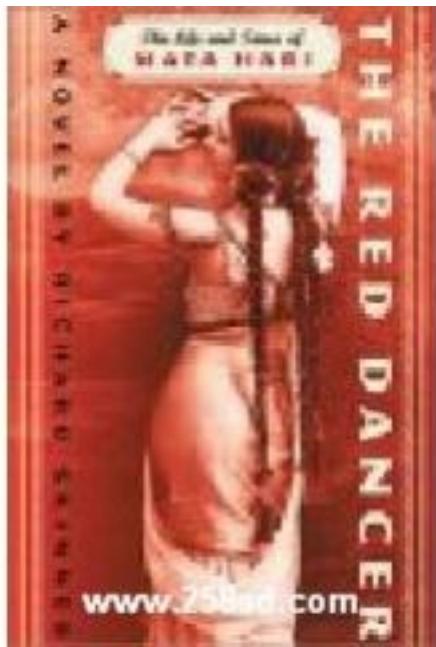


The Red Dancer: The Life and Times of Mata Hari



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From Publishers Weekly The life of WWI spy Mata Hari is examined from the perspective of the historical figures who knew her in this intriguing first novel by a British journalist. Beginning in 1895, when opportunistic Margareta (Gerda) Zelle of the Hague married Rudolph MacLeod, a captain in the Dutch army, and went with him to Indonesia, Skinner chronicles the rise of a femme fatale who eventually dined with royalty, had her portrait painted by master artists and passed herself off as an exotic dancer before engaging in a career of espionage. The novel is written in a series of linked chapters, alternately narrated by the protagonist herself, her disenchanted husband (who tells about Gerda's chronic infidelity, the death of their young son and the breakup of their marriage), one of her maids and an omniscient narrator. Ever resourceful, Gerda returns to Europe and reinvents herself as an "Oriental dancer," engaging in liaisons

with military and public figures and finally being recruited by the German espionage service. She is killed by a French firing squad in Paris in 1917. Skinner's research is assiduous, encompassing many aspects of fin de siècle European and Asian life. He incorporates in-depth explanations of Javanese musical instruments (which Mata Hari integrated into her art) and such topics as the origins of Cubism, the process of "dowsing" and the 1903 assassination of the king and queen of Serbia. Because Skinner chooses not to put himself inside his protagonist's head and maintains a dispassionate tone throughout, the tale is cool and distancing, but perhaps the legendary courtesan should remain an enigma. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. From Library Journal Skinner's debut novel portrays Mata Hari through a series of imagined accounts from people who knew her. Each provides a limited perspective on the woman who transformed herself from Margaretha Zelle from The Hague into a renowned courtesan. Sections of letters, newspaper reviews of her performances, and other documentary fragments are interspersed with first- and third-person narratives that recall her experiences in Europe and the East Indies. Essays on topics ranging from absinthe to the Orient Express to Zeppelins precede chapters that tie Mata Hari to the subject in some way. We emerge from the novel as though leaving a hall of fun-house mirrors. Each view reflects some facet of its subject, but none offers a whole picture. This ambiguity might be Skinner's point, but ultimately it is unsatisfying. The book may renew interest in the enigmatic woman, executed as a spy, but those who really want to learn about her life and times will turn to biography or histories of the era. Kathy Piehl, Minnesota State Univ., Mankato Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc. See all Editorial Reviews

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