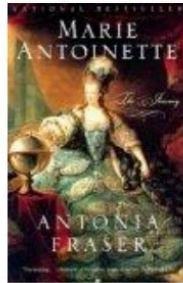


Marie Antoinette: The Journey by Antonia Fraser



Fabulous, Historical

In the past, Antonia Frasers bestselling histories and biographies have focused on people and events in her native England, from Mary Queen of Scots to Faith and Treason: The Story of the Gunpowder Plot. Now she crosses the Channel to limn the life of Frances unhappiest queen, bringing along her gift for fluent storytelling, vivid characterization, and evocative historical background. Marie Antoinette (1755-93) emerges in Frasers sympathetic portrait as a goodhearted girl woefully undereducated and poorly prepared for the dynastic political intrigues into which she was thrust at age 14, when her mother, Empress Maria Theresa, married her off to the future Louis XVI to further Austrias interests in France. Far from being the licentious monster later depicted by the radicals who sent her to the guillotine at the height of the French Revolution, young Marie Antoinette was quite prudish, as well as thoroughly humiliated by her husbands widely known failure to have complete intercourse with her for seven long years (the gory details were reported to any number of concerned royal parties, including her mother and brother). She compensated by spending lavishly on clothes and palaces, but Fraser points out that this hardly made her unique among 18th-century royalty, and in any case the causes of the Revolution went far beyond one womans frivolities. The moving final chapters show Marie Antoinette gaining in dignity and courage as the Revolution stripped her of everything, subjected her to horrific brutalities (a mob paraded the head of her closest female friend on a pike below her window), and eventually took her life. Fraser makes no attempt to hide the queens shortcomings, in particular her poor political skills, but focuses on her personal warmth and noble bearing during her final ordeal. Its another fine piece of popular historical biography to add to Frasers already impressive bibliography. --Wendy Smith

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Though I'm not what you'd call a seasoned history buff - French history, in particular - I can confidently say that Antonia Fraser's *MARIE ANTOINETTE: THE JOURNEY* is the definitive biography of Marie Antoinette. It's hard to imagine that any historian can top this exhaustive look at the life and death of France's most infamous Queen.

Fraser traces Marie Antoinette's life, from privileged birth to tragic death, in great detail. (The story actually begins well before Antoinette's birth, with a look back at the Princess's ancestors, and ends not with the Queen's beheading, but with the fate of her daughter, Marie-Thérèse-Charlotte.) Fraser makes extensive use of contemporary documents, most notably correspondence between Marie Antoinette and her friends and relatives, including her mother, the politically ambitious Maria Theresa. She also cites - sometimes critically - the work of historians before her. The result is a keen, nuanced examination of the life and legacy of Marie Antoinette, to whom history has not been kind.

While Antoine was, like all people, a flawed individual, she was far from the she-devil caricature drawn by her opponents. The Queen did waste the taxpayers' money on all manner of frivolities; but then, so did her husband and other assorted members of their royal circle. (Indeed, much of this expense went towards traditional or customary labor and favors; had she tried to do away with these French traditions, the Austrian-born Queen would have been vilified just the same.) Born into privilege, she knew little of poverty, famine, or hard labor - the lot of most of her subjects. Most damningly, she actively defended France's monarchy, positioning herself directly opposite freedom and democracy.

Even so, Marie Antoinette was a scapegoat, a receptacle for the political unrest, violence and hatred of the time. Much of the criticism directed at the Queen was predictably gender-based: she was at once stupid and frivolous - and a political mastermind capable of manipulating and cuckolding the King; a cold, frigid lover, the source of her husband's impotence and/or asexuality - and a ravenous, insatiable whore, who either engaged in orgies with men or women, depending on whom you believe. (At her trial, she was even accused - along with her sister-in-law - of sexually abusing her own son!) Pamphlets of the time depicted the Queen in all states of undress and sexual positions, and her physical appearance was often a topic of discussion. Naturally, her body - or rather, the contents of her womb - was also a point of public interest, as her primary job was to bear France the next King. Sound vaguely familiar? (Hence the title of this review, which could just as easily read Hillary Clinton in muslin.)

Marie Antoinette was the victim not just of misogyny, but of xenophobia as well. Prior to Princess Antoinette's marriage to the Dauphin, Austria and France were rivals. The future King Louis XV had been raised on tales of those evil Austrians, a factor perhaps contributing to his initial indifference

towards his new wife. The Princess drew no small amount of suspicion as an Austrian upon her marriage to the Dauphin, and the hatred and discrimination only grew with her unpopularity. The Queens loyalties were often called into question, despite the many sacrifices she made in order to become the Mother of France. (Imagine being forced from your family and homeland, thrust into a strange place with no friends or allies, and treated like the states baby machine. The Queen may have been privileged, but she was also very much oppressed.)

At 544 pages, MARIE ANTOINETTE is a hefty book; so much so, in fact, that I probably wouldnt have read it had it not been available in audiobook format. Even so, it took me also a month to finish the audiobook, which clocks in at over 20 hours. Frasers take on Marie Antoinette is astute, informed and fascinating. Even so, I dont think I would have made it through the print book. English is my primary language, and with no training in French, Im certain that I would have found the French (and Austrian) names, places, words and phrases difficult to enunciate and follow. Donanda Peters makes for an engaging and charming narrator, transitioning from French to Scottish accent with ease.

My only real complaint is in Frasers coverage of Frances political climate during Marie Antoinettes reign. Fraser does talk politics, but these discussions are usually framed and presented in terms of Marie Antoinettes life, as a sort of backdrop. With no real foundation in French history, I found this rather confusing and choppy, but again, Im a novice - history buffs will probably come to the table with all the background knowledge they need.

That said, I think hardcore history buffs and novices alike will enjoy MARIE ANTOINETTE: THE JOURNEY. The book is rife with feminist undertones (Fraser seems no stranger to patriarchy blaming!), so methinks it might make great leisure reading for feminist-minded women, as well. I look forward to devouring more of Antonia Frasers political biographies!

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