Marie Antoinette: The Journey by Antonia Fraser

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

My Personal Review:
This is only the second book that Ive read by Antonia Fraser, the other one being her last, Faith and Treason. Although I enjoyed that book well enough (for Fraser is a very capable writer, able to both capture and hold the readers attention), I was more than a little uncomfortable with the obvious bias that shone through an otherwise excellent treatment of Englands Gunpowder Plot. I was hesitant, therefore, about purchasing this one; but as it turned out, I thoroughly enjoyed this 488-page hardcover (with 429 pages of actual text). I found it to be enthralling, captivating, eye-opening, informative, and insightful, making it a joy to read and a book that
I could not wait to get back to. Additionally, it is amply illustrated (48 pages, mostly colour), and I found Frasers treatment to be fairly thorough (though perhaps not quite so thorough as Ive come to expect with Alison Weirs books). Most importantly, I came away from the book with not only a greater knowledge and understanding of (not to mention sympathy for) one of the most famous women in history, but a much deeper understanding of the French Revolution and of the various factors leading up to it.

Fraser does write in a manner that is sympathetic to Antoinette. I do feel authors of historical subjects ought to be as objective as possible; perhaps, though, it is as Fraser says: [I]s [looking without passion] really possible with regard to the career and character of Marie Antoinette? (p. 422). This was a woman who, in her lifetime, was either greatly admired or vehemently loathed (sentiments which dont seem to have softened much with the passage of time). More significantly, however, this was a woman who was clearly maligned. Like the rest of us, she had her faults (which are certainly not glossed over by Fraser), but surely no one who has even an ounce of compassion (whether he or she be detractor or admirer) could think that this woman deserved the callous treatment she received and the abject humiliations to which she was subjected.

Antoinette appears, in spite of her faults, to have been primarily a compassionate and kind-hearted (if not overly intelligent) woman. Nevertheless, she had the misfortune of being by accident of birth of royal blood (and Austrian blood at that) and, by the machinations of a domineering mother, queen consort to the king of France at a time when the French court was, in essence, an opulent fish bowl. As a result, Antoinette had the additional misfortune of being at the mercy of libelists intent on her destruction (at a time when there were obviously no libel laws). With reference to Louis XVI, Fraser makes a comment equally applicable to Antoinette: She was hated, not for what she did, but for who she was (ie. a foreigner and a representative of the old order). Any legitimate faults she may have had were, it would seem, merely surplus to requirement for a woman who already had more than enough black marks against her.

Those who think that horror and tragedy are the domain of novelists would be well advised to think again. Just as fiction can scarcely approach the horror of recent world events, there is nothing in the realm of fiction that can even come close to the attitudes, injustices, abominations, and humiliations that occurred during the French Revolution to humankind in general and French royalty in particular. If youve steered clear of history books before for fear that they must, by necessity, be dry and boring, I cant recommend this book highly enough. And if youve enjoyed it, I strongly recommend Stephen Cootes highly-readable Royal Survivor (on the life of Englands Charles II) or anything by Alison Weir. For me, this book has awakened a hunger to learn more about late 18th century Europe and some of Antoinettes more colourful contemporaries (such as England`s George III and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire).