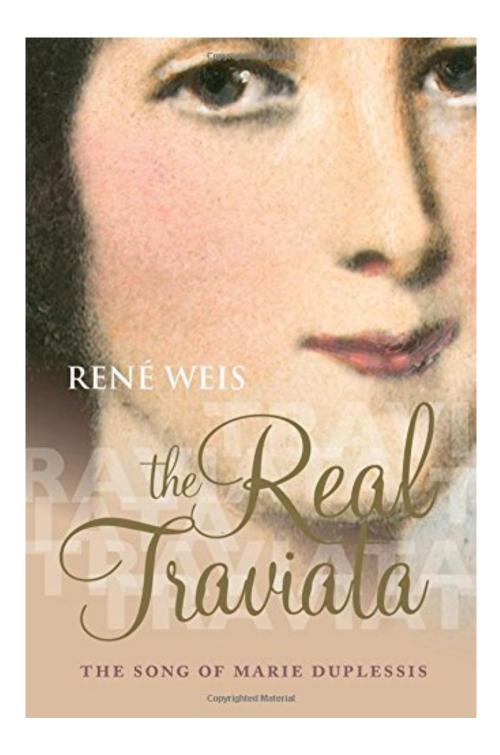


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The Real Traviata is the rags-to-riches story of a tragic young woman whose life inspired one of the most famous operas of all time, Verdi's masterpiece La traviata, as well as one of the most scandalous and successful French novels of the nineteenth century, La Dame aux Camelias, by Alexandre Dumas fils.

The woman at the centre of the story, Marie Duplessis, escaped from her life as an abused teenage girl in provincial Normandy, rising in an amazingly short space of time to the apex of fashionable life in nineteenth century Paris, where she was considered the queen of the Parisian courtesans. Her life was painfully short, but by sheer willpower, intelligence, talent, and stunning looks she attained such prominence in the French capital that ministers of the government and even members of the French royal family fell under her spell.

In the 1840s she commanded the kind of 'paparazzi' attention that today we associate only with major royalty or the biggest Hollywood stars. Aside from the younger Dumas, her conquests included a host of writers and artists, including the greatest pianist of the century, Franz Liszt, with whom she once hoped to elope. When she died Theophile Gautier, one of the most important Parisian writers of the day, penned an obituary fit for a princess. Indeed, he boldly claimed that she had been a princess, notwithstanding her peasant origin and her distinctly demi-monde existence.

And although now largely forgotten, in the years immediately after her death, Marie's legend if anything grew in stature, with her immortalization in Verdi's La traviata, an opera in which the great Romantic composer tried to capture her essence in some of the most heart-wrenching and lyrical music ever composed.

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Most helpful customer reviews

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

The Real Traviata and the Men Who Immortalized Her

By Nancy A.

"...a young woman of exquisite demeanor...chaste, oval features, her gorgeous dark eyes shadowed by long lashes, the purest arching eyebrows, a nose of the most exquisite and delicate curve, her aristocratic shape that marked her out as a duchess for those who did not know her...by a wist of fate she was born a peasant girl in Normandy." from the obituary of Marie Duplessis written by Theophile Gautier

I knew that La Traviata was connected to the Alexander Dumas fils book The Lady of the Camellias (La Dame aux camelias) but I didn't know there was a real woman behind the stories, Marie Duplessis, born Alphonse Plessis.

The Real Traviata: The Song of Marie Duplessis by Rene Weis reveals the woman and the men who loved her and presents a history of the transcendent art that has made her immortal. Alexander Dumas fils was one of her lovers; his novel inspired by Marie's short life arrived soon after her death. It became a play, and that play inspired Verdi to throw out his nearly completed project to write La Traviata--all within four years of Marie's death.

The book, play, and opera met with resistance getting past the censors. Marie was a courtesan, one with class and style and regal bearing whose lovers included men from the highest ranks of life. Marie's protector had her educated, paid for her housing, and availed himself of her love even while knowing she had at least one other lover on the side. Some courtesans of the day were quite wild and profane but Marie had the bearing, soul, heart and generosity of a high born lady. Dumas loved her but was too poor and had to give her up. Liszt was on concert tours and couldn't bring her with him; he left the first woman he ever loved behind in Paris.

