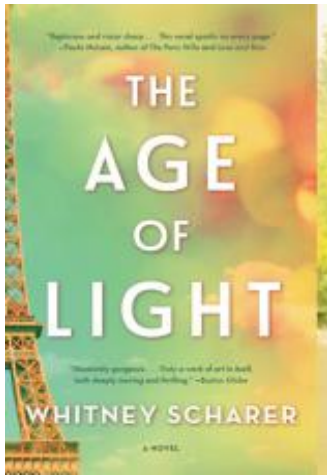

The Age of Light

by Whitney Scharer



About the Book

Told in the alternating timelines of 1930s Paris and the battlefields of WWII, this "rapturous and razor sharp" debut novel brings to light the life of Lee Miller, a little known but fearlessly original artist whose legacy remains largely unexplored (Paula McLain, *New York Times* bestselling author of *THE PARIS WIFE*).

"I'd rather take a photograph than be one," Lee Miller declares after she arrives in Paris in 1929, where she soon catches the eye of the famous Surrealist Man Ray. Though he wants to use her only as a model, Lee convinces him to take her on as his assistant and teach her everything he knows. As they work together in the darkroom, their personal and professional lives become intimately entwined, changing the course of Lee's life forever.

Lee's journey of self-discovery takes her from the cabarets of bohemian Paris to the battlefields of war-torn Europe during WWII, from inventing radical new photography techniques to documenting the liberation of the concentration camps as one of the first female war correspondents. Through it all, Lee must grapple with the question of whether it's possible to stay true to herself while also fulfilling her artistic ambition --- and what she will have to sacrifice to do so.

Discussion Guide

1. In many ways, Lee Miller is a strikingly modern heroine and she makes choices, particularly regarding her sexual and romantic relationships, that deviate from the social norms of the time. Were you surprised by her actions, and did Lee's behavior change your understanding of women from this period in history?
2. The settings in this story contrast romantic, bohemian Paris in the 1930s with scenes of war-torn Europe in WWII. In what ways did the contrast between these two places --- as well as the different settings of the prologue and epilogue --- affect your experience of the novel?

3. The expatriate, inter-War community in Paris is well known for producing numerous creative innovators --- F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Cole Porter, to name a few recognizable personalities outside this novel. Why do you think Paris at this time was so inspiring to so many individuals?

4. *THE AGE OF LIGHT* opens with Lee Miller as a middle-aged woman in England. We know she's married to Roland Penrose and is no longer working as a photographer. How did this foreshadowing impact your experience of the novel? How did this impact your feelings about Lee and Man's relationship and Lee's artistic journey as they developed over the course of the book?

5. Feelings of jealousy and paranoia play a huge role in this novel --- especially with regard to romantic relationships. Given Surrealist artists' rejection of hetero-normative culture, do you feel this envy was rightly earned? In Lee Miller and Man Ray's relationship, did one person seem to have more traditional views of monogamy than the other?

6. The novel hints at Lee's tumultuous past with her father, and his visit to Paris is exceptionally tense. How do you feel Lee's childhood history of modelling for her father influenced the way she made her art, and her relationships with men?

7. The 1930s were a period of intense political, economic and social change for Europe and the United States. The artists depicted in this novel created works inspired by pervasive feelings of anxiety and unease in the world around them. Do you feel these themes are relevant to today's cultural climate? Which contemporary artists are challenging and interrogating our current events in the same way?

8. Lee Miller experienced trauma at many points in her life: during her childhood, in her relationship with Man Ray, and during WWII. How does the structure of this novel help us understand this trauma? How are we to feel about Lee by the end of the novel? Do you see her as a survivor or as someone ultimately undone by what she has experienced?

9. Ilse Bing and Claude Cahun are two other women artists depicted in this novel. They do not readily accept Lee into their social circle and are vocal about their distrust of her and her relationship with Man Ray. Did you empathize with Ilse and Claude? Do you think these women would have been more effective in overcoming patriarchal attitudes if they had worked together? In current professional environments, what forces or attitudes do you think work in favor of women overcoming patriarchal attitudes? What forces work against?

10. Lee ultimately decides to invite Man Ray to Bal Blanc under the guise of needing his help. What does it say about Lee that she chose to confront him in such a public way? Do you think Man Ray felt sincerely sorry for his actions regarding Lee's career and their relationship? What would you have done in Lee Miller's position?

Author Bio

Whitney Scharer earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Washington, and her short fiction has appeared in the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Cimarron Review* and other journals. She's received an Emerging Artist Award in Literature from the St. Botolph Club Foundation, a Somerville Arts Council Artists grant, and been awarded a residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. *THE AGE OF LIGHT* is her first novel.

Photo Credit: Sharona Jacobs

The Age of Light

by Whitney Scharer

Publication Date: October 22, 2019

Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction

Paperback: 400 pages

Publisher: Back Bay Books

ISBN-10: 031652414X

ISBN-13: 9780316524148