

Esther...Who?

Going through some Lion 21 "FEATURE" covers, I did a double take upon coming across this cover. The woman looked like Esther Williams, but the cover says Esther "Gage" and doesn't make any reference to any movie-star status, so I looked up her biography, and, sure enough, she *was* Esther "Gage" during her second marriage...

Williams was born in 1921. She was enthusiastic about swimming in her youth. She was National AAU champion in the 100 meter freestyle. She went to Hollywood, where she quickly became a popular star of the 1940s and 1950s.

Many of her films, such as *Million Dollar Mermaid* and *Jupiter's Darling*, contained elaborately staged synchronized swimming scenes, obtained not without physical cost to the performer. She broke her neck filming a 50 ft (15 m) dive off a tower during a climactic musical number for the 1952 release *Million Dollar Mermaid* which landed her in a body cast for six months. She subsequently recovered, though she still suffers headaches as a result of the accident. Her many hours spent submerged resulted in her rupturing her eardrums numerous times. In her autobiography, Williams details several other occasions in which she nearly drowned shooting her oxygen-defying stunts; she rarely used a stunt double.

Her love life was a source of media interest. She has been married four times. She met her first husband Leonard Kovner while at Los Angeles City College. She later wrote in her autobiography *The Million Dollar Mermaid* that "he was smart, handsome, dependable...and dull." They were married in Los Altos on June 27, 1940. They divorced in 1944.



She married singer/actor Ben Gage in 1945, with whom she had three children. In her autobiography, she portrays him as an alcoholic parasite who squandered her earnings. She also disclosed in her autobiography that she had a passionate affair with actor Victor Mature while they were working on the film *Million Dollar Mermaid* (1952), citing that at the time her marriage was in trouble and, feeling lonely, she turned to Mature for love and affection, and he gave her all she wanted. She was romantically linked with Jeff Chandler, but broke off the relationship when she discovered that Chandler was a cross-dresser, which she revealed for the first time in her autobiography. She and Gage divorced on 20 April 1959.

She then married former lover, Argentine actor/director, Fernando Lamas on December 31, 1969. They were married till his death from Pancreatic Cancer on October 8, 1982. She currently resides in Beverly Hills with actor husband Edward Bell, whom she married on October 24, 1994.

Esther Williams retired from acting in the early 1960s and currently lends her name to a line of women's swimwear and to a company that manufactures swimming pools and swimming pool accessories. She co-wrote her auto-biography "The Million Dollar Mermaid" with popular media critic and author Digby Diehl, which was published in 1999.