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Too strong for fantasy

Marcia Davenport

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Too strong for fantasy Marcia Davenport
"I always meant to be a writer from my earliest recall", writes Marcia Davenport in her memoir, "Too Strong For Fantasy", "and like all such people I lived from infancy in the world of stories and books, most of them fantasy. When I began to outgrow fantasy, history seized me by the throat and has held on ever since. History is inseparable from place and politics and political men". The daughter of the great lyric soprano Alma Gluck, and the step-gaughter of the renowned violinist Efrem Zimbalist, Davenport's earliest memories are of music and of Arturo Toscanini, whom she calls "the dearest friend that I have ever had". She began her writing career at the age of 25, on the editoral staff of "The New Yorker", where she knew Harold Ross, E.B. White, Wolcott Gibbs, and James Thurber. Davenport's passion for music and for history led her to write a biography of Mozart, the first by an American; published in 1932, it has never been out of print. Encouraged by the great Scribner's editor Maxwell Perkins, she then wrote five novels, including "The Valley of Decision," which is her best remembered. In the 1960s, at an age when "detachment and a sense of humour temper an undue preoccupation with oneself", she wrote this autobiography. Davenport provides superb descriptions of Toscanini in action - for years she attended not only his every performance but his rehearsels as well. Her account of working with Maxwell Perkins is the most precise explanation of how Perkins drew the best from an author. Through her husband, Russell W. Davenport, who became managing director of "Fortune" and "Life", she mingled with America's political elite and became an active participant in the 1940 presidential campaign of Wendell Wilkie. Much of "Too Strong For Fantasy" concerns Czechoslovakia, a country and people she came to love. Ironically, because of her long and close friendship with Jan Masaryk, the foreign minister of Czechoslovakia who died mysteriously in 1948, and her moving account of his death, the communist government suppressed the book. It has only recently been published in Czech. In "Too Strong For Fantasy" a perceptive writer re-creates an era of unequalled excellence in music, and of passionate political conviction, set against the back-drop of a world torn by war and distorted by communist ideology.

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