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Marie Antoinette: The Portrait Of An Average Woman



Synopsis

Originally published in 1932 and for decades since one of Stefan Zweig's most popular biographies, this portrait of an average woman, betrothed at fourteen, crowned queen at nineteen, and beheaded at thirty-seven, aimed not to deify, but to humanize. Supplementing library and archival research with psychological insight, *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman* is a vivid narrative of France's most famous queen, her relations with her mother Empress Maria Theresa, her husband Louis XVI, and her lover Swedish Count von Fersen, set against the backdrop of the French and Austrian courts of the ancien régime, the French Revolution and the Terror... the biography to end all biographies on Marie Antoinette ... [Zweig's book] possesses all the qualities of the excellent biography — directness, frankness, full exposition, picturesqueness, characterization, color and delectable readableness. — The New York Times — Powerful, magnificent, poignant — The New Republic — A stupendous and superb piece of work. — Chicago Daily Tribune

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Customer Reviews

This biography was the first well researched effort to present the life of the unfortunate Marie

Antoinette in alignment to the facts and also adding psychological insight. Prior to this effort all renditions tended to idolize her as a martyr or deride her as the personification of all the evils of the old regime. She was neither of the two, but as correctly assessed here, a quite ordinary, uneducated woman that led an extraordinary life due to the historical components that surrounded her fate as a member of a ruling house. Not just ordinary, she was also very naive and not at all intelligent, as when she arrived in France it took seven years for her to get pregnant and it would have taken more had her brother not pushed the husband into the operation that he desperately needed to be able to perform. This is an incredible contrast with a similar situation encountered, much earlier by Catherine de Medici when she married Henry II and did not get pregnant for several years, but Catherine was a Medici and she found a solution to that problem, and all the others that came with her long reign. It is not the youth and lack of experience that were as important as the willingness, the initiative that is missing from her character. This is also the reason that she was almost illiterate when she arrived in France, as shown by her primitive handwriting when she signed her marriage document. The book is particularly accurate in relating the transformation that occurred in this otherwise ordinary woman when the sufferings of the Revolution brought out a character of great depth and tragic dimension that completely stole the limelight from the Revolution with her tragic trial and execution.

I owned a copy of this book in my teens, but somewhere along the line it was lost, strayed or stolen. My primary reason for acquiring a new copy was nostalgia; I also wanted my collection to include all the books I could identify about this tragic woman. Readers should be aware that Zweig's work has long since been superseded, and rightly so. Zweig was a novelist and cultural writer, but he never studied historical method and was heavily influenced by non-historians, with the almost unavoidable result that his work on Marie Antoinette, though an excellent "read," is deeply flawed as a work of history. Zweig was a friend and associate of Sigmund Freud, and his biography of Marie Antoinette bears the imprint of Freud's ideas, which were new and invigorating when Zweig's study of Marie Antoinette appeared (1932). Zweig's thesis, that sexual frustration in the seven years of the queen's unconsummated marriage led to her flighty, spendthrift behavior, is unmistakably Freudian in its inspiration. That alone would not limit the book's credibility, but in his eagerness to offer an intellectually "modern" interpretation of Marie's life, Zweig juggled his evidence, highlighting documents that would support his theory and suppressing others available to him that contradicted it. The most blatant example of this historical fudging involves the explanation Zweig advances for Louis XVI's failure to consummate his marriage for seven years. At the beginning of Chapter 2,

Zweig quotes a letter to Madrid from the Spanish ambassador at Versailles; because of the text's intimate nature, early editions of Zweig's book discreetly left the letter in the original Spanish. It reports gossip that Louis' foreskin was tight and inelastic, so it could not retract properly and made intercourse painful.

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