Marie Antoinette The Journey by Antonia Fraser

Thoroughly Engrossing Biography

Author Antonia Fraser gives us a detailed, engrossing biography of Marie Antoinette. Frazer's work is well-documented and scholarly. She provides sufficient background information to put the historical events in context, but does not allow the facts to hinder the flow of the story. Her writing has an immediacy that pulls the reader so deeply into the story, it is easy to forget that we already know the ending of this historical life. Through Frazer's eyes, we first sympathize, and then empathize with the princess who only became queen by accident. In addition, Frazer gives us a thorough education in the social order at Versailles, the complex bureaucracy (and attendant jobs) of the French court, and the political infighting that ultimately was the downfall of the French court.

My Personal Review:
This is only the second book that I've 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 reader's attention), I was more than a little uncomfortable with the obvious bias that shone through an otherwise excellent treatment of England's 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 Frazer's treatment to be fairly thorough (though perhaps not quite so thorough as I've come to expect with Alison Weir's 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 don’t 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 (i.e. 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 you’ve steered clear of history books before for fear that they must, by necessity, be dry and boring, I can’t recommend this book highly enough. And if you’ve enjoyed it, I strongly recommend Stephen Cootes highly-readable Royal Survivor (on the life of England’s 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 Antoinette’s more colourful contemporaries (such as England’s George III and Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire).