



Wormwood Star: The Magickal Life of Marjorie Cameron (Revised Edition)

Spencer Kansa

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In the first-ever biography written about her, *Wormwood Star* traces the extraordinary life of the enigmatic artist Marjorie Cameron (1922-1995), one of the most fascinating figures to emerge from the American Underground art world and film scene. As well as illuminating her early childhood and wartime experiences, the book offers a fresh perspective on the role she played in the infamous Babalon Working magick rituals, that were conducted by her husband, the maverick rocket scientist and Aleister Crowley disciple, Jack Parsons, and the future founder of Scientology, L Ron Hubbard. Following Parsons death in 1952 from a chemical explosion, Cameron inherited her husband's magickal mantle and embarked on a lifelong spiritual quest, a journey reflected in the otherworldly images she depicted, many of them drawn from the Elemental Kingdom and astral plane. The biography also takes an in-depth look at Cameron's artistry and film appearances, and features reminiscences from the many artists, poets and movie star friends she inspired along the way. With so much of her life and work shrouded in mystery, *Wormwood Star* sheds new light on this most remarkable artist and elusive occult icon.

Wormwood Star: The Magickal Life of Marjorie Cameron (Revised Edition) Details

Date : Published May 1st 2014 by Mandrake of Oxford (first published January 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9781906958602

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Format : Paperback 304 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Philosophy, Thelema, Biography, Occult



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Tosh says

First of all Cameron was an excellent friend of my Dad and Mom. And second, its weird for me to read a biography on a family friend. But saying that, this is overall a good introduction to Cameron and her work. She was (or still is) a fascinating character - and as a big part of the Jack Parsons story it's an essential read for anyone interested in Magik or the the cult world.

The beauty of Cameron's life and work is that she had one foot in the Occult, and the other in the arts. I think both worlds were equal footing for her. The big drag about this book is the actual printing of images and photos. They're terrible. Probably due to some printing mistake and no money to fix it - but nevertheless an important book to have in your library.

i think also that there will be other biographies coming out on her, because she is just too interesting to be an obscure figure. There are certain people not interviewed for this book that makes it interesting in a 'hmm' way. No Kenneth Anger interview, no one from the OTO, nor from her estate as far as I know. The publishers were not allowed to print any of her artwork (which could be a blessing considering the printing of the book) - but alas, Kansa did a good job in research and the book is totally readable and super interesting. Get it before it disappears!

Marisa says

I gave it the high rating I did because I was very happy to finally see a biography of this fascinating woman, and it contains much information that has never been previously revealed. However, I am left wondering if anyone bothered proofreading or editing this work. Parts of it are very poorly and amateurishly written, which detracts enormously from the book's impact. It almost reads like an unedited rough first draft. For example, I found very irritating the author's habit of transcribing his interview subjects' statements absolutely verbatim, awkward sentence structures and all (I'm surprised he also didn't include all the "ums," "uhs" and "ers"). And if they laughed while talking, he simply tacked "ha ha ha" onto the end of the sentence: "...It seems like a lot of men Cameron lived with went over the deep end ha ha ha." I was also left wanting to know more about Cameron's daughter Crystal. She's a wild undisciplined child, then suddenly a wild undisciplined teenager, then suddenly she's married with a child, then suddenly she's wandering around the neighborhood naked, then suddenly she has a bunch of wild undisciplined children herself. There is no connective tissue holding these fragments together, unfortunately. At any rate, Kansa certainly did his homework as far as the bulk of Cameron's life is concerned, especially her early life and her marriage to Jack Parsons, so the book is definitely worth reading for that alone. I would like to see a second, more tightly edited edition of this work.

Meredith says

Her life was a perfect example of "Bad choices make good stories". Jack's death dogging her so hard for so many years was terribly sad. But then again, it probably had a lot to do with making her the person she was.

And hey, she ended up living next door to Exene Cervenka in what seems to be a perfect example of what someone called the 'convergent evolution of awesome'.

I really wish that the photos would have been of higher quality and there would have been more pictures of her art. All in all a solid biography of an unusual person who knew and influenced a lot of unusual people.

Richard says

I really enjoyed this book. It fills in a lot of blanks between, "Strange Angel" by George Pendle "In The Center of the Fire" by James Wasserman and "The Unknown God" by Martin P. Starr.

Mogg Morgan says

(ps I am the publisher so maybe expect some bias)

Even so - great book and love the new photographs, the new material and the author interview. Ps This time round there is a Kindle edition which is v popular platform

Sarah says

This wasn't very well written but that wasn't even really the problem. Too little narrative and too much mythologizing by people who knew her. Like it's not that illuminating to read about one acquaintance after the other who found Cameron very witchy. I think maybe a scrapbook of her artwork and some discussion of her magick work would have been a better legacy project? Although I gather she destroyed much of her artwork. It lacked some gravitas somewhere. :/

Otto Hahaa says

Cameron oli okkultistinen taiteilija, jonka elämä oli aika rankka. Tämä hänen elämäkertansa on melkein hyvä. Selvästikin kirjoittaja on tehnyt paljon työtä etsiessään ihmisiä ja selvittäässään Cameronin elämänvaiheita. Olisi vain toivonut, että mukana olisi ollut myös innostunut kustannustoimittaja. Nyt kirja on vähän halvan tuntuinen ja viimeistelemätön: Fontti on tylsä ja osa kuvista on pikselöitynyt tai muuten vääristynyt. Virheitä ja lapsuksia löytyy, kertovat Amazonin arvioijat.

Cameronin elämä oli monimutkainen ja rikkinäinen, se ainakin tulee selväksi. Maailmassa on muitakin ihan hyviä taiteilijoita, jotka eivät ihan täydellisesti breikanneet elämänsä aikana, ja joita muut taiteilijat muistelevat lämmöllä ("the artists' artist, i.e., poor", sanoi eräs toinen eräässä toisessa kirjassa.), mutta Cameron onnistui törmäämään ja vaikuttamaan aika moneen läntisessä Amerikassa vaikuttaneeseen ihmiseen. Tätä olisi voinut kirjassa välillä vähän selventää, keitää kaikki nämä henkilöt oikein olivat? Ketkä pitää etsiä internetistä/wikipediasta, ketkä ovat tärkeitä lähinnä siksi että kirjoittaja haastatteli heitä?

Tarina ei ole hagiografia, vaan Cameronin typerätkin teot käydään läpi (siksikö kirjaan ei saanut laittaa yhtään kuvaaa teoksista? joku pahoitti mielensä?). Kirja tuntuu vain välillä kasalta anekdotteja, eikä

kokonaisuus hahmotu. No, voi olla, että kokonaisuutta ei ole, ihmisen elämä ei ole selkeä suunniteltu draama. Cameronin elämässä sattui likaakin melodramaattisia asioita, jotka olisi luovan kirjoittamisen kurssilla suositeltu editoimaan pois.

Mutta monet Cameronin teokset löytyvät kuvahaulla. Ja paljon on joka tapauksessa tuhoutunut, erinäisistä syistä. Cameron itse otti asian tyynesti, koska teoksista on kuulemma kopio astraalitasolla. (Välillä jää epäselväksi, kuinka paljon Cameron puhui sekavia (huumeissa tai mielenterveyden järkkyessä), kuinka paljon oli vakavissaan, ja kuinka paljon vain esitti tehdäkseen vaikutuksen. Tähänkään ei ole varmaan vastausta.)

Claire says

A competently written (he could really use a proofreader!) biography of a fascinating woman, one who brings together so many worlds: Anais Nin, Dennis Hopper, L. Ron Hubbard and Bob Hope all pass through the strange occult web Cameron tossed over California in the late-1940s through the Beat 50s and into the hippy 60s. Cameron provides an interesting lens for understanding the underground forces of these decades.

S Suzanne says

fascinating partner to the book I just read about Jack Parsons...

Would love to see a book of her artwork. Marjorie Cameron was a witchy wind pushing towards the beatniks and hippies - a wild precursor like Maya Deren (in her wildness) with whom she crossed paths at parties in CA in the late 40s.

Seems to have been a terrible mother - so anxious to have a starchild - and then wanting to continue "doing what thou wilt".

Fearlessly (and heedlessly) pressing her outre visions on a trepidatious public.

Own this and will be checking back through it - Thanks Remy Norton for telling me to read it!

Recommended for those interested in the Jack Parsons inner circle of occultism, Aleister Crowley, or the Hollywood underground of the 40s - 60s.

Also for those interested in women who follow the inner voice - rebels and witches.

Cameron was willing to live in very poor conditions (for herself and her child) in order to focus on her artwork and avoid the machinery of modern careers.

Frank Tiernan says

Just finished the updated edition of 'Wormwood Star', a can't put if down job if ever there was one. Excellently researched and written so that it reads like an exciting novel. One of my all time favorite bios. Way up there with 'American Hipster' by Hilary Holladay, 'Perdurabo' by Dr. Kaczynski and 'Call Me Burroughs' by Barry Miles. Thanks Spencer, for keeping your promise of a revised edition, which made me hold off on rereading the first edition, and for an extremely entertaining read. Don't be surprised if I reread the new edition.

