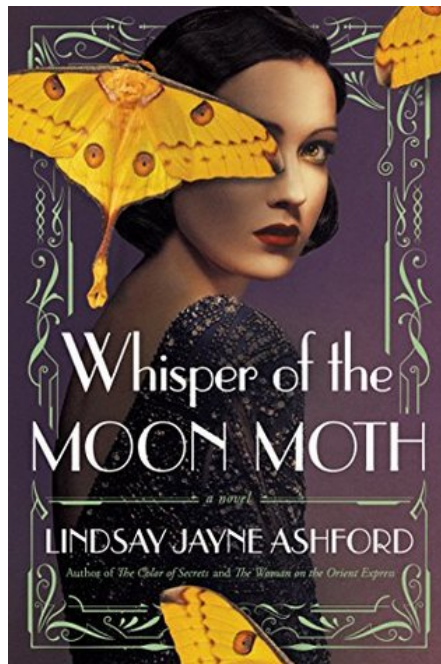




Whisper of the Moon Moth

Lindsay Jayne Ashford

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From the author of *The Color of Secrets* and *The Woman on the Orient Express* comes a poignant novel inspired by the Hollywood legend—and the secrets of—actress Merle Oberon, famous for playing Cathy to Laurence Olivier’s Heathcliff in the film *Wuthering Heights*.

For nineteen-year-old Estelle Thompson, going to the cinema is more than a way to pass the time...it’s a way out. In 1931 in Calcutta, Anglo-Indian girls like Estelle are considered half-breeds, shunned by both English and Indian society. Her only escape is through the silver screen, where she can forget the world around her.

When Estelle catches the eye of a dashing American heir with connections to a major motion-picture studio, he also captures her heart. Soon, Estelle has a one-way ticket to London and a recommendation for a screen test.

To get to the top, she must keep her Indian heritage concealed—and so begins her new identity as movie goddess Merle Oberon. But just as her dreams are poised to come true, she discovers that her own family is keeping a much more shocking secret from *her*—one that changes everything she’s believed about her past.

Whisper of the Moon Moth Details

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From Reader Review Whisper of the Moon Moth for online ebook

Tsbaber8 says

I liked that it opened up my curiosity about Merle Oberon but was disappointed to learn that much of what is in the book was made up by the author. I think if it would have been more factual it would have been better.

Marjorie says

I was a little hesitant reading this novel at first as a fictionalised reimagining of a reallife feels so many shades of wrong. However, I decided to give it a fair crack of the whip and decided to treat it as though the people within the covers had never really existed and it was all fiction. This is surprisingly easy to do, especially if you know absolutely nothing about Merle Oberon. To me she was merely a name from the end of the Golden Era in filmmaking and I'm not even sure that I have seen her in a film - I know her most famous film was perhaps *Wuthering Heights* but as I don't particularly like the novel I haven't been in any rush to see an adaptation of it.

The tale itself is gloriously wrought. The early section, in India, where the young Estelle lives with her mataji, Charlotte, is particularly evocative. You can feel the heat and smell the spice laden air wafting from the pages. The character of Estelle is particularly empathetic and her naivety from her rather cloistered upbringing in the Anglo-Indian quarter is at eternal odds with both her ambition and her underlying sensuous nature. Whether Merle Oberon was really like this I have no idea but I kind of hope she was; there is a feisty fearlessness to her that makes you immediately warm to her and accept her character flaws without them diminishing your affection for the character.

Whilst only just "pale enough to pass" this doesn't stop her from following her dreams and travelling to England with a letter of recommendation in her pocket and love in her heart. Sadly the love was misplaced and the intended recipient of the letter away but by a string of fortuitous meetings she still manages to make the right connections by meeting with Sandor Korda who sees her potential and so a star is born.

I found this to be a real page turner and was quite sad when it finishes early in Merle's life after her marriage to Korda. Whilst the events are fictionalised the inspiration behind the author's imaginings is explained in the Afterword and the known biography of Ms Oberon is synopsisied there for the reader. All of the characters in the book live and breathe and this isn't because there is a "name" attached to them; indeed many of them behave in ways that you wouldn't expect (although Vivien Leigh's overvaulting ambition and spite are well recorded) and feel all the more real for it.

If you can separate the real person from the fictional account then you will enjoy this novel. The settings, both glamorous and mundane, are richly evoked and the populace of the pages live and breathe on their own. There are some twists and turns in the plot that you genuinely don't see coming but when all mixed together they just make it feel like a genuine life.

Erin says

Considering that I enjoyed "The Woman on the Orient Express", there was no question that I wanted to read the latest from Lindsay Jayne Ashford. Of course, I had to wait until I was in the mood to read it. Last evening turned out to be the right time and it didn't take me too long to become immersed in the world of Hollywood movies and the silver screen lifestyle.

The central character for the book happens to be Anglo-Indian Estelle Thompson, who will become the actress known as Merle Oberon. Estelle and her mother, Charlotte are living life in Bombay. Before too long, Estelle captures the eye of a Virginian man that breaks her heart, but does make sure Estelle is on her way to London and the motion picture industry. Sure enough, Estelle soon captures the attention of director Samuel Korda and her film career as Merle Oberon is launched. However, Hollywood comes with a price and Merle must ensure that no one ever discovers her true parentage and so she promised herself that she will commit to the white world and bury her Indian heritage. But even in Hollywood no secret can go unpunished.

I must say that this was a **quick read, the characters are standard, and the epilogue reveals many elements that hook the reader are completely fictionalized.** Definitely take this book on vacation because it is a pretty familiar story of the Hollywood starlet. If you love Hitchcock, Leslie Howard, Douglas Fairbanks, Vivien Leigh, William Wyler, and Clark Gable- well they all make an appearance. On the other hand, I felt the characters all seemed to fit into some type of stereotype, especially Estelle/Merle. I am still unsure after finishing the story if she really came to any type of self-realization. Like the children in "The Chronicles of Narnia," Merle always appears to need someone to figure out her problems. I felt her hard to relate to because I wanted to shake her and scream "Get some common sense." Lastly, I really loved the relationship between Merle and Flora, but it was completely fictionalized. As was the feud between Merle and Vivien Leigh. I know that this is a book of fiction, but when the fictional parts are more believable than the real parts of the story, it has an effect on my leanings as a reader.

Nadine Paque-Wolkow says

Ich mag Bücher über das Showbiz. Sie versprechen immer eine ordentliche Portion Drama und das goldene Zeitalter des Films ist dafür ja perfekt geeignet.

Ich gebe auch zu, dass ich dem Buch erst seine drei Sterne gegeben habe.

Der Schreibstil ist für diese Art Roman in Ordnung, die Protagonistin folgt den gängigen Standards des Genres, von der jungen Naiven, die versucht ihren Weg zu gehen, über einige sexuelle Eskapaden, hin zum Star. Das Flair der Zeit, wurde gut eingefangen. Das Thema "Rassismus" zieht sich durch das ganze Buch, denn die Protagonistin schwebt immer in der "Gefahr", dass jemand ihre indische Herkunft aufdeckt und ihre Karriere damit beendet.

Was mich beim Lesen gestört hat war, dass die Geschichte eine sehr lange Vorlaufzeit hat. Über die Hälfte des Buches vergeht und die Protagonistin hat noch keinen Fuß in der Tür eines Filmstudios. So nimmt der Klappentext sozusagen das ganze Buch vorweg und wenn man ihn kennt, dann kennt man halt auch 98% der Geschichte.

Dann kam der Epilog (und ja, ich hab nicht gewusst, dass Merle Oberon eine ECHTE Person war, weil ich am Anfang nicht das Vorwort der Autorin gelesen habe (mache ich nie)). Doch dann im Epilog erklärt die Autorin, dass sie eine Menge in das Leben der Hollywood-Diva hineininterpretiert oder sagen wir schlicht ... erfunden hat. Natürlich könnte man argumentieren, dass jede "Romanbiographie" eine gewisse Portion von künstlicher Freiheit beinhaltet und da sage ich ... ja natürlich. Aber hier passiert es halt auf einem Level der mich stört. Der Gipfel war ja, dass behauptet wird, dass Vivien Leigh Merle Oberon droht ihre indische Herkunft zu verraten und ihr so nachhaltig zu schaden. Ja, okay, ich hab verstanden, die zwei Ladys mochten

sich nicht, aber das war mir dann doch etwas künstlerische Freiheit zu viel.

Das Buch als solches war ein typischer historischer Frauenroman, den ich auch Fans des Genres empfehlen würde. Mich stören allerdings die vielen Dinge, die die Autorin einfach "erfunden" hat.

