does love." How difficult do you think it would be to fall in love during wartime, knowing that death was a very real possibility for one or both partners? Do you think this would change the kind of love a person might feel, make it more intense perhaps because risk is everywhere, or less intense because the fear of death creates a fear of true intimacy? How can love make someone a monster and where does this happen in the book?

7. The difficulties Jess and Dan and Amelia face during the war are very different to the difficulties D'Arcy and Josh have faced in their lives. Do you think people in contemporary

times are guilty of creating problems where none exist? To what extent does living through a war change how a person views life? Are contemporary concerns less important than those people faced during the 1940s or are both sets of issues equally challenging and worthy of discussion?

8. There are many women in the book who are based on real people including Martha Gellhorn, Lee Carson, Iris Carpenter, and Catherine Coyne. Had you heard of any of these women before reading the book? Which ones? Is it true that the stories of so many extraordinary women have been lost to history, and forgotten by those of us who come after? If so, why do you think that is? What other books have you read, or movies have you watched, that feature extraordinary women from history and what did you enjoy about them?

Give Your Next Book Club Meeting a Taste of France

When D'Arcy arrives at the Chateau *Lieu des Reves*, she doesn't shy away from indulging in the homemade pastries and food prepared for guests. Whether it's [that](#) first dinner with Josh or the romantic picnic they share—there's always something delicious on the menu in France.

To create your own decadent French picnic, Natasha Lester has some suggestions:

Tarte Tatin: an upside-down pastry with fruit (often apple) that is caramelized in butter and sugar before the tart is baked.

French Baguette: a classic French loaf of bread characterized by its long, thin shape and crispy crust.

Paté: a paste, pie or loaf consisting of ground liver with a variety of other ground meat (pork, poultry, fish) combined with herbs, spices and either wine or brandy. A platter of different types of paté served with slices of baguette will allow guests to sample different tastes.

Cheese: like the paté, creating a platter with a few different flavors and textures of cheese makes for a nice tasting experience served with the baguette. Some popular French cheeses include Brie, Gruyere, Roquefort, and Chevre.

Chocolate Tarts: a type of custard tart with a mixture of dark chocolate, cream and eggs are poured into a sweet pastry shell and baked until firm.

Macarons: sweet pastries made with almond powder or ground almond, they come in a variety of flavors denoted by different colors and types of filling. Note that macarons are different from the macaroon, which is coconut based.

Palmiers: pastry in the shape of a palm leaf or heart. They are also known as French Hearts or Elephant Ear among other names.

Cherry Clafoutis: a type of tart consisting of a sweet custard batter mixed with ripe cherries and baked. While cherries are the traditional fruit used in this dish, other fruits can be substituted.

Champagne or wine is always a good choice to pair with any of these treats and plentiful around France. But if you're looking for something a little bolder Natasha has shared her favorite recipe for a **Manhattan**.

2 oz. Whiskey
1 oz. sweet vermouth
2 dashes Angostura Bitters
Serve with a twist of orange