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The Mistress Of Paris: The 19th-Century Courtesan Who Built An Empire On A Secret



Synopsis

Catherine Hewitt's *The Mistress of Paris* is a fantastically readable biography of a nineteenth-century Parisian courtesan who harbored an incredible secret. A gorgeous, smart, ambitious, hard-working, steely autodidact and businesswoman whose product was herself, Valtesse would be totally at home in our self-branding society. The New York Times Book Review *Comtesse Valtesse de la Bigne* was painted by Édouard Manet and inspired Émile Zola, who immortalized her in his scandalous novel *Nana*. Her rumored affairs with Napoleon III and the future King Edward VII kept gossip columns full. But her glamorous existence hid a dark secret: she was no comtesse. Valtesse was born into abject poverty, raised on a squalid backstreet among the dregs of Parisian society. Yet she transformed herself into an enchantress who possessed a small fortune, three mansions, fabulous carriages, and art the envy of connoisseurs across Europe. A consummate show-woman, she ensured that her life and even her death remained shrouded in just enough mystery to keep her audience hungry for more. Spectacularly evoking the sights and sounds of mid- to late nineteenth-century Paris in all its hedonistic glory, Catherine Hewitt's biography tells, for the first time ever in English, the forgotten story of a remarkable woman who, though her roots were lowly, never stopped aiming high.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Hewitt's fascinating biography reads like a novel and paints a vivid portrait of a woman who reinvented herself and carved out a successful and lucrative career in one of the only realms available to women in her time, place, and circumstances. Booklist "[A]stonishing.... A

thoroughly researched and clearly written account of a determined and talented woman and of an era." • Kirkus Reviews • "Reading like a novel with enticing cliff-hangers, Hewitt's work marries the life of Valtesse with the fascinating history of Paris, imbuing both with vivacity." • Library Journal • "An enthralling story, told with both conviction and sympathy." • The Observer (UK) • "Hewitt is a diligent researcher and her handsomely illustrated debut biography is crammed with period detail. . . . she offers an intriguing insight into the precarious glamour of life as a nineteenth-century courtesan." • The Daily Telegraph (UK) • "Riveting." • The Bookseller (UK) • "A fascinating biography . . . Full of detail and astute observation, the book is a remarkable tale of a woman who never stopped aiming high, but whose personal life was shrouded in mystery." • France magazine • "Her lovers included painters and politicians, and she caused plenty of scandal that will have you curled up with this book for hours." • Living France • "Well researched . . . she has written a truly handsome boudoir book." • Irish Examiner • "It is incredibly readable. The story itself is innately fascinating . . . Hewitt has a great deal of knowledge on the time period of nineteenth-century Paris . . . much to enjoy in this engaging account of Parisian culture." • All About History (UK) • "This proves to be both a full and intriguing biography, and a fascinating portrait of the time period. . . . The Mistress of Paris is not just a biography of a fascinating woman, but an in-depth look at the France of the nineteenth century . . . A skillfully woven tapestry of a fascinating life, this is a hugely interesting and surprisingly involving read." • The Bookbag

Catherine Hewitt studied French literature and art history at Royal Holloway, University of London, and the Courtauld Institute of Art. Her proposal for *The Mistress of Paris* was awarded the runner-up prize in the 2012 Biographers' Club Tony Lothian Competition for the best proposal by an uncommissioned, first-time biographer. She lives in a village in Surrey, England.

Amazingly interesting! I read the Kindle version of this book and was constantly clicking to use its Google search function, plus Google images. WOW! I learned a lot about Paris between 1850 and 1905. I am now fascinated by the profession of courtesan and am actively trying to find out more information. The sex is not all that interesting - what is interesting is discovering the business of a courtesan and how successful ones became so wealthy. I don't have the answer yet. Hope to find it soon! You'll want to find out more if you read this book. To help you understand better, during this time period women still wore long dresses and didn't expose much of their bodies. OK - good, so maybe a man would pay to get a peep or something better, but that does not explain why a man

would buy his courtesan a mansion or pay her some very high consulting prices. The best my husband and I could guess is that in the case where the courtesan was the lady of the mansion and the mansion was usually not in the gentleman's home town, that she was paid to run the place like an exclusive hotel - she'd decorate, provide upkeep, party services, etc., and she was a good companion. So far, I have not read that definition with most of the information I've found so far referencing prostitution, which, of course, is titillating. It seems to me, however, that sex just was not the big thing as to why a courtesan was being paid.

The author has unfortunately fallen into the common trap of becoming far too fond of her subject. The majority of the book is a recitation of all the superlatives of Valtesse, "Comtesse" de la Bigne, a courtesan in late-19th Century Paris. We learn how Valtesse had the quickest mind, the wittiest sense of humor, the most perfectly-run household with only the most discreet and well-trained servants, had the deepest understanding of literature and art, how everyone was enraptured by her and instantly fell under her spell, how perfect she was at this thing or that other thing.... in fact, she was perfect at ALL the things. By halfway through, it's apparent that we are not reading about a real person, we are reading about a cardboard cutout of a person who is faultless and superlative in every respect, who has no nuance. It's too bad, because the time period is undoubtedly interesting, Paris and France are ALWAYS interesting and seeing it from the point of view of a courtesan - who would have a view simultaneously from the "inside" and the "outside" of society - could have been a fascinating read. Unfortunately, this book is not it.

The formidable amount of research which has been done to create this tale of a Parisian courtesan of the nineteenth century is amazing. The book recreates Paris in the late 1900s, the scene of this extraordinary young woman who cleverly created a career for herself as a courtesan. We read of the stages a woman had to negotiate from being a common prostitute to earning the title courtesan. A fascinating picture of a clever and erudite woman of that era.

I found this book fascinating. I am in love with all things Paris. This book artfully combined history with culture with art in the latter part of the 19th century. I was in Paris when I read this book. I found Valtesse's bed in the Musée Arts Decorative. I found her home on Boulevard Malsherbes. It is not 5 floors of apartments. I tried to see one of the paintings of her in Musée d'Orsay but it was on loan to Taiwan. I will be returning to Paris in October and I plan to hunt down more traces of Valtesse. Although the book at times was not as fluid as I am used to (there are many footnotes) I

was not bothered by this because this courtesan is one of the most interesting women I have read about. I looked forward to reading a little more each day.

Well crafted. Amazing historical references to Paris. Great record of a bygone era

Excellent ...enjoyed every minute..

THIS BOOK GIVES THE READER AN INTIMATE LOOK AT THE LIFE OF A PROSTITUTE IN PARIS IN 1800'S.

So fascinating! Never heard of this courtesan before but the woman sure knew how to make the best of what she was given. A courtesan who patronizes the arts and artists (in many a ways)? How very French!

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