

Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Santa Cruz author Carolyn Burke's biography on Lee Miller, below, is making national and international waves.

A Life and Times

Biography of Lee Miller explores exciting journey

By TOM HONIG
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It's one of the great joys of reading: a story about someone you've never heard of, giving you insight into something you didn't know you cared about.

That's the gift from Santa Cruz author Carolyn Burke, whose new biography about model/photographer/free spirit Lee Miller is commanding attention both here at home and in Europe. She will read from her book and answer questions at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Capitola Book Cafe.

The book, "Lee Miller, A Life," is a captivating read, one that raises questions in the reader's mind about how things have changed — and how they've stayed the same — in women's lives over the past century.

Burke is a biographer from an older tradition, one that explores her subject through the lens of the times in which she lived. And those times were remarkable, from the flapper era of the 1920s through the war years when Miller became a formidable photojournalist, chronicling the horrors of the Nazi death camps as they were freed by the Allies.

If You Go

WHO: Reading by Carolyn Burke of "Lee Miller, A Life."

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Wednesday.

WHERE: Capitola Book Cafe, 1475 41st Ave.

COST: Free.

DETAILS: 462-4415.

After the war her life changed again, and she set down her camera, ultimately done in by her wartime experience. By the post-war years, she was a mother and a gourmet cook (Burke graciously provides "A Lee Miller dinner for eight" as an appendix.)

But she also was haunted by her war memories, and perhaps other aspects of her singular life. She drank; she was depressed, but by the end faced her approaching death with remarkable composure.

Miller was a formidable presence, one that Burke brings to life in a slow but purposeful way.

Was Miller a feminist?

"Not in our modern terms," said Burke in an interview. However, Burke said, Miller walked her own path during her 70 years. Her childhood was shocking, even by

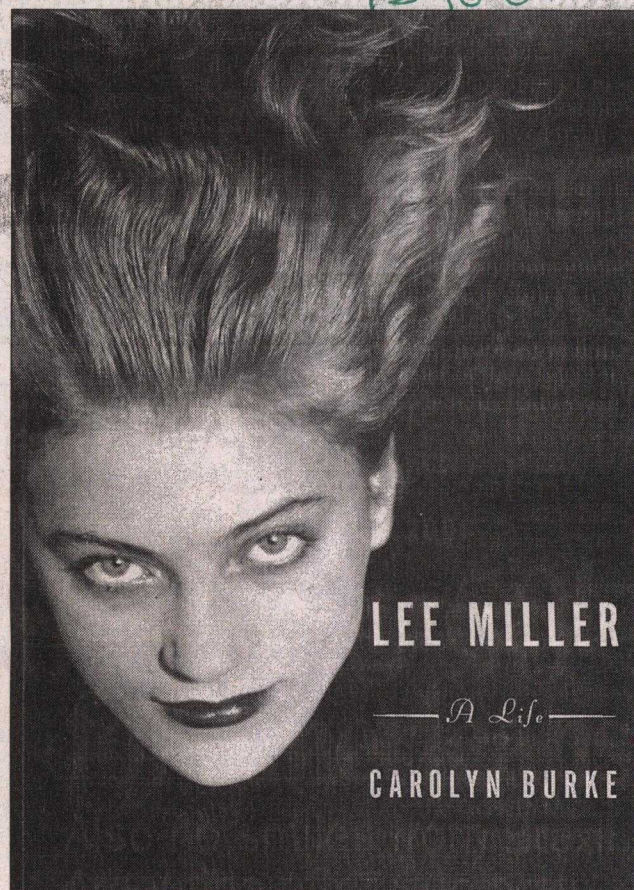
today's standards (more on that later). Her young adulthood was hardly ordinary: Her life changed one day in 1926 when she was discovered on a New York sidewalk by magazine magnate Conde Nast.

Burke met Miller in May of 1977, just weeks before Miller's death. The story of their meeting is a surprise for the reader, because Burke's biography until then is a more comprehensive and even distant look at Miller, her legacy, her photographs and even the times in which she lived.