Impoverished Girls Preyed On by Men

Weis takes us into the disturbing history of prostitution and child abuse in the early 19th c. Marie's childhood was tragic and horrifying. Her drunkard and abusive father forced Marie's mother into hiding for her life, leaving her two daughters with family. Marie's surrogate family could barely feed themselves and when Marie was ten she was told she had to find her own food. At some point she was trading sexual favors for food.

She was a beautiful girl with skin like Camellias, and with dark eyes and hair. Starved for food and love, Marie later confessed that she had enjoyed the attention of the men. After her father found and reclaimed his daughters he himself abused Marie and when she was thirteen sold her favors to a local pedophile. Shortly afterwards she had her first menses. Weis cites an 1857 study by Ambroise Tradieu who first revealed the pervasiveness of sexual child abuse and rape. Men from the highest classes picked up teenaged girls and indulged themselves without thought.

Marie as Pretty Woman

That Marie, like other young girls who were abused and raped, became a prostitute was ordained by such a childhood. She was smart; to avoid the dangers of the streets she sought a protector. At age 16 she found her protector in Morny, a Bonaparte. Just six years before she was starving; now had a home of her own, enough to eat, and lovely clothes to wear. Her lover paid for her education--reading and writing, piano, dancing, everything needed for her to move among the highest classes of society. (Think Pretty Woman or Pygmalion or My Fair Lady.) Her protector even fell in love with her. At age 17 Marie gave birth and was sent to her country hometown to recover; Morny took the baby, who died. Marie didn't learn of her baby's death until a year later.

Queen of the Night

Morny left Paris for a position with the government and his friend took his place keeping Marie. By then she was a real trophy mistress. She had a series of generous lovers, protectors who paid for her upkeep while seeing other men. Marie lived the high life abroad and at home, enjoying the opera and gambling and waltzing through life. Then Marie met Edouard de Perregaux, a serial womanizer, romantic and feckless. He became the man immortalized as Alfredo, Violetta's lover in Verdi's opera. Their affair had ups and downs, marriage and estrangement.

Edouard saw that Marie was a 'pearl lost in vice', a kind and romantic woman. He moved her out of Paris to keep her to himself for a while. He had his own checkered past and was involved with another courtesan and actress. They idyll didn't last. Back in Paris Marie had to juggle the man paying for her keep and her lovers. She had to think of her future when her older protector would die; any of these lovers could be taking his place. Although Edouard may have loved Marie he was in debt and his family pressured him to give her up.

Marie was an exceptional woman, especially considering her profession and childhood. One day a woman and with her son struck up a conversation with Marie. The ladies hit it off but Marie felt the need to confess she was a courtesan. The woman had seen Marie's soul and remained a lifetime friend. Marie donated money for an orphanage and raised even more from her friends.

Marie eventually became involved with a 'manager' and had men lining up at her door. She lived in splendor and it took a lot of money to keep up appearances. Her most notorious love affairs at this time included Alexander Dumas fils and Franz Liszt. Dumas was the first to note symptoms of T.B. in Marie.

Death and Transfiguration

Marie's tuberculosis claimed her life in 1847 when she was only 23 years old. She had been estranged from Edouard and wouldn't let him see her. She wouldn't ask for help from friends. She spent her last days sitting at the window in her empty suite. Her possessions were sold at auction. Dumas purchased back a necklace he had given Marie; his daughter wore it to her grave. She was buried in a temporary unsanctified grave until Edouard had her reburied with a tomb. He insisted on opening the coffin to be sure it was Marie. His last image would be her already decaying face.

