



HARRI HOUDINI



CHARMIAN LONDON



JACK LONDON

From Lavender Fields to Purple Prose

Rebecca Rosenberg's Sonoma Valley odyssey and the secret sex life of Charmian London.

Story JONAH RASKIN

Readers who blush at purple passages in print might find themselves blushing much of the way through Rebecca Rosenberg's *The Secret Life of Mrs. London* (Lake Union, \$14.95), which falls somewhere between feminist fiction and chick lit.

They will blush when they read the novel's climactic scenes in which the narrator and main character, a married woman named Mrs. London, makes love with the famed magician and escape artist Harry Houdini, known in these pages as "Magic."

The *Secret Life of Mrs. London* shows what happens when a writer uses her imagination while undermining familiar icons. Rosenberg has fans, but London loyalists have rebuked her in print.

"I am concerned that fiction written

about real people can cause readers to confuse fact and fiction,” one park docent wrote to the *Sonoma Index-Tribune*. He added, “If truth is stretched too far by supposition and imagination, it can be disrespectful to the dead.”

In the big sex scene in *The Secret Life*, Charmian tells Houdini, “I need you, Magic.” He replies, “You will get everything you need,” sounding like a sex therapist who means to release her pent-up frustrations. No wonder the book is selling well in Sonoma. Rosenberg is a savvy publicist. At readings, she appears with a magician; together they cast a spell.

You can almost hear the fictional Mrs. London panting when she explains, “I never got all I needed with Jack.” She adds that her magic man loves her “in a way I’ve always longed to be loved, as a woman, not a comrade, not a muse, not a confidant. Purely as a woman.”

In many ways, Rosenberg is an ideal writer to explore the life and times of Charmian and Jack London. She’s read the biographies, including Charmian’s two-volume tome about her husband, and she knows, too, that to understand Jack one has to read between the lines, make educated guesses and go behind the scenes.

For years, Rosenberg and her husband lived in Sonoma Valley, not far from Beauty Ranch, where Jack and Charmian tried and failed to create a utopian community. Like London, Rosenberg knows what it’s like to lose one’s home. Hers burned down in the October wildfires, 104 years after Wolf House went up in flames.

She’s currently a refugee from the fires, living in La Jolla, but she’s moving back to Sonoma to go on cultivating lavender that has proved to be a far more valuable crop than the eucalyptus trees that the Londons grew for lumber and that turned out to be a lousy investment.

Moreover, while Rosenberg will never be as famous as Jack and Charmian, she gained national attention for the lavender she grew on her property next to Chateau St. Jean Winery. *The New*

York Times singled out her company, Sonoma Lavender, for praise.

With her novel, which challenges the official story, Rosenberg has plunged head first into the Jack London literary minefield. Indeed, she rejects many of the stories that docents tell at Jack London State Historic Park about the famed author’s birth, death, marriage and the Wolf House fire, too. Like Jack and Charmian, Rosenberg suspects arson, though that story doesn’t have legs where the docents are concerned.

Maybe Rosenberg is brave, and maybe a bit naive, though she majored in psychology and knows how important dreams and the unconscious can be when it comes to human behavior.

“Jack was a complicated man,” she told me. “He was not one-dimensional.”

Her book offers a kind of cubist portrait that captures ironies, ambiguities and complexities that biographers have tried to ignore.

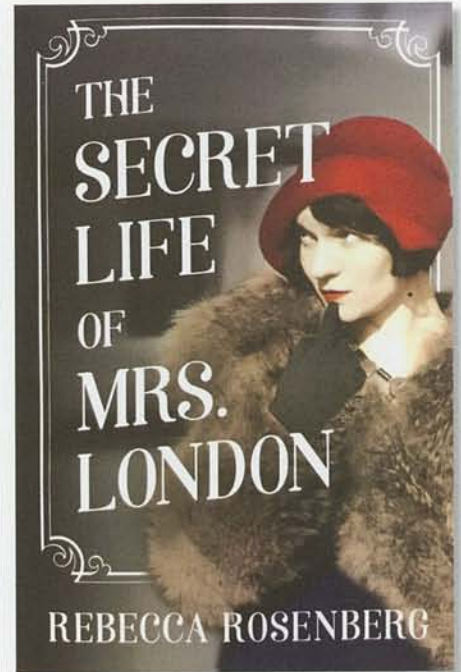
It’s a fact that Jack and Charmian London met Harry Houdini and that Charmian had a relationship with him after her husband’s death. Still, the dialogue between Charmian and Houdini, along with their magical, albeit brief love life, is the product of Rosenberg’s imagination.

London fans will probably not be amused. In fact, Lou Leal, the dean of the docents at Jack London State Historic Park, has condemned Rosenberg’s fictional account.

The Secret Life plays fast and loose with biography and history. When it suits her dramatic purposes, the author borrows freely from real life, and when it doesn’t she makes up an alternative, fictional realm in which sex and death race one another to the finish line.

In a gripping scene in the novel, Charmian persuades Jack’s doctor not to say that he died of a morphine overdose, but rather of uremic poisoning. Then, after Jack’s death, Rosenberg’s fictionalized Charmian is finally free to find love and sex with Houdini.

Those who criticize *The Secret Life* might acknowledge that Jack and Charmian fictionalized themselves in



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the books they wrote and published. Indeed, Jack created idealized women characters inspired by his wife. Charmian created a fictionalized version of her husband in her two-volume biography.

Perhaps Charmian didn't know what she was doing. She didn't marry Jack until 1906, when he was already 30 years old and three-quarters of the way through his life. By that time, he had made up all kinds of stories about his origins and his parents. Perhaps he himself didn't know what was true and what wasn't.

"The paradox of social existence, to be truthful, we lie, to live true, we live untruthfully," London wrote in 1900 to Anna Strunsky, a Russian-born Jewish socialist and Stanford student who rejected his marriage proposal.

Was Jack as inadequate a lover as Rosenberg suggests? Was Charmian starved for sex all through her marriage, and did Houdini finally provide her

with the pleasures she had never experienced before? We will never know for sure, though *The Secret Life* certainly offers plenty of food for thought.

We might remember that in her diary, Charmian kept track of her sex life with Jack, though she didn't provide graphic details. They did have sex, though less frequently as the years passed.

Jack planned to write a book he called "Jane Barleycorn," about his own sexuality, but never did, because it would not have suited his image as a rugged naturalist.

Why did Rosenberg write her book?

"There are a great many biographies," she told me. "But no novel about them. I was inspired to create Charmian as a character after I read her biography of Jack." She added, "People are more likely to read a novel than a work of nonfiction."

Novelists are free to make up stories. Readers are free to ignore them. Any-

one who takes *The Secret Life* as fact and doesn't appreciate writers who imagine the unimaginable, might lighten up and not rush to defend Jack and Charmian, who need no defending after all these years.

More than 100 years later, London's novels still call to readers, especially his masterpieces, *The Call of the Wild*, *Martin Eden* and *The Valley of the Moon*, that tells the story of a modern marriage between a boyish, pugilistic fellow named Billy and a sexy, mature woman named Saxon who seems very much the image of Charmian London.

Jack London was far wiser about women and womankind, at least in the pages of his fiction, than even he imagined. ☾

Jonah Raskin is the editor of The Radical Jack London: Writings on War and Revolution.

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