



Shocking Life

Elsa Schiaparelli

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Shiaparelli's fascinating autobiography charts her rise from resident of a rat-infested apartment to designer to the stars. This publication will coincide with 'Surreal Things' at the V&A in March 2007.

Shocking Life Details

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Author : Elsa Schiaparelli

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From Reader Review Shocking Life for online ebook

Sabrina Chapadjiev says

Listen. I love Schiaparelli. Like, a mad love. She cray, and I love her.

Was super excited to get into this autobiography, for possibly all the wrong reasons. I wanted to know how she constructed the clothes she did? How she built her fashion empire? How she dreamed up a new way of expressing femininity, whimsy and strength?

What I got instead was what I *should* have expected- a diaphanous breeze of glamour, half-painted stories, dream like parties and exquisite happenings that seemed so casual that it seemed her life had no aim but a decadent glory. Although the book jacket exclaims, 'Schiaparelli's fascinating autobiography charts her rise from resident of a rat-infested apartment to designer to the stars', it - like the entire book - ignores her aristocratic familial associations which, no doubt, leveraged her to the type of lifestyle that allowed her to fecklessly explore her own desires.

Writing from two personalities - the first person and the third person she calls, 'Schiap', who exists to her in the fifth dimension, this is not so much an autobiographic book as it is a fragrance. Much like her renowned perfumes, it captures a mood, a breezy mind-state, but despite it's word count - doesn't give the sense of fact a whirl. In fact, I encourage you to read her wikipedia page before reading this book. I wish I had before I read it.

That being said, if you're as enamored with her clothing and personality as much as I am, I encourage you to read this- to get a sense of how she thought of herself. But it is mostly fluff, and self-referential hoo-ha, she miraculously bumps into the right people all the time, and somehow launches an international brand.

That being said, I love she didn't talk business so much. I just wish she talked about her own art a bit more. But honestly, her whipped creamed existence, anchored by a true grit she rarely touches on (she vaguely admits she pretty much abandons her child), I love her spirit. Her shocking spirit, of a woman who confidently breezes in and out of a brilliant and non-apologetic existence at a time when it just wasn't done. Her stories often encapsulate the stories of others, which shows that despite her self-myth making, she was more interested in others than herself. She just couldn't help herself. And God love her for that.

Roya says

Schiaparelli was an amazing person, but her autobiography just kind of rambles on like a one-sided conversation. Her account of WW II was rather interesting and offered a different perspective on the Nazi occupation of France than I have ever read before.. I also enjoyed the account of her visit to Moscow. She alternates between writing in teh first and third person and note sin the beginning of the book that she views herself as if in a mirror. I tried to decipher when she switched personal pronouns from first to third person, but there was no consistency. Sometimes, it seemed that, in the third person, she was reflecting and in the first , she was telling an account...but that rule did not always hold. So yes...a one-sided conversation.

Marika Scerri says

The autobiography of a self-pretentious lady & her struggles through a difficult political era but nonetheless great fashion eras!

Gives you a good glimpse of what went on behind the scenes from her point-of-view, as well as how it was to collaborate with Dali!

Rebecca says

3.5 stars, graded down because the general reader is not going to be, as I was, working on a Schiaparelli talk and awash in her life and brilliant designs. Much of her tale is fascinating; all must be taken with a grain of salt. It seemed to have been written in a spirit of defensive self-justification; was she trying to convince herself she was a halfway decent parent? It's interesting that needing to provide as a single mother propelled Schiaparelli into her design career, but she seemed to enjoy her work so much that she completely neglected her daughter. I wanted to hear much more about her collaboration with Dali and Cocteau, more about her creative process, less about her furniture... More and better illustrations would have been welcome.

Shannon says

Bleh. Such a slog. The hardest part is how unlikable Schiap was. The book was chock full of her self aggrandizing narcissism, name-dropping, bragging and general conceit. I've personally had this experience when working with artists whose work I admired, only to be so disappointed when they turned out to be not very nice people. I read this book as a precursor to reading "Shocked", which was inspired by the author reading "Shocking Life". I'm not sure I will read "Shocked" now. We'll see.

Charity says

Who knew?! I picked up this book at The Met after the Prada/Schiaparelli exhibit. I was utterly surprised by how fun it was. I loved hearing about life in Europe, especially Paris, in the first half of the 20th century. Schiaparelli was such live wire, full of that mad cap self confidence of women of a certain era.

Duncan says

Interesting life but a seriously annoying and somewhat arrogant style jumping in and out of the third person. Probably not worth reading unless you are seriously interested in the minor movements of her life.

Emily says

I knew next to nothing about Schiaparelli when I started this book, except that she made crazy surrealist clothing in the heyday of modern art in Paris.

Reading the book is like listening to a rambly old lady who never stops talking. She just launches into memories willy nilly and sometimes they are boring and don't really make sense, sometimes it's almost embarrassingly culturally outdated but often it is gripping and wonderful and it makes you wish you could have been there. She is always witty and funny and occasionally spouts the kind of awesome wisdom that you just want to write in large letters and tape all over your house.

My only complaint is that being a hodge-podge memoir, I definitely got the feeling that she glossed over certain parts, left out whole years, and then made a point to include certain little anecdotes that made her out to be the victim of a grand plot (um yeah, I didn't quite follow that). It sort of made me want to read a regular biography of her to get some perspective on her life.

Marisa Berman says

I enjoyed this outlandish autobiography of Schiaparelli but I constantly wondered how much was fact and how much fiction - either way it was an entertaining read. One thing I found interesting was how she would jump between first and third person. It seems that she used third person when she was ashamed or embarrassed of the story she told. But I found it eerily reminiscent of Patrick Bateman in American Psycho...

Katie Mcsweeney says

This is a toughie to review... I think I might have hated "Schiap" if I ever met her. She name-drops like there is no tomorrow. I wonder did she choose anecdotes just so she could name names... She mentions being firm friends, lifelong friends, dear friends, fast friends... with hundreds of people. Is it possible that these people felt the same??? A good test of this might be to see how many of these famous people mention her in their biographies? The woman practically invented networking!

Her relationship with her daughter was very difficult to understand. She talks about her love for Gogo with genuine feeling but she spent so much time away from her (from infancy). She is Italian by birth but chose to be French. She seems to hold onto nothing at all... not even her beloved workshop in Paris.

She bizarrely seems to blame experimental drugs for her losing touch with the fashion Zeitgeist. She hardly mentioned her collaborations with Dali and the ONLY reference to Coco Chanel (her biggest rival) is to mention that Chanel (and a long list of other people) was at some party or other.

All that being said, she occasionally had the most beautiful turn of phrase and sometimes she really hit the nail on the head with her pithy observations (p.49 "The moment people stop copying you, it means that you are no longer any good and that you have ceased to be news."). She said herself that if she hadn't been a dressmaker she would have liked to have been a writer... now that could have led to something spectacular!!

(Bad joke, I know)

Paul lowe says

I don't know why, but I had a strange interest about Elsa Schiaparelli ever since I was a kid. My grandmother told me about the eccentric Elsa and her strange clothes. Her bio is a great book about the most important fashion designer of the 30's.

Raquel says

Am about 3/4 of the way through this, and, man, is it a slog. Schiaparelli had, by all accounts, a very interesting life: a runaway bride, deserted wife, fantastic peacock, surrealist designer who collaborated with Salvador Dali and Jean Cocteau. But her writing is stilted. She doesn't know how to convey emotion and life--it's a lot of telling, not showing. I wish someone would write a biography on her and do her life justice. (Maybe Judith Thurman?)

UPDATE: I couldn't finish it. I got most of the way through, and then had to read a few other books in between, and just lost interest. Some interesting insights into fashion/design, but not well-written, not engrossing.

Lii says

I really enjoyed this book. After reading the Dior autobiography I thought this would be all about fashion as well, however, on the contrary fashion was not the major topic in the book. It is actually about the life of Elsa Schiaparelli. Living in different countries, making friends with influential people, living through the war and having to build her business again after the war.

This book is an interesting insight into how to build a business, what life was like during her time and her insight into all of it. She has a wonderful way of looking at life.

Emily says

This was really interesting, even though she barely writes about fashion at all. I do wish she'd written at least a little bit more about her inspiration for the fantastical things she designed, and that there had been more illustrations. Instead she talks a lot about her experiences as an immigrant, as a single mother, her furniture, and about escaping occupied Paris and aiding the resistance during WWII - all of which were quite interesting. She also writes a lot about yachting and private plane capers with her pals - those parts were less interesting to me.

I love how un-self-aware she is, as she talks about how all she ever needed to achieve amazing things was

friendship - not acknowledging that this method works best if your friends are mostly rich / powerful / famous. And when she talks about her jewels being stolen she says she lost practically nothing because the diamonds and sapphires were very small. Lol. She lived in a different world, to be sure, and this book provides a tiny yet valuable window into it.

Robin Temmink says

Elsa Schiaparelli is a true social butterfly. She describes her travels as someone would describe a walk in a park. Her life as an avant-garde fashion designer mostly enchanting. I'd compare her book to Diana Vreeland's autobiography. At times she switched subjects so casually that I lost the plot, but for most of it I enjoyed the wild ride she took me on.
