

# Transatlantic

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*Transatlantic*, the seven-episode Netflix series, portrays an especially intense moment in European history in the early days of the Second World War. In the gorgeous port city of Marseilles, France, at first in the sumptuous Hotel Splendide, then in the magnificent if dilapidated Villa Air-Bel, two wealthy, privileged Americans, Varian Fry (Corey Michael Smith) and Mary Jane Gold (Gillian Jacobs), are working for the fragile Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), struggling to save refugees from the Nazis. Thousands, rich and poor, many of them Jews, are fleeing to Marseilles. Among their charges are some of the continent's most distinguished artists, intellectuals, and revolutionaries, including Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, André Breton, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst, Lion Feuchtwanger, Jacques Lifschitz, Arthur Koestler, Wilfredo Lam, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Alma Mahler, Golo Mann, Max Ophüls, Victor Serge, and Franz Werfel.

The series, based on the novel of the same name by Julie Orringer, depicts the work of Fry and Gold as they attempt to procure visas and ship berths for the illustrious refugees. They wheedle and cajole to get visas from the American consul, whose real name was Hugh Fullerton, but is here called Graham Patterson (Corey Stoll). The real consul, much like his boss Cordell Hull and the Roosevelt administration, had little interest in helping Jews escape Europe to America. In the series, Patterson—an arrogant, conservative, and vapid careerist—is chiefly interested in retiring from the diplomatic service and getting a job with IBM. Fry and Gold have to evade the French police chief (Gregory Montel) who is working ever more closely with the Nazis. Luckily the protagonists are aided by vice consul Hiram Bingham, who though not authorized to do so, provides them a slew of American visas. In the Hotel Splendide, they have the assistance of two Black employees from French colonial Africa. Whether in the often carnivalesque atmosphere of Villa Air-Bel, filled with Surrealists, in the oppressive prison Camp des Milles, or in shoot-outs on the highway, we are presented with an engaging fictionalized account of that moment in Marseilles.

People from all over Western Europe who were fleeing the Nazis in 1940 had been poured into a funnel, at the bottom of which was Marseilles; its small opening was sometimes clogged, sometimes flowing into the Mediterranean, which usually led to survival and freedom. France itself had been conquered by the Nazis in June 1940. In the South of France, administered by the collaborationist

Vichy government of Marshal Philippe Petain, the Nazis had not yet imposed their totalitarian regime, leaving some possibility for daring action. In Marseilles, one could still get a ship to Portugal and from there to the Caribbean and the United States, Mexico, or South America. The passage to salvation was periodically blocked by foreign governments, whose ambassadors and consuls refused to issue visas; by shipping companies that declined to take on passengers; and by the Vichy government, whose police cooperated with the Nazis as they rounded up Jews, Communists, and other “undesirables.” This all lasted until the South of France too was taken over by the Nazis, who closed the port in 1942. But in that year and a half, Fry and Gold and their crew saved some 2,000 lives.

Not surprisingly, the story told in *Transatlantic* has been told many times before in novels and films. Babelio, which publishes lists of books on certain themes, lists four dozen memoirs, histories, novels, all in French, under the heading “Passage to Marseille 1940-42”—and that doesn’t include the books in other languages or any of several films. Some earlier novels cover much the same ground as Orringer’s *Transatlantic*. Communist author Anna Seghers (née Anna Reiling) published the excellent novel *Transit* in 1944, portraying the refugees as broken, ruined, and their situation tragic. It is a book still well worth reading. Jean Malaquais, a Polish Jew born Wladimir Jan Pavel Malacki, an author admired by Leon Trotsky for an earlier novel (*Les Javanais*) published *Planète sans visa* in 1947, perhaps the most realistic fictional account of the refugees in the port. More recently, Rosemary Sullivan published *Villa Bel-Air: World War II, Escape, and a House in Marseille* which, much like *Transatlantic*, is well researched, and mixes tragic and comic elements. But it was Orringer’s popular American novel *Transatlantic* that creator and producer Anna Winger, the writer and producer of *Unorthodox*, chose as the basis for her mini-series.