Nenia ? Queen of Literary Trash, Protector of Out-of-Print Gems, Khaleesi of Bodice Rippers, Mother of Smut, the Unrepentant, Breaker of Convention ? Campbell says

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WHISPER OF THE MOON MOTH is a fictionalized account of real-life actress, Merle Oberon, who acted alongside actors such as Laurence Olivier, Flora Robson, and Vivien Leigh. She was also half-Indian in a time where there was still a ton of racism towards people of color and something called the Hays Code forbade the portrayal of miscegenation or interracial relationships. So, you're probably asking, "How did she do it?"

Merle hid her identity.

Since this is a work of fiction, there's obviously a lot that deviates from real life, and Merle was so successful at hiding her origins that I don't believe the truth about her ethnicity came out until 2014. There isn't a whole lot of material to work with, so the author takes a ton of liberties (which she is very upfront about in the "epilogue" where she lists out all of her embellishments).

WHISPER OF THE MOON MOTH is very much a Cinderella retelling of the kind that's so popular in books of this type, in the vein of MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA. Merle, born Estelle Thompson, is the daughter of an Indian mother and a white father, living in an India that still has a rigid caste system, where multi-ethnic children are basically outcasts from both white people and Indian people. There is one major upside for Estelle, though, and that is that she is gorgeous.

Unfortunately, her good looks and lack of worldliness cause a lot of trouble with men, and after getting her heart broken she decides to pursue her dream of acting by going to England with her mom. In England, she has to hide who she is and pretend her mother is her servant. Luck ends up landing her first an audition, and then things like roles and later, an agent, and pretty soon, Merle Oberon gets cast as Cathy in an adaption of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

There's a lot of Hollywood drama, but it's super fun. I'd say that if you read THE SEVEN HUSBANDS OF EVELYN HUGO, and asked yourself, "What's next?" WHISPER OF THE MOON MOTH would be a good

follow-up, because it also balances the weighty topics of race and sexuality against the backdrop of superficial but intoxicating Hollywood glamor. SEVEN HUSBANDS did it better - because, I mean, let's face it, that book was perfection - but WHISPER OF THE MOON MOTH is a page-turner, and just serious enough to avoid the "frothy" label. I really enjoyed it.

FYI, just want to give props to Lake Union Publishing. Whoever curates their historical fiction finds does a really excellent job. I've read a number of their titles and don't think I've ever encountered one I did not enjoy. This one was no exception.

3.5 to 4 stars

Sian Pursey says

Dreadful. Story was poorly written and the epilogue made me feel very uncomfortable about the people mentioned in the book. It also seemed to have been poorly researched. It is set in 1931 yet refers to plastic cups on a tea vending stall in India! There is also a later reference to drinking using a plastic straw. I cannot believe such details got past an editor. If they are getting points such as this wrong, what else is wrong in the book?

Elizabeth says

Not a bad story, but I don't think I approve of made up biographies. Once you get to the factual bit at the end you can see how much the story differs to reality.

Magdalena aka A Bookaholic Swede says

Merle Oberon's life before (and after) fame is one that is so fascinating that I was thrilled to learn that a book was going to be published. However, my expectations of the book turned out to be too high. As a close friend of my (who is also reading this book, will link to her review when it's done) wrote about the book "categorizing this one as a freely adapted biographic fiction that is significantly heavy on the fiction." I personally called it fantasy since the author decided to take leaps in the story that had no anchoring in real life. But, that's me...

Anyway, the writing isn't bad. I enjoyed reading The Woman on the Orient Express by the author and if this had been a historical fiction with made-up characters would I have enjoyed the book more. But, alas there are so many omissions and added events that I felt that this is like taking a real person's life, erasing parts that don't fit with the story and adding events to make it more thrilling. For instance, the whole Vivien Leigh feud is just laughable. And, the ending is saccharine and definitely felt like the author decided to change the truth to a suitable lie instead. And, the part I was looking forward to, the love affair with a fellow actor was totally omitted. Glossed over. But, he was married so of course that is taboo and we can't have Merle having an affair with a married man. Instead, make it believe that she had a fling with David Niven before finding

true love...

Would I recommend this book? Not if you are looking for a biographical fiction, this is so far away from Merle's life that you will probably enjoy it if you know nothing about her and/or don't mind the author taking liberation with Merle's life.

I want to thank the publisher for providing me with a free copy through NetGalley for an honest review!

Julia says

Dieses Buch erzählt die fiktive Lebensgeschichte der Schauspielerin Merle Oberon, wie die Autorin selbst im Epilog erklärt, basiert die Geschichte auf den wenigen Fakten, die über Oberon bekannt sind und wurde von der Autorin ausgeschmückt.

