



American Rose: A Nation Laid Bare: The Life and Times of Gypsy Rose Lee

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

America was flying high in the Roaring Twenties. Then, almost overnight, the Great Depression brought it crashing down. When the dust settled, people were primed for a star who could distract them from reality. Enter Gypsy Rose Lee, a strutting, bawdy, erudite stripper who possessed a gift for delivering exactly what America needed. With her superb narrative skills and eye for detail, Karen Abbott brings to life an era of ambition, glamour, struggle, and survival. Using exclusive interviews and never-before-published material, she vividly delves into Gypsy's world, including her intense triangle relationship with her sister, actress June Havoc, and their formidable mother, Rose, a petite but ferocious woman who literally killed to get her daughters on the stage. Weaving in the compelling saga of the Minskys—four scrappy brothers from New York City who would pave the way for Gypsy Rose Lee's brand of burlesque and transform the entertainment landscape—Karen Abbott creates a rich account of a legend whose sensational tale of tragedy and triumph embodies the American Dream.

American Rose: A Nation Laid Bare: The Life and Times of Gypsy Rose Lee Details

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From Reader Review American Rose: A Nation Laid Bare: The Life and Times of Gypsy Rose Lee for online ebook

Rick F. says

Quite simply- a brilliant, revealing and most important, human portrait of an American Icon. American Rose: A Nation Laid Bare: The Life and Times of Gypsy Rose Lee by Karen Abbott is one of those rare biographies that allow the reader to truly BOTH know the subject, but understand her as well. Ms. Abbott not only captures the dramatic life of Ms. Lee (Hovick) but the complex relationships with her overbearing -unstable mother and talented sister- June Havoc (Up in Mabel's Room ect). This is both a biography of a person and a history of a unique time.

AN OFFICIAL JAMES MASON COMMUNITY BOOK CLUB MUST READ

RICK FRIEDMAN

FOUNDER

THE JAMES MASON COMMUNITY BOOK CLUB

Louise says

I'm not certain who this book was written for. If you are like me and don't know the story, the mish mashed time line, the confusion of names (Rose, Louise, June, Gypsy) and the many incomplete story threads will not help you. If you know the saga of Gypsy Rose Lee, it would seem that this book would have to be far too shallow.

The uninitiated will wonder: Why is the Hovick Family story interrupted by the Minsky Family story? (You have to keep reading, but you still wonder if it was worth the space.) Is this THE Mike Todd? (If you wait till page 345 you'll know.) Was Gypsy living at the February House? (You have to check Wikipedia.)

The writing is sketchy. It may be an attempt at style, but it leaves some important episodes hanging. For instance, on p. 41, Louise, (the future Gypsy - but you don't know that yet) tells her mother who has just (presumably) signed adoption papers that if she takes her with her "I'll make up for it some way." It takes a while for the uninformed reader to figure out that Louise is Gypsy and that her mother DID take her along.

If the reader is to get a reasonable portrait of Gypsy, a lot more information is needed. For instance, the money; at various times this family earned a LOT of money and if they really pinched every penny, where did it go? What of Gypsy's play "The Naked Genius"? Did it have any life beyond the Mike Todd production? What of her other works? Very little is said about "Mama" Rose attempting to shoot her son-in-law and then wrestling with the police. Did nothing become of this attempted murder and assault on a policeman? There is a lot of attention to Ginny Augustin's death, but Rose's lifestyle at the time begs a better description. Gypsy seems to be speaking for and raising funds for the poor... was Gypsy really a Communist as is hinted several times?

At times the book feels heavily influenced by the author's interviews with Gypsy's sister.

I would not recommend this book. There are probably better overviews for the casual reader, and for informed fans of Gypsy, her genre or her times I'm sure there are better books.

Chrissie says

I will tell you why I had trouble with this book. The primary reason is that the author flips back and forth between two different time threads. One thread begins immediately after WW1 and the other during the 1940s. After each chapter you flip to the other thread. Each thread progresses forward in time. And there was nothing achieved by this - except confusion! People die and then there they are again!

Secondly, I disliked the way it was written. It is written with "show talk". OK, Vaudeville and what then became the burlesque scene and strip tease IS a world of glamor and excitement and lurid language. I, personally, did not like it. And all the dropping of names irritated me. He was there and she was there, but nothing of importance is said about the presence of these stars and famous people.

