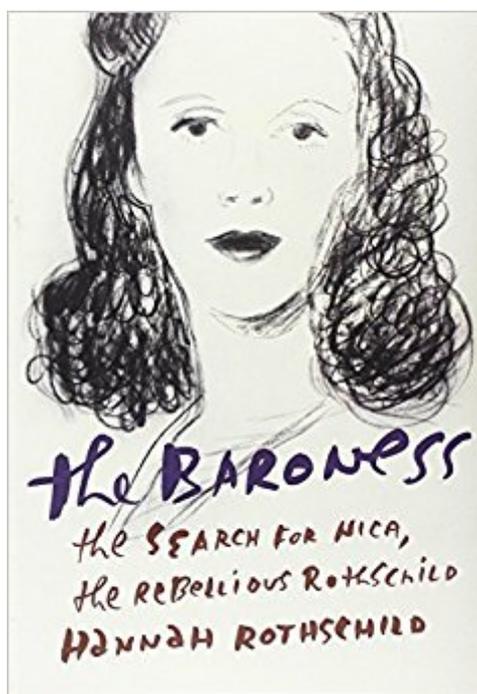


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# The Baroness: The Search For Nica, The Rebellious Rothschild



## Synopsis

Beautiful, romantic and spirited, Pannonica, known as Nica, named after her father's favorite moth, was born in 1913 to extraordinary, eccentric privilege and a storied history. The Rothschild family had, in only five generations, risen from the ghetto in Frankfurt to stately homes in England. As a child, Nica took her daily walks, dressed in white, with her two sisters and governess around the parkland of the vast house at Tring, Hertfordshire, among kangaroos, giant tortoises, emus and zebras, all part of the exotic menagerie collected by her uncle Walter. As a debutante, she was taught to fly by a saxophonist and introduced to jazz by her brother Victor; she married Baron Jules de Koenigswarter, settled in a chateau in France and had five children. When World War II broke out, Nica and her five children narrowly escaped back to England, but soon after, she set out to find her husband who was fighting with the Free French Army in Africa, where she helped the war effort by being a decoder, a driver and organizing supplies and equipment. In the early 1950s Nica heard "Round Midnight" by the jazz pianist and composer Thelonious Monk and, as if under a powerful spell, abandoned her marriage and moved to New York to find him. She devoted herself to helping Monk and other musicians: she bailed them out of jail, paid their bills, took them to the hospital, even drove them to their gigs, and her convertible Bentley could always be seen parked outside downtown clubs or up in Harlem. Charlie Parker would notoriously die in her apartment in the Stanhope Hotel. But it was Monk who was the love of her life and whom she cared for until his death in 1982. Hannah Rothschild has drawn on archival material and her own interviews in this quest to find out who her great-aunt really was and how she fit into a family that, although passionate about music and entomology, was reactionary in always favoring men over women. Part musical odyssey, part love story, *The Baroness* is a fascinating portrait of a modern figure ahead of her time who dared to live as she wanted, finally, at the very center of New York's jazz scene.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

My interest in music is extremely eclectic and my interest in Thelonius Monk has happened slowly over the last decade. I am ambiguous about labelling Monk a genius but acknowledge his importance in the evolution of music (jazz if you must apply a label) So the main reason for buying the book was to learn more about Monk and the music that he composed, played and also influenced in the period of the 1940's and 1950's. What I experienced in the reading was much more than an insight into Monk and that period. The majority of the book focuses on the period from the mid 19th century to the mid 20th century. The succinct history of the Rothschild Empire is mixed with the landscape of Europe, United Kingdom, America and other countries impacted by in particular the great wars. Overlaying this is the evolution of Jazz music set in context of the era and the geography. It is not limited to but flows from Louis Armstrong through Duke Ellington onto Monk, Miles and Bird. Yet whilst it is an excellent historical summary on many levels it also is an emotionally engaging read. I connected with Nica and her family and the musicians - the connections with Nica and the musicians was more often than not uncomfortable. The connection however was raw and real. I came away with an ambivalent feeling about Nica - suspended with feelings of admiration, empathy and frustration but still wanting to know more. Highly recommended

I bought this book with minimal expectation. I expected a book about a wealthy family who had opportunities that possibly most people don't have. What a surprise this book turned out to be. Even though this book is about Nica, the rebellious Rothschild, the branch of the family discussed in this book were all amazing people who are to be admired, especially Nica, the main protagonist. Sure they had money to follow their dreams and pursuits, which most of us don't have, but they had courage to defy expectations. I found this book beautifully written, I could not put it down. I read it on my kindle, but I found it unsuitable for the kindle because I could not follow the family tree, which I often needed to refer back to.

If you are a jazz fan and enjoy the bop era, do not miss this. Even if you are not, this is more than a jazz story. It is Nica's story. And, it is more than that. It is the story of Hannah's search for her

fascinating black sheep of a great aunt. I have a policy of not spending much time with stories of wealth or power, but when someone steps out like Nica did, it is well worth learning about. In the process I learned a bit about the humanity of members of a wealthy and powerful family. We can only hope that more such people step out and learn about the humanity of the rest of us. But I digress. This book is great fun to read - a detective story, a jazz story, and a family story. Told by an excellent writer and documentary producer. I bought it in print to be sure I could see the pictures well. They are all black and white of course, and all interesting, but the 2 page spread of Nica at the wheel of her Bentley convertible out front of the Five Spot, with Monk standing at the passenger door is priceless.

One of the Rothschilds has written a very sensitive and loving, though quite objective, biography of another member of her famous family. It must not be easy to write about someone in your [extended] family when you are a member of the same one. Nevertheless, Hannah Rothschild has created a story with wide reach into the political and social worlds of the early 20th Century, as well as the idiosyncrasies of some of the Rothschilds. Pannonica really became "Nica" when jazz tunes were written for her; and she must have revelled in that, since Nica seems to have been a much happier person than Pannonica. The fearlessness, and even recklessness, with which Nica immersed herself into what was really a totally different culture to the one she grew up in, is wonderfully told; a subtle but powerful testament to the draw of timeless musical art. She might have been "the rebellious Rothschild", but she was also an important patron of an original art form. If you enjoy the book, you should also seek out "Straight, No Chaser", the Monk documentary where she appears, all too briefly. In the end, Nica was as quirky a character as the writer of the music she loved so much - Thelonious Sphere Monk.

For the first 100 pages, I would have ranked this book as three stars, and only then because it was historically interesting. After that, though, Hannah picks up the jazz and the real musical culture that drew Nica in, and I was hooked. I received this book as a Goodreads First Reads giveaway, and I think I expected it to be more of a work of fiction. I'm not sure I knew what it was when I started. It is a biography, and it reads as a biography. At times it's a bit tedious, but even though Nica's heart and soul may never be fully known, Hannah shows us a world that is both beautiful and heartbreaking. It's beautifully written, and I've learned so much from this book. It takes a minute to really get into it, but I would definitely recommend this book.

Hopefully, Hannah Rothschild will win an Oscar for the movie that is long overdue; if there's anything to criticize—I'd have liked to see more about Hannah hanging out with about as unique a character as you could find—Pannonica transcends fiction. This is an excellent history of the Rothschild's, as well—and 24 songs about Pannonica just isn't enough. How do you top the relationship she had with Thelonious Monk? You don't.

Nica is one of the people I would have loved to have known. She was fearless, yet tender; eccentric, yet a pragmatist; wealthy and generous; intellectual, yet soulful. This woman is an unsung hero in the history of jazz. Hannah's writing captures her life well even though the reader wants to know details about her jazz coterie that are lost to history. Great read. Belongs in any serious jazz collection.

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