For Burke, the meeting was memorable, but she didn't decide to work on a biography of Miller until many years later. Her memory of her subject was "that she was so down to earth. ... There was gaiety. And she was dying with tremendous equanimity."

Long after that personal connection, Burke began delving into Miller's life. Burke comes from an academic background, having taught at Princeton, UC Davis and UC Santa Cruz. But she left her academic career far behind as she worked on the book.

And, as she confesses, the work



Burke

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became a major part of her life.

The most unsettling part of the book, both for the reader and the author, stems from Miller's girlhood. At age 7, she was apparently raped. In addition, the rape was said to have given her a case of gonorrhea.

Beginning as early as the next year, the girl's father, an amateur photographer, began shooting pictures of her — including nudes.

"At first," said Burke, "I thought it was a case of incest. But in the course of interviewing (family and friends), it wasn't what it seemed. It probably didn't go so far as that, but it certainly is unsettling."

Miller's father continued to shoot nudes of his daughter well into womanhood. Those years presaged her years in Paris, as she became a free spirit, a Bohemian and the lover and muse of photographer Man Ray — among many others.

Burke portrays a young woman who proclaimed her sexual freedom even while expressing doubts about it.

"She wanted to be loved," said Burke, who went on to describe a comment from Miller that "I was very pretty, but I was a fiend inside."

It's this aspect of the biography that makes the work so fascinating for today's readers. The book has won her glowing reviews in publications as diverse as the fashion magazine *W*, the youth-culture magazine *Nylon*, the *Economist* and *The New York Times*.

"Young people are apparently latching onto the story," she said.

Woman of contradictions

For those of us unfamiliar

with Lee Miller, the story is a remarkable one. Miller was, ultimately, a woman of contradictions, of great beauty, great power and ultimately great talent. She was a woman of her times, one whose life changed along with her adopted home of Europe during the first three-quarters of the 20th century.

Burke details Miller's transformation from Parisienne to a reluctant wife of a wealthy Egyptian. The book truly takes off as Miller transforms again into a photojournalist, documenting the horrors of the blitz on London in the early war years. Then, the reader is once again astounded by the graphic descriptions of Miller as war correspondent, as she goes along with servicemen during their ghastly discoveries in German prison camps. At one horrific scene, a French doctor who was also taking pictures observes a scene of dead and dying people tumbling out of a freight car, which makes him sick to his stomach and unable to go on. "Lee took the pictures I could not take," the doctor reports.

Miller's story changes again, after that. Obviously haunted by the war memories, she puts down her camera for good. The trajectory of her life, from there, trends downward. Despite motherhood and a new role as gourmet chef, Lee Miller sinks into alcoholism and depression, her famous good looks long gone. Her second husband, the artist Roland Penrose, holds her as she dies at age 70, of cancer.

Burke says that the research and the writing about Miller became part of her life as she proceeded with the story.

"Writing the Paris chapters, especially about her relations with Man Ray, I felt how blessed it is to be close, even briefly, to someone who shares in one's creative life. (Especially) when it's deeply entwined with the

sexual/emotional."

But an even more surprising change for Burke came during her research into the war years.

"I have been a peace activist for many years," she said. "But when writing the war chapters, I came to understand the adrenaline rush, the high of

combat and the camaraderie. ... I admire her bravery and her ability to be one of the guys, the

Gl even though it proved to be too much for her once the post-war disillusionment and depression set in."

The rhythm of Burke's book builds as it goes, and reaches its

peak with Miller's war years. The final years are almost like a postscript, but the reader bids Miller farewell a bit reluctantly.

Burke's book is what biography ought to be — and too often isn't in this age of tell-all accounts and "pathographies," as some have termed them. "Lee

Miller, *A Life*," belongs on the shelf of anyone interested in how people of her generation dealt with their times. It's a memorable tale.

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