Tim Pendry says

This is a competent biography of a minor but iconic figure in the Californian artistic 'scene' of the post war years.

Margaret Cameron is particularly iconic to anyone who has seen Kenneth Anger's 'Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome' where she plays the Crowleyan 'Scarlet Woman' to great effect.

Her role is not merely theatrical - she was, indeed, the Scarlet Woman in Jack Parsons' 'Babalon Working' of 1946, a magickal ritual with a strong sexual aspect that was undertaken without the approval of Crowley.

Having noted this, she was also an unstable and mostly irresponsible woman who was probably deeply damaged by the sudden death by fire of Parsons. It is intriguing that accidents to others and to artistic materials by fire were a constant minor theme of her life.

She would probably not merit enormous interest in herself, especially as so little of her art work survives (though I consider what does remain to be significant in a certain female and occult context) if she was not at a very interesting place at an interesting time.

Her story starts as the classic tale of the small town misfit who finds her way to California but it also gives us insight into that transitional period when displaced and war-damaged young people were uprooted and then forced to come to terms with civilian life.

Many twenty-first observers tend to see the 1960s as a cultural explosion that had little connection with the disruption caused by the second world war - nothing could be further from the truth.

Very young people twenty years before were either traumatised or came across the traumatised and had experienced a military discipline that they both chafed against and yet were obliged to obey.

For most Americans, it was a case of swallowing their pain and knuckling down to the new job opportunities that were made available thanks to generous training allowances and the expansion of the cold war military-industrial economy.

Unlike the men who came out of the first war, the men (and women like Cameron) who came out of the second could enter into a job and a boom. They did not talk about the violence and easy sex of war time but they could eat well and be sheltered in close communities if they wished.

But the traditional picture of two decades of Eisenhower conformity is not a complete one. Many individuals took their pay-out and sought freedom - and California provided that opportunity.

Cameron met Parsons there. He was very much one of the early creators of military-industrial technology (as a rocket scientist) much as the leading cultural edge today is taken by internet pioneers.

Being a top technologist in a leading edge sector is not at all incompatible with cultural creativity. The traditional arts/sciences split is an unhealthy European historical phenomenon that has still not entirely been overcome.

This connection saw her enter a peculiar world of science fiction writers, practising technicians and creative artists that was prepared to explore transgression, sexual and cultural, in total defiance of American norms.

The book is thus full of counter-cultural cameo appearances - not only Anger but Curtis Harrington and Dennis Hopper, not only the Beats but Anais Nin and other sexual and altered state experimenters, many also damaged by war and (in the older cases) pre-war poverty.

War damage is certainly a theme - not just from the second world war but Korea. We will also see Vietnam war damage as infecting the culture of the 1970s just as we are now seeing Afghan and Iraq war damage affecting our current culture.

In some ways and as always, plus ca change - change the forms and the content but the style of the damaged and their transgressional ways tends to repeat itself in both creativity and self-destruction.

The difference is that this generation was not swallowed up in a working city but were part of something like a pioneer culture as the American West was industrialised under huge governmental stimulus.

For this reason, the book is worth reading as an introduction to a world between one great war and one great social upheaval when some exciting but unstable personalities thought unthinkable things and did things that few other cultures would have permitted.

One is left with a problem here. Instinctively non-judgmental, in every chapter I am left with the problem of assessing whether the creativity was worth the pain and the pain the creativity.

These are searching and unsettled people. It is no accident perhaps that Parsons' circle spawned three religions all of dubious import but all of some influence.

Parsons was instrumental in constructing a peculiarly American version of Thelema that would almost certainly not have impressed the very English Crowley. Later, radical libertarianism would morph into LaVey's carnival satanism but this cannot be put down to Parsons.

Alongside Thelema is L. Ron Hubbard's half-cynical Church of Scientology which some Governments would like to label as 'criminal' but that is far too simplistic an assessment. Europeans and hacktivists hate it but it is an authentic expression of an anomic culture.

And then there is the less direct and possibly more benign influence of Robert Heinlein on the Church of All Worlds which leads us into the magical world of new age polyamory, neo-paganism and environmentalism.

We might add the various UFO cults who owed their existence to a confluence of science fiction and magical

thinking, the spiritualisation of altered states and the somewhat fantastic interpretations of indigenous Indian shamanic practice.

In all these last, Cameron was to dabble as if these pot-pourri of ideas were naturally to be successively linked in a chain of absurdities and ignorances.

