

The Aviator's Wife by Melanie Benjamin

This book, as explained in the Author's Note, is based on Anne Morrow Lindbergh's diaries and letters with little variation or fiction added. With that being said, I had so many feelings about Anne throughout the book, throughout all of her life events and choices. What I loved about all of these strong feelings towards her, was that I realized what a "real" person she was. I also had to learn to understand that the era in which she lived, expectations for women were so different and she defied most things that were expected of her. For all the times I felt that she was weak, she came back with a stronger moment. "Charles was asked...about the technical difficulties of the challenging flight. I was asked...how I intended to set up housekeeping in a plane (Page 160)." How would I feel if I had done the exact same work and was being asked domestic questions versus professional ones? I am such an outspoken person that I'm not sure that I would be able to hold back and not do a little boasting since no one else was doing it for me. Anne had every right to demand her own attention but due to the decade, the role of women and her self-worth, I think she missed her opportunity to be greater than Amelia Earhart!

I am tempted to say that because of the era in which she lived, Anne was always flanked by the double standard of being a woman versus being a man. I am so angry that people of that time couldn't realize how heroic she was being. She was putting her life in danger too. We fail to understand how primitive flying was in the 20s and 30s. Her contribution to aviation was just as important and just as astounding. But just like society, even Anne was guilty of demeaning her accomplishments. "An eager young wife who had been shaped, just like every other eager young wife of my generation, by her husband, but I was a wife who had wanted to be shaped, had willingly put herself in his hands and demanded he make her over in his superior image (Page 283)." She wasn't looking for her limelight, she was content to live in his shadow.

One of the constant imageries in this book is that of the Paparazzi. Charles Lindbergh is barraged by photographers everywhere he goes and once he marries Anne, she becomes part of the circus as well. But the biggest tragedy from this enormous celebrity, is the death of their son. The book does take a majority of its pages to describe the crime and its result, and with good purpose. It is the pivotal moment in her life, as well as in their marriage. It is a confluence of several of their life choices: fame, celebrity, being untouchable, the Depression, and nomadic lifestyle. With the fame, everyone wants a piece of them and you can see that by the intensity of photographers following their every move, with the map to their new home and looking for pictures of their first child. Neither Charles nor Anne wanted to be famous but their hero status makes them "famous" and sought after public figures. They suspect that the kidnapping of their child is based on two factors: 1. The Depression has made people take extreme measures for money and 2. Rich celebrities are prime targets for a ransom. Plus, they are really the only celebrities of their time. This imagery of no peace or privacy does give me a greater sense of empathy for the celebrities of our time.

On many occasions in this book, I found myself wondering if Charles and Anne ever truly loved one another. Even in their courtship and engagement, there was little affection. At their wedding Anne notes: "Two hearts, in such sympathy – there was no need for words, sentimental, silly, romantic...We were too special for that. For ordinary words, spoken by ordinary couples (Page 87)." It's as if they were above it all...love and the earth. I guess that being extraordinary means you don't need everything else but I think they truly missed out on their lives because of their choice in spouses.

Another theme in this story is of betrayal. Anne says that "Betrayal is more enormous than forgiveness (Page 90)." The many betrayals that occur in this book are beyond enormous. Anne betrays Charles when she asks the Colonel to go against Charles in the kidnapping investigation. The Colonel even states that it would be difficult to go against your spouse and she simply says, "This is my child we're talking about. It was very easy (Page 208)." He betrays her with infidelity, and she does as well. They betray their marriage because they do not care for it or nurture it.

The theme of manipulation is prevalent as well. "Colonel, you are in an enviable position. You have no political standing, yet you are a world figure (Page 251)." This is the manipulation of Charles by the Nazis that gives them the credibility as a powerful nation. "I don't mean to sound vulgar...But-so far no one has dared attack you...the baby's bereaved mother, and so above reproach. Which is why you are in the perfect position, really (Page 288)." This is the manipulation of Anne by Charles to encourage the idea of treason of her country alongside him.

But, the greatest of themes in this book is that of self-discovery. Anne's self-discovery takes a lifetime but it does happen gradually. She states that: "I wished I could claim my achievements with the pride of accomplishment, but I simply couldn't (page 239-240)." Over time and with the separation from Charles' iron fist, Anne begins to realize the enormous importance of her own accomplishments. Mostly, it becomes real to her as her children begin to uncover Anne's history and undertakings. Her daughter Reeve says "You were pretty brave then, I bet (Page338)," after discovering Anne's pilots license. Anne is forced to reflect upon herself and define herself. "I was Mom. I was Wife. I was Tragedy. I was Pilot (Page 340)."

After reading this book and learning how much of it is based in reality, I can honestly say that my opinion of Charles Lindbergh has been changed. I always considered him a true hero and a true explorer but I did not know anything about his personal life other than the fact that his son was kidnapped. I can also honestly say that I knew absolutely nothing about Anne Morrow Lindbergh before reading this book and I am impressed, disappointed, proud, sad, happy...all the feels! This was a truly great story about a resilient woman who was just as brave and heroic as any man of her day...including her husband!

What was your opinion of Charles Lindbergh prior to reading this book? And after?

Why do you think the Lindbergh's decided not to tell their living children about Charles Jr.?

During the kidnapping, Anne says: "Privilege, I was not ashamed to admit at that moment, had its perks (page 55)." Should she have used it more or was this the extent of her privilege as a woman?

Did the paparazzi in this book make you more sympathetic to the hounding that famous people get in the press presently?

What did you think Charles meant when he said: "No irregularities...Our children will be pure (Page 135)"?

Were the Lindbergh's Nazi supporters? How do you view their actions at the start of WWII?

One of my favorite lines is "I was Mom. I was Wife. I was Tragedy. I was Pilot (Page 340)." How many "personas" are we that we forget to list? Anne downgraded her own importance, do you?

What was your opinion of Anne Morrow Lindbergh prior to reading this book? How did you feel about Anne at the end of the book? Did her indiscretions make her less likeable?

What did you think when you learned that Charles had other families/children in Germany?

Did you like this Historical fiction novel? Why or why not?