I wanted to understand Gypsy Rose Lee's life. This is a biography. She and her mother reinvented facts over and over again, so I wanted the author to explain in a clear fashion this very messy life filled with lies and inventions. The jumping between different times and numerous versions certainly didn't lend itself to clarity. Some of the sentences were unclear - so what is the author saying with that?! Also, everybody is switching names!

When you read a biography you cannot always like the person. The author must present the facts and the person as he/she really was. You can read a book about an important, but disgusting person and still like the book because the author made that person's personality and life clear. Yet here I did not find the way the story was written to be clear, and Gypsy Rose Lee is really just not someone all that important. Investing a lot of time in understanding her feels wasted, even if she was one of the most famous American striptease artists. Why do I dislike her AND her mother? Her mother in fact was even worse than Gypsy Rose Lee. Their sole aim in life was the search for money and fame, and they used people. They treated people as objects, as a means to attain their own goals. Mothers that push their own children toward glory and fame in the performing arts, when this is to the child's detriment, portray despicable behavior. Very hard to stomach. Being in their company was intensely disagreeable. Sick people. The author could have explained why they were who they were so that I could feel sorry for them, but that never happened, even if I can understand that having such a mother could destroy an individual. Having a bad mother is still no excuse for an adult's own misconduct. Please let me state clearly that their sexual conduct has nothing whatsoever to do with what I am criticizing both mother and daughter for!

Bernadette Dunne did an excellent narration. I loved the tone she used for Gypsy Rose Lee. Through her tone you heard the magnetism and the attraction this woman drew as a stripteaser.

I am glad that is over, now I can move on to something more worth spending my time on. I gave it two stars, rather than one, because I did learn about the Roaring Twenties and Vaudeville, and I do understand that perhaps due to the Depression people needed an escape valve.. The era is well depicted. The book continues to her death in 1970. Except of course at the very end it has to flip back again to the 1940s!

Raya Saab says

Overall I enjoyed reading this book and appreciated the way it shifted through time periods to really follow Gypsy's evolvment and growth as a star. I left this book with a deep pity for Gypsy and her childhood upbringing, but also an admiration of her stubbornness and determination to build the persona she wanted. The book touched a bit about the lies, deaths, scandals but it left me wanting to know more. In particular it kept me with a curiosity to know more about the crimes that occurred and how it truly tied to Gypsy. The author, through Gypsy, was able to highlight the change of times and the burlesque industry, weaving in political and economical views of the time which I appreciated.

Laurie Notaro says

Great narrative, absorbing, quite an entertaining read. The structure was a bit of a jumble, but as long as you pay attention to the date on the chapter heads, it's fine. Abbott's writing is really engaging and sometimes lyrical. I've had this book forever; so glad I finally got to it, even if I was just trying to prove that Japanese tidying up lady wrong about throwing away books that you haven't read. Ghastly thought. Only a demon would say that.

Karyl says

I've been reading this book for 4 days, and I'm only 39% of the way through. I rarely give up on a book, but I'm going to have to do just that. There are too many issues with this book for me to continue.

The biggest issue is the structure of the book. One chapter will discuss Gypsy Rose Lee's childhood, being put on the stage from a young age as a bit player in her younger sister's acts. Their mother was overbearing and at times cruel, and saw her children as a way of getting rich. But then the following chapter will jump in time to the 1940s, when Gypsy was an adult. It's really quite difficult to keep track of what's going on in the later chapters, as to why the author is even including these events. I would much preferred a more chronological structure to this book.

I also am having a difficult time of caring about Gypsy Rose Lee to begin with. The chapters about her childhood seem to be more about her mother and her sister than about her, and I feel as though the readers are only getting a superficial view of who this woman is.

What would have worked a lot better for this book, in my opinion, is a prologue of some kind which tells the reader exactly who Gypsy Rose Lee was and who many of the characters are that the author is going to introduce. I feel as though the author drops us into the middle of a story with very little introduction.

Carrie Cole says

This book starts off strong, but it stumbles pretty quickly. My main issue with the book is the fact that it jumps years and characters with each chapter. Usually I don't mind this as a device, but I think it really hurt the book in this case. Rather than getting me more interested in the story, I found myself flipping through the

book, trying to get a grasp on where the events fell in the actual timeline. While the pieces about the Minsky brothers were an interesting counterpoint to Gypsy's story, I don't think they enhanced the story as it was written. Gypsy's story itself is so interesting that more time could have been spent on her narrative. As it was, I felt like the book progressed pretty well until the last 50 pages or so, when the momentum started to tumble. It seemed like there was a rush to fit in everything that still needed to be said, leaving me feeling like I was missing out on things.