From out East also came the beats and the artists. Cameron played a Zelig-type role appearing somewhere in all these stories. This is why her story is interesting - giving flashes of insight into what comes to appear like a total chaotic system.

To observers from outside, all this appears both fascinating and absurd. We Europeans tend to see it for what it is - transgressional transcendentalism'. These people are fully infected with Walt Whitman.

But to complain would be like complaining about Chinese order or European cynicism - a waste of time. This madcap culture drew together the disturbed of a whole continent into one zone and it is natural that they should come to feed off each others' instabilities.

The upside was massive psychological creativity - often nonsense but not always. Parsons' 'Three Essays on Freedom' remain a startling statement of cognitive libertarianism that bears re-reading.

My own view is that, if Parsons had lived, he might well have 'grown out of' his early naivete and given some 'bottom' to the libertarian Californian impulse. The 'Three Essays' are humane, nothing like the violent Conan-like imagery of Crowley, always a Victorian late-imperialist in tone.

There is no sign that Parsons was intrinsically irresponsible and a non-cynical ethical libertarianism might have acted as counterweight to the harder lines of Ayn Rand and Heinlein.

But this was not to be. He died - then great creativity, intrinsic nuttiness, irresponsibility and narcissism all grow by stages in this biography until we reach the 1970s and what is really a form of cultural melt-down.

By this time, intelligent transgression and libertarianism has degenerated into a world of 'shell-shocked beasts' (p.226) who hug trees, believe in nonsense like the 'mother goddess' and can't remember any more why they use drugs.

Spencer Kansa is to be commended for his hard work in not only digging out material related to a woman who seems to have been particularly careless with evidence (no surprise there!) but getting personal testimonies from the now aged participants in the events.

There is an irritating 'nervous tic' where he inserts 'ha ha' for a laugh but this is a small complaint. The book is well written and solid with excellent visual material, although curiously with no pictures of her art which one assumes relates to copyright problems.

As for Margaret Cameron herself, I think she deserves her minor iconic status. I was struck by the range of physical change in her over time (almost as if this was not the same woman) and at certain brief points in history she seems to 'be' the counter culture.

I am not persuaded that she was a particularly nice or intelligent woman but the book was worth writing and publishing and perhaps, one day, an account of this culture might be written by someone who is both fair-minded and will not be enamoured of Whitmanesque musings.

Kansa plays it straight in this by-way of American history and for that we should be grateful.

izzy strazzabosco says

im so happy this book exists!

Abbymerrick says

Reductive and cliche-ridden to the point of absurdity, the redeeming portions of this book are prolonged interview excerpts with Cameron's friends and associates. Despite the author's asinine, extensive editorializing, semi-objective glimmers of Cameron's actuality occasionally emerge.

Essentially, loved the subject, hated the presentation. Alas this seems to be the only extant biography of a complex and elusive cultural icon. Can someone else please pick up the trail and address Cameron as both a private individual and iconoclast in a nuanced way?????

Michael Dreimiller says

I read this looking for a different perspective of her husband Jack Whiteside Parsons. The writing style did nothing for me. It is well researched and lots of interesting people cross paths with her but I had a hard time getting through this book.

Carla Remy says

A biography of Marjorie Cameron, widow of the underground legendary inventor of rocket fuel/Crowley Satanist/buddy of L. Ron etc Jack Parsons. I've read a couple books on Jack so I knew of Marjorie and was thrilled to find this bio, and learn about her fascinating life after Jack blew himself up (was murdered?) in 1952. I knew she legendarily starred in Anger's Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome, but didn't know she also appeared in Night Tide, a movie which apparently gave Dennis Hopper his first starring role. Choosing to go by the name Cameron alone, she was known as a witch but also a painter. A very interesting story of an odd, compelling woman, and a look at L.A. in the 50s and early 60s.

This book was well-written and thoroughly researched with high class quotes (Hopper, Dean Stockwell --- hey, it just occurred to me they're both in Blue Velvet).

However, it lacks slightly in professional editing. He says Highland Park is a section of Pasadena, and having lived there myself (for unfortunate years) no, I'm pretty sure it's L.A. Maybe it was different in the 50s but I doubt it. Anyway, one can't expect the writer to know everything, and these locales are right next door to each other, but this is something a good editing would have caught. I only mention this because its just a coincidence that I even know this fact So what of assertions in the book I don't coincidentally know about?

Of course this is a deep underground book: on top of everything else it's about a woman that wasn't famous. Also the art of editing may be shrinking. But aside from my obsessive detail-oriented copy-editing nature, I

feel like this book is pretty great and Spencer Kansa deserves better editing but I'll accept it and I'll still give this 5 stars.