Almost immediately the low-born courtesan was turned into an angelic soul, starting with her obituary. Dumas wrote The Lady of the Camellias; he revealed the seamy side of Parisian society, an unflinching look at the world of the prostitute and the men who frequented them. After getting past the censors he turned the book into a play. It too was unable to pass the censors until Marie's former lover and protector used his governmental power to approve its performance. And then Verdi attended the play and immediately starting writing the music of La Traviata, even before he had a libretto.Verdi was not married to his companion and understood social prejudice; they too had tried to hide in the country. Verdi had lost a wife and children and understood grief. The opera allowed him to deal with his personal losses.

The story of the abused child who inspired one of our most beloved operas is fascinating and disturbing. While reading the section about the opera's performance history I was able to find clips on YouTube and other online sites. The book is illustrated showing the people and places of Marie's history. It was a fascinating read.

[A] superbly readable and meticulously researched biography...It is hard to think of a more dramatic life, from a horrific childhood to the glamour of high society, and Weis tells it with operatic pathos. The Sunday Times

I received a free ebook from the publisher through NetGalley in exchange for a fair and unbiased review.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful.

Great Christmas Present!

By Denis Noble

"Marie Duplessis deserved to live on in ways that lay beyond the reach of words, in the most powerful medium of all, music." This sentence from page 272 accurately sums up the huge emotional impact of this book. The parallels with the story of Saddayako, the Geisha who became immortalised in Puccini's opera Madame Butterfly, kept reverberating in my mind as I became progressively drawn in by the sensitive way in which René Weis does justice to his subject. The critics who were outraged by the immortalisation of a fallen woman are acknowledged. Weis hides nothing. Indeed, he is a far more nuanced and therefore effective critic himself of the morals of the Parisian world in which Marie Duplessis lived. But he also conveys the charm and humanity of Marie, who naturally sought the marriage that could offer her the only viable means of escape from her predicament. I challenge anyone not to be moved by this book. It is also meticulously researched, with important new scholarly discoveries. Great Christmas present!

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

The Real Traviata

By S Riaz

This is a thoroughly researched and extremely detailed biography of the life of Marie Duplessis. Even if you have not heard of her, you will know the opera, La Traviata and the character of Violetta Valery was based upon the short, tragic, rags to riches, real life of story of Marie Duplessis; as was the novel, "La Dame aux Camelias," by Alexandre Dumas, fils, which was later turned into a play in 1849. What made the story of

this 'Lady of the Camelias,' this, "fallen woman," so fascinating that her story became a sensation which is still played out on stages throughout the world even today?

It has to be said that, if you wanted to create a character you felt sympathy for, it would be hard to imagine anyone feeling anything other than compassion for the young Alphonsine Plessis (she later took her mother's first name) who was the second daughter of poverty stricken parents in 1824. After her father attempted to kill her beloved mother, the family were split up and young Alphonsine was told at the age of only ten that the family she was living with would no longer feed her. Little wonder that this young girl, reduced to begging, was at the mercy of inappropriate attention from adults, as she drifted alone and seemingly unwanted. You would think that, having rediscovered her father, things might improve; but sadly, Alphonsine was destined to be misused by those who should have been protecting her.

The author does an excellent job of not only telling us the story of Marie Duplessis, but also of recreating the times shelived in. Alphonsine was a young lady who used her looks and intelligence to become a glamorous courtesan, who had several wealthy, influential protectors and who went from working in a laundry (and worse) to being at home in the echelons of Parisian society. In the times when Alphonsine was living in Paris (1838 to 1847), the city was hedonistic and full of great art, music and glamour.

This is a story of aristocratic splendour, of the famous – such as Alexandre Dumas and Liszt – and of terrible tragedy. Not only of the death of a young woman, but of a life which burned so brightly that was almost like a match – destined to flare and then be cruelly snuffed out. However, despite everything, you have to applaud this young woman who was abused, abandoned and rejected, but who used her assets of beauty and intelligence to rise way above the life she expected to live and to become the talk of Paris. This really is a very detailed work, but it beautifully recreates both the life of Mari Duplessis and of the era she lived in, plus looking at the success of the works based upon her story after her death. A very interesting read and an excellent biography. Lastly, I received a copy of this book from the publisher, via NetGalley, for review.

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