I appreciate the author's desire to be vague about some of the incidents that occurred, but in some cases I just ended up feeling confused.

Gypsy was an absolutely fascinating character, and her story is truly amazing. While I appreciate the fresh insight into many events that had never been shared before, I found myself wishing that some things were handled differently.

I'm glad I was able to read this book through goodreads.

Meiran says

The only places where this book suffered were where the author seemed to want to play coy or just dodge an outright statement. Sometimes her comments were vague, despite having major impact on the people's lives.

SPOILER ALERT

In an early story, the author describes a story where the girls are camping out and their mother hears someone in the campsite, and shoots at them. They then discover it was just a cow, and bury the body before moving on so that the owner will not discover it.

Later in the book, in a throwaway sentence, the author says "the cow that was not really a cow at all."

She moves on so quickly that you have to go back and reread the sentence time and again to be sure she really is saying what you think she is saying.

Otherwise, the story is well told and the author's decision to skip around within the time frame works well to tie in common themes and ideas throughout Gypsy's life. I also enjoyed the attention paid to the Minsky brothers story.

Heidi says

Fascinating from start to finish... watching the musical Gypsy as a young girl with my very un-Rose-like mother is one of my favorite memories of my introduction to movie musicals. Later, as a teen, I was astonished to learn that musical was based on real life. I recall (in the days before internet research) learning bits and pieces of Louise and June Hovick's early vaudeville days as well as the force of nature known as Mama Rose. However, this book is a tale for grown-ups... and after reading it, I'm not sure who I feel most sad for... this is one family shaped by both their era and their deep, often ugly, ambition and emotions. In the end, I remain as fascinated as that 10-year-old who watched Rosalind Russel play Mama Rose and Natalie Wood slip off that first glove!

Elaine says

What? You whippersnappers don't know vaudeville, burlesque and the greatest stripper of them all? Gypsy Rose Lee, her movie star sister June Havoc, and their mother from Hell make for a revealing read.

We are taken all over America as Mama puts her little girls to work on the stage wherever she can land gigs. This uncovers the sexual peccadillos of male audiences even in the heartland. Shocking. I was shocked by the bare truth.

The New York scene before and after the Crash opens up for our viewing, including the gallant role of relieving men's depression over the Depression. Night after night Gypsy undressed to make their spirits rise as she recited her own verses to the rhythm of dropping her clothing.

Gangsters, politicians, reformers, and owners of the burlesque theaters are candidly described as is the sex milieu in New York and middle America. As unbelievable as it may seem, Gypsy was not virginal

Rated R for explicit sex. Rated A as a really open book.

Rachel Aranda says

This is such a confusing book to write a review on. Ms. Abbott did a good job writing each chapter. She is definitely a practiced author. As an author though she failed to do what she said she'd do in the introduction, which was to answer questions and give an in depth look into the mind of Gypsy Rose Lee. I don't feel I learned much from this book that I didn't know before reading it, which defeats the purpose of reading the book as I wanted to learn more about Gypsy Rose Lee. With all the works she references though I have a list of other books to read about Gypsy Rose Lee if I wanted to.

One other thing that really bothered me about the chapters, while nicely written, were about different people and took place in different time periods. There was no indication of the switch off character or time period. One minute I'm reading about Gypsy Rose Lee about to perform as an established performer only to go to her mother, a man who let her perform, then back to Gypsy but as a child, then Gypsy's sister, etc. Sometimes this switch is done extremely well, like in another Ms. Abbott book about 4 women acting as spies during the Civil War, but the changing POVs just seemed sloppy.

This book could have been more cohesive had it been organized better. Think Ms. Abbott wanted to cover too many people and it made her book unlikable. Ms. Abbott also didn't deliver on her promise with this book. I can't see myself giving this book anything more than a 2.25 rating as I expected more from the author and this book.

Melanie Coombes says

American Rose is the story of Gypsy Rose Lee. She hit the vaudeville circuit at an early age and later was to become one of the most famous burlesque striptease artist of her time. The relationship between Gypsy, her

sister, June and her mother, Rose was a huge part of this story. We find out early how driven and compulsive their mother was and how her behavior shaped Gypsy's life. Once you start this story, you can't help but hate Rose for how she used and forced her children into showbiz, no matter the cost. This was such a great book. The author does not tell the story chronologically, but goes back and forth between Gypsy Rose Lee's early life in one chapter and then the next chapter takes place decades later towards the middle of her career. So you get to see different fazes of Gypsy's life in each chapter. The author's note does state that a friend described Gypsy as the "most private public figure of her time." So I often wanted to find out more of how Gypsy thought and felt, but I think even her friends and sister never really knew the real Gypsy. However, this was such a fascinating read and I will now want to read Karen Abbott's first book, *Sin in the Second City*. I won this copy thru the goodreads giveaway program and feel I really got lucky to receive such a great book, packed with so much background info and research.

V. Briceland says

Gypsy Rose Lee's rise to fame rested upon a strip-tease act in which she removed very little and left her audience hanging. Karen Abbott's biography of the forceful personality manages to do very much the same.

Half straightforward biography and half social history of the rise and fall of the American burlesque theater, Abbott uneasily alternates between a historian's documentary approach to her subjects and third-person present-tense narrations of Lee's thoughts and inner turmoils. She further muddies the waters by jumping backward and forward in time, between Lee's successful career after the events narrated in the musical and movie *Gypsy*, and the actual events that went into the heavily fictionalized and sanitized account of Lee's upbringing. Toss in the alternate narrative of the Minsky brothers and the burlesque stages of New York City, and it's a confusing, if amiable, mess.

What's disappointing about the book is that it promises to expose many of the scandals involving Lee and her domineering, force-of-nature mother. It does not. It hints heavily at murders, mob involvement, and family betrayal, but never makes good on the promise to explain any of them—not well, at any rate. Like Lee's act itself, Abbott teases at the evidence, then backs away, leaving readers uncertain how much (if anything) they might actually have glimpsed.

American Rose is highly readable, but that seems to be more a function of Gypsy Rose Lee's outsized personality than Abbott's leap-frogging narrative. And that's a shame, because instead of a nation or even a strip-tease artist laid bare, I felt like a spectator in the front row of the Minsky's Republic after one of Lee's specialty numbers—highly entertained, but aware that the artist had done little but rearrange the draperies.

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

Imagine having your very name, Ellen June, taken away from you and given to your younger sister because it was a prettier name. Gypsy Rose Lee, renamed Rose Louise after her sister was born, learned early in life to try on different identities, to reinvent herself, to hide her true self.

Imagine being that pretty little sister, forced into toe-shoes at 2 ½, years too early, dancing until your feet bled to satisfy your mother's insatiable greed for wealth and glory.

Like many people, I'd heard of the famous stripper Gypsy Rose Lee, but I knew nothing about her life. It was never an easy life, and never quite what she pretended it to be. Her mother was the ultimate bad stage mother, and her daughters were never quite able to recover from being her children, never able to have normal relationships with normal people. Gypsy Rose Lee became less likeable as she continued to invent herself.

This story is more than a biography, it is also a history of vaudeville and burlesque, of the corruption rampant behind the glitter, of some of the major players, especially the Minsky brothers. The story is fascinating.

The writing didn't always work for me. I think the book would have been better if it had been about 100 pages shorter. The author alternated between early and later periods in GRL's life. At first this worked, but then it became too choppy for me, and the story felt disjointed. Some of the writing seemed awkward and ambiguous, perhaps because the history of GRL is ambiguous, difficult to tell truth from fiction.

A great deal of research went into the writing, including interviews with sister June, and the end notes are helpful. There are numerous wonderful photos included, and I loved seeing some of the people and places I was reading about. Anyone interested in Gypsy Rose Lee or her times would find this book interesting despite what I feel are its shortcomings.

I was provided an Advanced Reader's Edition of this book by the publisher for review.

Susanne says

I promise you, read this book and you will never look at the musical *Gypsy* the same way again. You knew the Ethel Merman character (Gypsy's mother) was an eccentric over-bearing stage mother, but you didn't know she was a serial killer, too....

There is a lot of scandal lurking in this book, but some of it requires work on the reader's part - reading between the lines and uncovering the inferences the author points toward but never says. I suppose because some of the people touched by this story are still alive, declarative sentences have to be shunned to avoid lawsuits.

The structure of this book, as has been said in other reviews, is very annoying. There's no reason for the jumping timeline other than to keep the "best bits" of the story for the later chapters.

It's also sort of padded with stuff that doesn't pertain to Gypsy, but that's cool if you are unfamiliar with the era - and the book does say it's her "*Life and Times*".

If you're at all interested in burlesque and/or Gypsy Rose Lee, do yourself a favor and suffer through the timeline shifts to finish this book. It's an informative and entertaining read.
