



## **Femme Fatale: Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari**

*Pat Shipman*

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In 1917, the notorious Oriental dancer Mata Hari was arrested on the charge of espionage; less than one year later she was tried and executed—charged with the deaths of at least 50,000 gallant French soldiers. The mistress of many senior Allied officers and government officials, even the French minister of war, she had a sharp intellect and a golden tongue fluent in several languages; she also traveled widely throughout wartorn Europe, with seeming disregard for the political and strategic alliances and borders. But was she actually a spy? In this persuasive new biography, Pat Shipman explores the life and times of the mythic and deeply misunderstood dark-eyed siren to find the truth.

Her blissful Dutch childhood as Margaretha Zelle ended abruptly with her parents' emotionally scarring divorce and, shortly after, her mother's death. Shuttled off to reluctant relations, Margaretha impulsively married a much older man, who gave her syphilis (then incurable) and took her to the Dutch East Indies, where the unhappy marriage exploded into vicious hatred following the death of their oldest child. Fleeing her tragic marriage, she reinvented herself as Mata Hari, a scandalously sensual dancer with an Indies name and an Indies aura about her novel "artistic" dances.

Mata Hari's life reads like both an action-packed adventure tale and passionate, poignant romance. Shipman reveals new information about this beautiful, brilliant, and dangerous woman, tracing the web of connections between her professional and personal lives. Once called "an orchid in a field of dandelions," Mata Hari was one of a kind, a rich and multifaceted personality whose ambitions and talents propelled her breathtaking rise—and her tragic fall.

## **Femme Fatale: Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari Details**

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## **From Reader Review *Femme Fatale: Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari* for online ebook**

### **Isabel says**

There was something lacking in this biography. It felt like too many research students had been on hand and the narrative lost its sparkle. Talk about labouring the point about Mata Hari having an incurable sexual disease. A bit disappointing.

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### **Jennifer says**

In *Femme Fatale*.. , Pat Shipman does a lot of research to discover whether Margaretha Zelle (Mata Hari) was truly a spy or just a woman who lived an unconventional life. Her early life in Holland was happy, she had a father who doted on her. This was upset by her parents' divorce and subsequently, her mother's death. Margaretha was forced to live with unwilling relatives. She made an unwise marriage looking for an escape, only to find another cage. Her marriage to Lt. MacLeod led to a few years in Dutch West Indies- which gave birth in some way to her alter ego, Mata Hari. Her marriage was unhappy. The unhappiness grew to misery after death of their child, a little boy named Norman. Shipman speculates as to whether Norman was the victim of congenital syphilis as well as both parents being afflicted. Their young daughter, Non, survives but MacLeod is increasingly mistrustful of his wife. Their relationship becomes more volatile until "Gretha" contacts her father for help in procuring a divorce. MacLeod frees her with the stipulation that she will never see her daughter again. She heads for Paris and reinvents herself as Mata Hari. A patron showcases her dancing, bordering on striptease, and suddenly she is the toast of the town. Engagements in opera houses and theatres ensue, but these paying jobs can't keep her out of debt. She becomes the mistress of many of Europe's elite- a financial arrangement for the pleasure of her company. This extravagant and loose lifestyle is what ultimately gets her into trouble. When WWI breaks out, she is in Berlin, engaged by the opera for several weeks. Mata Hari breaks her contract and her trunks of clothes, costumes, furs, and jewels are seized. When she goes to a German official to see if she can recoup her belongings and obtain a visa for Paris, she sets a series of events into motion that lead to her conviction and execution for espionage. Fascinating subject matter- not sure why there hasn't been a more recent film biography of this larger than life character.

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### **Iris van den Brand says**

Ik wilde dit boek enorm graag lezen, voor ik de tentoonstelling over Mata Hari zou bezoeken in het Fries Museum. Maar wauw. Mijn verwachtingen lagen erg laag, want Amerikaanse schrijfster gaat schrijven over een Nederlandse vrouw en de Nederlandse cultuur uit interesse voor Friesland. Maar, Pat Shipman heeft een laagdrempelige (niet zo zeer wetenschappelijke) biografie geschreven op een meeslepende manier; hij is leesbaar voor iedereen. Het verhaal van Mata Hari laat je hart een beetje huilen. Het boek stroomt over van de tragiek. Ik was dan ook blij dat het boek uit was. Niettemin, dikke aanrader.