Erzählt wird also die Geschichte der jungen Frau Estelle Thompson, die als halb-Inderin/halb-Engländerin in Indien aufwächst. Als "Halbblut" gehört sie weder zur indischen Kastengesellschaft, noch zur Kolonialmacht England.

Hier nimmt die Aschenputtelgeschichte ihren Lauf. Estelle ist bildhübsch, aber unerfahren. Sie verliebt sich, wird abgewiesen und beschließt schließlich mit ihrer Mutter nach England zu gehen, um dort ihre Schauspielkarriere voran zu treiben. Sie muss ihre wahre Identität verstecken und ihre Mutter als ihre Angestellte ausgeben, aber Stück für Stück kommt ihre Karriere in Fahrt.

Die Geschichte ist spannend genug, daß ich sie bis zum Ende gelesen habe. In den letzten Jahren kamen aber ähnliche Geschichten auf den Markt (Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo, Memoirs of a Geisha,...) die mir besser gefallen.

Diese Rezension basiert auf einer ARC, die mir der Verlag über NetGalley zugeschickt hat.

#NetGalleyDEChallenge

Susan says

3.5 stars

I found this book to be an entertaining story. It is about an era in the British and American movie industry that I find fascinating. It delves into the life of Merle Oberon at the beginning of her movie career in the 1930's as she struggled to hide her Anglo-Indian heritage.

The author has been criticized by other readers for the lack of historical accuracy in the book. However, in her epilogue the author discusses some of the historical background and the creative license she has taken in the story. While I personally would prefer a story that adheres closer to the historical facts, I found this to be a good story. I did not necessarily look for it to be a biography.

I voluntarily reviewed a complimentary copy of this book which I received from goodreads and the author/publisher. I was not required to write a review. All opinions expressed are my own.

David Highton says

Free from Amazon Prime but not my cup of tea! Purports to be based on the early life of actress Merle Oberon, forced to deny her Anglo Indian heritage, the epilogue at the ends displays just how much poetic licence has been taken, with a lot of fictional content added.

Allie Riley says

I loved this and read it in only a few sittings. Beautifully written and fascinating. Prior to encountering this book, I had never heard of Merle Oberon. Now, I feel I will have to investigate more of her work. Helpfully, Ashford includes an epilogue which gives further details and explains where and why she deviated from the facts of Oberon's life. I would like to read more by this author.

Iset says

This is not the sort of book I usually pick up. As a historian my interest wanes in the 20th century onwards, and I normally go out of my way to avoid fiction in the setting, for the same reason I tend to avoid contemporary novels: I'm so familiar with it I simply find nothing new or exciting to tempt me, especially when I could be using that book reading time to read about far distant eras and places. Indeed, the setting here did not really surprise or delight me in any particular way. Rather, it was Merle Oberon's unique experience that drew me in.

Of course, she was a tremendous success, her life as we look back on it seems as glamorous as any Hollywood starlet. And yet, alongside this astonishing sensation, her early life was incredibly hard, and after her death it was discovered that she had been forced to conceal her Anglo-Indian ancestry because bigotry would have kicked her out of the movie industry. I think this is the most fascinating aspect of the 20th century, for me: despite the incredible rush of modern technology, some of the attitudes that people held are beyond belief. Heck, the attitudes some people are still desperately clinging onto today frankly make me question their intelligence and sanity, as well as serving as a reminder that progress and modernity is an ongoing process.

The author discloses in the author's note at the end what changes she made; they're mostly either on the small side or else filling in the gaps in what I think is a plausible way – although Vivien Leigh fans may not be pleased.

6 out of 10

Mary says

absolutely awful... writing ... story... characters... etc... not worth you time ... it was free on kindle unlimited but really this should not have been printed... supposedly a fictionalized version of Merle Oberon's life it was so far from reality that it was basically a book that plagiarized her life in order to have a story to write...

definitely don't bother with this one...

Amy says

3.8. This one was great as a pairing to *The Girls in the Picture*, which I read earlier this year. It is historical fiction based on our earliest movie stars, this one featuring Merle O'Brien, who featured in over 50 movies, including playing Cathy in *Withering Heights*. I enjoyed it. Felt it was another 3.8.

It's true that I have had a focus on reading historical fiction in the Jazz Age. (*Listopia*, #4). This one also pairs nicely with *The Girl from the Savoy*, set in London around the same time, only in that one, our title character Dolly and the co-stars in the book revolve around the stage. Musical theater. That one, was my favorite of the three.
