

Martha Gellhorn

A celebrated author, an avid traveler and a distinguished journalist, Martha Ellis Gellhorn was one of the first female war correspondents. In a career that lasted for more than five decades, she covered many of the crucial wars and disputes, literally changing the face of war reporting. She also received a lot of acclaims for her work as a fiction and travel writer. Born to parents who had liberal ideas about society, politics, gender and education; Martha Gellhorn was automatically inclined towards intellectual awakening and strived towards developing insights that would induce her to establish an equal standard for women, both at professional and societal level Her personal life also garnered a lot of attention because of her brief but stormy marriage with Ernest Hemingway. As a woman she was way ahead of her time and left no stones unturned to progressively proceed in her profession, thereby challenging, breaking and mending the rules and perception of society towards woman.

Childhood & Early Life

- Martha Gellhorn was born on 8th November 1908 at St. Louis, Missouri. Her German born part-Jewish father, George Gellhorn was a gynecologist and her mother Edna Fischel Gellhorn was a suffragette.
- They were four siblings, Martha being the only daughter and the third child. Her brother Walter became a pre-eminent law professor at Columbia University and younger brother Alfred was an oncologist who became the dean of the University Of Pennsylvania School Of Medicine.
- She went to a co-educational institution named John Burroughs in St. Louis and completed her schooling in 1926. After that she joined Bryn Mawr College but did not complete her graduation, leaving the course midway to pursue a career in journalism.

Career

- In the field of journalism, she started with '*Times Union*' of Albany as the only female reporter where she worked for six months. After that she worked for '*The New Republic*' where she got her articles published for the first time.
- In 1930, she moved to Paris to advance her career as a foreign correspondent. There she worked at the '*United Press*' for two years during which she associated herself with the pacifist movement.
- After working in Paris for two years, she came back to the United States where she was recruited as a field investigator for the 'Federal Emergency Relief Administration' (FERA) and she was to travel around America and report the effect of Great Depression on the country. While working as the field investigator for FERA, Martha Gellhorn met photographer Dorothea Lange and together they documented their findings which were included as the official government records of Great Depression.
- In 1937, Martha Gellhorn got her first war assignment to cover Spanish Civil War for Collier's Weekly. After that she reported on advance of Adolf Hitler in Germany and

subsequently reported on World War II from Finland, Burma, England, Singapore and Burma.

- In 1944, on the D-Day Normandy Landings, where female correspondents were not allowed out of safety reasons, she slipped into a hospital ship to cover the operation. She was the only woman to cover the landings on that day.
- Next year i.e. in 1945 she reported the liberation of infamous Dachau concentration camp and subsequently reported the Nuremberg trial for the '*Atlantic Monthly*'. Till date the detailed and ghastly report of the camp is considered to be the set standard of authentic and prudent journalism
- Even after the end of WWII, Gellhorn continued with her aggressive war reporting. After covering the Indo-China war, in 1966 she reported the Vietnam War for the London '*Guardian*' and covered the Six-Day Arab-Israel war, the next year.
- Old age did not deter her from her work. In 1980s she went to El Salvador to cover the American civil war and in 1989, at the age of 80, though her health was faltering, she still reported the US invasion of Panama.
- With the onset of 1990s she declared her retirement owing to aging and worsening health conditions. However, in 1995 she travelled to Brazil to report the plight of the street children there living in extreme poverty. Prior to her death, this was her last noteworthy write-up.

Major Works

- While Martha Gellhorn was working in Europe, she actively supported and took part in the pacifist movement, the experience of which she penned down in her novel '*What Mad Pursuit*' (1934).
- She had done a significant work as a field investigator for 'FERA' and eventually had stirred up some powerful friendships as well controversies. The account of all these are found in her fiction novel '*The Trouble I've seen*' (1936).
- She had written some eye-opening articles while reporting wars such as '*The Face of War*' (1959) which provides a deep insight about the incidence and consequences of wars; '*The View from the Ground*' is a write-up on peacetime.
- Martha Gellhorn's travelogue of her travel experiences with Ernest Hemingway called '*Travels with Myself and Another: A Memoir*' (1978) is one her finest travel writings.

Awards & Achievements

- Her reporting of the Normandy landings of D-Day holds a lot of significance in journalism. She was the only woman to be covering the operation. In 1999, in her honour Martha Gellhorn Prize for Journalism was established.
- In 2008, United States Postal Services chose five persons to be honored with first-class rate postage stamps. She was the only lady among the chosen ones.

Personal Life & Legacy

- In 1930 while working in Paris, Marth Gellhorn met journalist Bertrand de Jouvenel at the age of 22 and a affair started between the two. But the two could never get married because Jouvenel's wife's refusal to grant divorce.
- In 1936, she met Ernest Hemingway in a holiday trip. An affair started between the two and they got married in 1940. But the marriage soured and culminated into separation after four years.
- While working in FERA, she found the likes of Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of Franklin D. Roosevelt and a lifelong friendship developed between the two women. However, her reports also ignited a controversy owing to which she was fired from her job.
- In 1954, Martha married TS Matthews, the managing editor of '*Time Magazine*'. However, this marriage also ended into a divorce after around 10 years of togetherness.
- In 1969, she adopted a boy and named him 'Sandy' but owing to her hectic work schedule and her freedom seeking nature, the mother-son relation also could not bloom properly.
- During her last years, she was suffering from many health conditions. On 15th February, 1988 she committed suicide.

Cause of Death: Suicide

Personality: Ambitious

Character Traits: Competitive, Go-getter, Maverick and Ballsy

Challenges Faced: Abortion, Divorce and Depression.

References

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