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### **Manda says**

This book provides a fascinating vindication of Mata Hari, one of the most famous alleged double agents in

history. The distance of 90 years since her execution and a modern post-sexual revolution perspective allow the conclusion to be drawn that she was convicted before her trial even began for her sexual reputation rather than any real evidence of espionage. Mata Hari was a study in contrast, a self-made woman who still relied on men for her financial upkeep, yet the way she unapologetically took what she wanted from life made her a woman two or three generations before her time.

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### **Rozonda says**

Very serious and well-researched bio of a fascinating character, it throws a lot of light on her conviction as a spy and on the real motives behind it. A sad but illuminating story, entertaining and well-written.

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### **Penny says**

Interesting and generally well written life story of Mata hari. I spent a lot of the book trying to work out if she was indeed a clever woman or a very foolish one. Still not completely sure. I liked the writing style apart from the several times when the author stated 'she was the only biographer' to spot/investigate/discover various aspects of Mata Hari's life. The book stands on its own without this sort of author puff.

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### **Liz says**

It's very sympathetic to Mata Hari and the author continuously mentions that "no other historian" or "no other biography" looked into some of her sources. I would have liked it more if the prose had been more neutral; Shipman is very persuasive with the case she builds against Mata Hari's ex-husband and the holes in the story of Mata Hari as a master spy, but her pointing it out to the reader breaks the fourth wall in an uncomfortable way.

PopSugar Reading Challenge 2017 | Task 40: Book you bought in a trip (to WWI museum in Kansas City, MO)

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### **Bettie? says**

My first reaction was **must publish my thesis or go bust** then I checked out the author - professor of anthropology.

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### **Ayala Levinger says**

very thorough. I would have liked if it included more details about her daughter.

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## Rebecca says

What begins as a fascinating biography of a woman everyone's heard of and no one actually knows eventually turns into a tedious list of the basics: names, places, dates. Pat Shipman works hard to prove Mata Hari was not a spy for the Germans during World War I in *Femme Fatale*--and thanks to her exhaustive research Shipman succeeds--but I wish the charm of the book (and Mata Hari herself) wasn't lost along the way.

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## Carl Rollyson says

Mata Hari, the femme fatale convicted of espionage and executed by the French during World War I, is hardly a virgin subject for biography. She is a perennial of children's books devoted to famous spies and secret agents and no less of a draw in biographies for adults. Greta Garbo played her on the big screen as the subversive siren redeemed by love. Mata Hari's recent biographers doubt the evidence against her. French intelligence, it seems, fabricated a case, determined to find a scapegoat in an exotic courtesan who happened to be in all the wrong places at all the wrong times.

She began as the "little Dutch girl," Margaretha Geertruida Zelle, to borrow a phrase from Toni Bentley's entertaining and authoritative *"Sisters of Salome"* (2002). Adam Zelle treated his daughter like something special. She adored her wayward n'er-do-well dad with the gift of gab, and she grew up looking for a handsome man in a uniform to marry. Rudolf MacLeod, 20 years her senior, and a veteran of 20 years of slogging it out in vicious wars in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), obliged her. But MacLeod turned out to be a tyrant and Gretha, as she was known then, could not suppress her flirtatious nature. They parted in acrimony after several years together in the tropics.

Although Gretha had an almost matronly figure, she moved well and seems to have made a keen study of native dancers. Her complexion was swarthy, and in costume resembled one of those goddesses hanging off of Indian temples. Her adopted name, taken from a Malay phrase, means something like "sunrise." With the dim lighting and a pair of small, cymbal-like cups covering her mammaries, she was able to enchant European audiences for the better part of a decade, claiming to offer dances that had their origins in the sacred rites of the East. She combined, as Pat Shipman notes in *"Femme Fatale: Love, Lies, and the Unknown Life of Mata Hari"* the sacred and profane. Her titillations could be enjoyed as — shall we say — a cultural experience.

World War I changed everything. France was losing the war. Who was to blame? Rather than accepting responsibility for the catastrophe, the French government, especially its intelligence branch, claimed that spies informing Germans of French military plans had undone the nation. And Mata Hari — a so-called "international woman" — came under suspicion. Why did she travel so much to Germany, England, and France, always consorting with military men? The answer is simple, Ms. Shipman replies: Mata Hari was a sucker for a uniform, relied upon men to give her money to support her extravagance, and took no notice of what others made of her itinerary.

Determined to convict, French intelligence agents got Mata Hari to admit she had taken money from a German officer, and after they in turn offered her money to spy on the Germans, they accused her of being a double agent. Sentenced to death by firing squad after a trial in which her former lovers reported she had never even talked about the war, she went to her death with dignity, all the while proclaiming her innocence.

So what is unknown in the story? According to Ms. Shipman, Mata Hari may have had syphilis — which would account for her erratic behavior and her husband's equally bizarre actions. He had probably infected her. Ms. Shipman devotes many pages to making such a case, but then, really, so what? How has the story changed? Yet Ms. Shipman persists with tag lines such as, "No previous biographer has noticed."

One especially dubious move is Ms. Shipman's reliance on Adam Zelle's book about his daughter, a tendentious narrative that Mata Hari herself ridiculed. Ms. Shipman acknowledges that Zelle's work is self-serving, but then she quotes Mata Hari's letters, which are available only in Zelle's narrative. Who is to say that Zelle did not alter or even invent some of this correspondence? Other biographers, such as Erika Ostrovsky in *"Eye of Dawn: The Rise and Fall of Mata Hari"* (1978) find Zelle so compromised that they hardly mention his book.

As Toni Bentley points out, the significant event in Mata Hari's life occurred in 1985 when the sealed dossier of evidence against her was opened for biographer Russell Warren Howe. This disclosure established that the case against her amounted to very little indeed.

Although Ms. Shipman belittles previous researchers it is hard to see how her book could exist without them. Certainly she has discovered a few nuggets and provided some riveting passages on what it was like for that poor little Dutch girl in the East Indies, but only devotees of femme fatales need trouble themselves over her biographer's lucubrations on the intricacies of her possible disease.

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## **Anna Alexander says**

Born Margaretha Gertruida Zell, Mata Hari was the Paris Hilton of her day.

The daughter of Dutch parents, her father showered her with gifts and fancy clothes and it was clear she was the favorite of the family. When her father went bankrupt, Mata Hari was sent to live with relatives who sent her to a boarding school. Here she learned sex equals power and sex with powerful men equals power AND status.

Mata Hari was in love with being in love which showed when she married a much older Colonel in the Dutch Army. The marriage offered her money and a position in society and it also offered her syphilis which she acquired from her husband. The couple had two children and the marriage went to shit when her first child, a son, died. It was believed the boy died from the mercury treatment he was getting for syphilis. Both parents fell into a deep depression and the Colonel got violent.

Mata Hari left her daughter behind and fled to Paris where she reinvented herself as a mixed-race princess trained in sacred and sexual temple dances of the east. She was the belle of the ball in Europe and danced before large crowds and small garden parties. The cash flowed but Mata Hari spent lavishly on clothes, hats and a lifestyle to which she was accustomed. She left behind great debts and her creditors constantly hounded her. When things were lean she would insist on spending anyway and couldn't figure out why her creditors took her furniture.

Like all good things, they must come to an end. World War I broke out and Mata Hari's gig as a dancer dried up. So she did what she did best and "entertained" officers and high-powered men in her hotel room in Paris. She fell in love with a Russian spy who was injured in a battle and she agreed to spy for him. Now this is where things get dicey. Pat Shipman points out that Mata Hari probably passed on a secret or two or made a phone call but she was not "responsible for the death of 50,000 soldiers" as she was charged. Plus, she argues, it would be difficult for an easily recognizable person to be a spy. She was simply made a scapegoat

for flaunting her lifestyle and sexuality. The evidence against her was weak and the government was suspicious of someone who traveled during war time, had several high-powered lovers, and spoke several languages. She was found guilty anyway.

When she was executed, Mata Hari walked with her head held high and refused a blindfold.

Overall, I found this book to be very satisfying. I did not know anything about Mata Hari going into the book and I enjoyed learning about the infamous *Femme Fetale*. Shipman's writing style is very approachable and her research was thorough. The only problem I had was that I did not like Mata Hari. I admired her for doing what she had to do get by but I still didn't like her. She reminded me of Paris Hilton and seemed only to care about her lavish lifestyle and nothing else. Despite her self-absorption, she did not hurt anyone and did not deserve to be thrown to the wolves.

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## **Petra X says**

How is a spy like a supermarket?

When I first went to Bali, I saw billboard signs for Mata Hari and I thought wow, is there some sort of film about her life they are advertising? Then I discovered that the word for sun is matahari. Okay, but why the billboards I thought?

The very prosaic answer was just round the corner: it's the name of the largest department store in Kuta.

I don't really want to review the book, which was excellent, four and a half stars. It was about an extremely interesting, beautiful and intelligent woman who switched between extreme morality and amorality as and when it suited her. After a fascinating, adventure-filled life lived larger than most people's imaginations, she got executed.

Ok, what I really want to write about is supermarkets. I feel that a country reveals itself through its supermarkets. What you see there is how people live, their most pressing preoccupations that can be fulfilled in a retail environment will be present, their appetites, drinking habits and economic status, all are on shown in the bright lighting of a supermarket.

When I went to Bali for the first time my first stop was at the Bintang, Kuta's biggest and most modern supermarket. It caters for the reasonably well-off (think: Waitrose) and expats. The differences between it and Western ones was striking. The perishables all had their own closed-off plexiglass section which was lightly chilled to keep them in peak perfection. There were endless varieties of neon-coloured sweeties, some of them of candy-coated insects, all our candies are belong to Haribo. The merchandise section had the usual range of kitchen goods but instead of being able to buy a - say - dish drainer - in pink, you could buy it in about six shades of pink, and so it went. The sweetest section was the underclothes. There were panti-girdles with padded hips and bottoms for size 32" hips. Imagine being that slim and tiny and wanting to be bigger! I'm a size 6-8, and I need a large in Bali.

The most extraordinary thing of all though was the lack of names. My driver (view spoiler) had told me that were only 4 names for 95% of Balinese Hindus - and if I called out Made (Mah-day) I would see. Made is the name given to the second child, boy or girl, and also to the sixth and, in a big family, the tenth! So I called out Made and an awful uncountable lot of people turned round. Luckily most people have nicknames, but it does seem that very large numbers of cafes are called Made's Warung. Is this the prescribed occupation for a second child?

Then we went to a local supermarket. More surprises. There were no atmosphere-controlled rooms for the fruit and veg, there was no segregation and triple-wrapping of the stinky durian (view spoiler). What they did have was bright green bread. Pistachio-coloured. What indicates gone-off to us doesn't to them, they like their bread dyed a brighter shade of grass. There were cigarettes in soft packs bearing almost-US labels and a vast array of lighters, like the kitchenware they like them in every shade.

The beer, in six packs, was in wine-size bottles. There was a large selection of extremely cheap spirits with very dubious-looking labels that purported to come from France or the US (just like the perfumes). Indonesia is a Muslim country, but Bali is almost entirely Hindu and is the breadbasket of the country bringing in major amounts of foreign currency.

I went to the Mata Hari department store. An amazing treasure trove of a place, whose supermarket was much like Bintang but smaller and even more upscale. It had sections of pick-your-own for nuts mixed with exotic-looking dried fruits and other comestibles I didn't recognise but were cheap and sweet and Good for Me.

I love Bali, I used to do business there and go two or three times a year. If I could think up a business now that would entail trips that would end up being profitable I'd do it again.

Meanwhile, this is a book review. The book is a good one, great for a gift to someone who likes unusual biographies and for me to remind me of my supermarket obsession.

Read 24 Jan, 2012.

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### **Jennifer says**

Not bad, not great. I certainly know more about Mata Hari than I did before reading it. I give the author a great deal of credit for tracking down as much information as she did. My complaints are that the years between her divorce and 1915 are pretty much glossed over, and that I never felt that I knew her at all. I also found that I was slightly disturbed by this book, because I realized that over 100 years later women are still shamed, scorned, etc. for the same reasons that Mata Hari was.

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### **Laura says**

The subject is quite interesting since this is the first book on MH I have read.

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