Winger’s series goes beyond some other literary and cinematic accounts in several ways. Politically, it depicts not only Fry, Gold, and the ERC, but also the beginnings of the anti-fascist resistance, while anticipating what will become the post-war anti-colonial struggle by the peoples of the French colonies in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the Caribbean. These are important political additions to the way the story has sometimes been told.

Psychologically, the film touches our emotions in many ways. We become concerned about individual migrants, such as leftist philosopher Walter Benjamin (Morit Bleibtretu). Orringer’s and Winger’s account goes further than others have in portraying Varian Fry’s actual closeted homosexuality through a fictional relationship with the character Thomas Lovegrove (played by Amit Rahav, whom some may remember as the groom Yanky Shapiro in *Unorthodox*). That’s well done and admirable. The series elicits concern for Mary Jane Gold who is pressured to have sex with the awful American consul if she wants his help for the ERC. And we feel sympathy for her as she falls in love with the idealistic German Jew (and future renowned economist) Albert Hirschman (Lucas Englander). We commiserate with Paul Kandijo (Ralph Amoussou), who falls in love with Lisa Fittko (Deleila Piasko), the guide who takes people across the Pyrenees into Spain, but whose husband is in a nearby prison. And we worry for Paul, his brother, and others as they attempt to free prisoners being sent off by the French authorities to German camps.

Unfortunately, while the historical moment is great, as so many others have recognized, the writing, by Winger and a half dozen others, is sometimes disappointing and perhaps because of the directors (Stéphanie Chuat, Véronique Reymond, and Mia Meyer) the acting is quite uneven. Gillian Jacobs as Mary Jane Gold doesn’t seem quite right at first, though she seems to gradually grow into the role after a couple of episodes. Carole Stoll who plays the American consul has been nominated for awards in other roles, but here gives a broad performance and is unconvincing. Similarly, though less bad, is Michael Corey Smith’s portrayal of Varian Fry, which seems artificial. Gregory Montel, a terrific actor whom we know from “Call My Agent,” gives a performance of a French police chief that verges too close to Peter Sellers’ Inspector Jacques Clouseau. On the other hand, Amit Rahav’s

portrayal of Thomas Lovegrove is restrained and sensitive, and Ralph Amoussou's part as Paul Kandijo wins us over. In some cases, the problem is not the actors but the characters who seem to have been gotten wrong by the writers. Victor Serge (Emanuel Salinger), the courageous revolutionary and brilliant writer, is made out to be rather an old fool, though he was far from it. Still, whatever their individual strengths and weaknesses, the eighteen actors who make up the ensemble give creditable performances and as a whole keep our interest.

The film's splendid cinematography takes advantage of Marseilles' beauty, the Mediterranean light, and extraordinary settings: the Fort Saint-Jean, the posh Hotel Splendide, and especially the romantic ruin of the Villa Air-Bel. The Villa becomes the setting for the Surrealist artists' storytelling, games, and parties, all created by the film crew's creative artists and costume designers. All of this is engrossing, charming, and sometimes quite funny.

We see famous artist and intellectual refugees in this film, but we get little insight into the thousands of others waiting in the port. What the film seems to miss might have been found in the books of Anna Seghers and Jean Malaquais; that is, the poverty of many of the refugees, their hand-to-mouth existence, the daily search for a visa and a ship berth, and pervasive sense of fear. Yes, we see police arresting people, some violent attacks, and prisoners being taken off to the camps. Yet, those scenes don't fully convey the terror of the period. Maybe that's because, as Winger says in *Making Transatlantic*, an account of the production that follows the seven episodes, she thinks of the series as a "screwball melodrama" in the style of films of the 1940s. Perhaps that's why we never feel the dread and desperation that most of these refugees felt.

The work of Varian Fry and Mary Jane Gold and their colleagues was heroic, and we have to be glad to again be reminded of that cause, brought to a mass audience of millions. Though the lens is a little too rosy when, even in bright and beautiful Marseilles, it should be more a smoky gray. As the filmmakers note in *Making Transatlantic*, they created the film just as Russia invaded Ukraine, giving it a particular poignancy as millions of refugees are seeking safety from an authoritarian, imperialist power once again.