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Very Much A Lady: The Untold Story Of Jean Harris And Dr. Herman Tarnower



Synopsis

A classic tale of true crime, now an HBO film titled *Mrs. Harris* starring Annette Bening as Jean Harris and Sir Ben Kingsley as the Scarsdale Diet doctor! Jean Harris belonged to the last generation of Americans brought up to believe that nice girls get married. But her love affair with Dr. Herman Tarnower went on for fourteen years without a marital commitment. One night Jean Harris, the prim headmistress of an elite girls' school, shot the famous Scarsdale Diet doctor to death. Was she a jealous woman bent on revenge? Or the desperate victim of a Dr. Feelgood who kept her enslaved by drugs and passion? In this incredible book, acclaimed journalist Shana Alexander exposes the dark truth behind the killing, the high drama of a sensational trial, and the fate of a complex woman doomed by her love and her own desire.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Shana Alexander's *Very Much a Lady* and Diana Trilling's *Mrs. Harris: The Death of the Scarsdale Diet Doctor* are complementary books about a fascinating case: the murder of Dr. Tarnower by his lover Jean Harris. It is Jean Harris' motive in killing Dr. Tarnower that interests these two writers. Jean Harris was neither psychotic nor particularly violent. In some ways, she seemed the classic

example of the woman wronged. In other ways, she seemed the classic example of the 1950s woman coping uneasily and unsuccessfully in the changed world of the 1980s and in still other ways, she seemed the eternal victim of circumstance. Both writers agree that the punishment did not fit the crime. Mrs. Harris did not intend to kill Dr. Tarnower and in law, intent does matter. Shana Alexander spends more time than Diana Trilling in exploring the mistakes made by the defense (such as their refusal to plead to a lesser charge), and she is more critical of the prosecution. Both writers, however, are primarily interested in Jean Harris' character. Their differing approaches regarding the latter are at the heart of these similar, yet ultimately distinct, books. Shana Alexander is an objective partisan. She is honest about Jean Harris' flaws, but it is clear both from her tone and the accumulation of biographical information that she considers Jean Harris not as a victim but as a basically sane and not unlikable human being pushed beyond her limits by her culture, her background, her medical history and her own psychology. She doesn't exculpate Jean Harris but neither does she condemn her. Diana Trilling, on the other hand, is far less partisan and far more critical. She sees in Jean Harris a woman who sacrificed her intellectual integrity for a sordid affair. She is disgusted by Mrs.

Very Much a Lady by Shana Alexander is the immensely readable story of Jean Harris. For anyone who has lost track of yesterday's headlines, Harris is the headmistress of a girls' school who shot and killed her lover, Herman Tarnower, a respected cardiologist who authored the best-selling *Complete Scarsdale Diet Book*. To this day, Harris maintains that the fatal shooting of Dr. Tarnower was an accident that occurred when the doctor fought with her over the gun she planned to use to kill herself. Alexander traces of the lives of Harris and Tarnower from childhood on and sees the seeds of destruction planted early on. The same character traits which brought them together as lovers doomed them to a terrible ending. Harris's relationship with her impossible-to-please father formed her early identity as a "good girl" and led to her need for a dominant male image to shore up her shaky sense of self. The classic overachiever, Harris had to excel in any project! she tackled. She craved stimulation which she failed to get from her brief first marriage to a decent but unexciting man. Harris divorced him and began a fourteen-year-long love affair with Dr. Tarnower. The latter was a dedicated physician with old-fashioned attitudes toward women. There is one puzzling aspect to the tale that deserves fuller attention than Alexander gives it: Harris's religious background. According to Alexander, Jean Harris's Mom was a devout Christian Scientist. The irony of Jean's passion for a doctor should have been examined in light of the Christian Science beliefs into which she had been indoctrinated during her childhood--but this is ignored by Alexander. The jury rejected

Harris's version of events and found her guilty of murder.

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