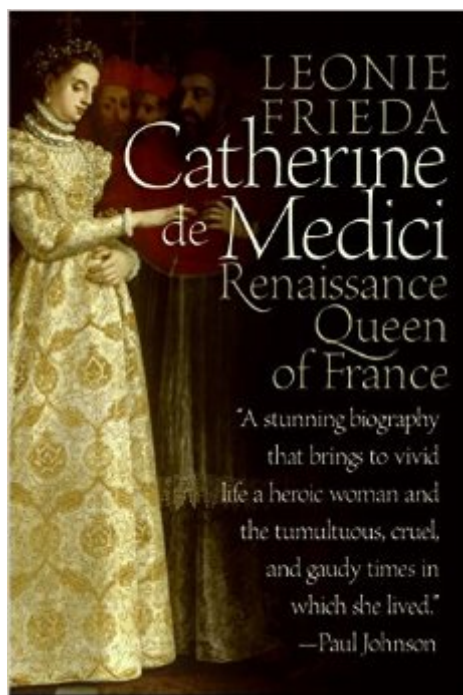


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Catherine De Medici: Renaissance Queen Of France



Synopsis

Poisoner, despot, necromancer -- the dark legend of Catherine de Medici is centuries old. In this critically hailed biography, Leonie Frieda reclaims the story of this unjustly maligned queen to reveal a skilled ruler battling extraordinary political and personal odds -- from a troubled childhood in Florence to her marriage to Henry, son of King Francis I of France; from her transformation of French culture to her fight to protect her throne and her sons' birthright. Based on thousands of private letters, it is a remarkable account of one of the most influential women ever to wear a crown.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I highly recommend this book to people who want to know more about the Medici family and its illustrious member who became the Queen of France. Catherine de Medici had 10 children: three became French kings, one became Queen of Spain (as wife of Philip II). Her youngest son was a serious candidate to wed England's Queen Elizabeth. The Queen Mother was a lavish spender who insisted on mounting extravagant "magnificences" in total disregard for France's precarious financial state. She would even impose taxes on the ever-suffering populace to finance her exercises of excess. She formed her own company of scantily clad dancing girls ("the flying squadron") which proved quite popular. Catherine was not a hardcore religious type (like Spain's Philip II) but attended Mass regularly. She was not threatened by the rise of Protestantism and sought to meet their demands by peaceful means. She was superstitious: when a seer predicted the death of her husband King Henry II at a tournament, she begged him not to compete (he did anyway and was killed in an accident). She presided over eight Wars of Religion: civil wars between Protestants

fighting for their right to worship freely, and Catholics trying to keep the country from splitting apart. The author discusses Catherine's many diplomatic efforts to resolve the difficulties peacefully. But treacherous behavior among hardcore Huguenots eventually hardened her attitude, culminating in the disastrous Massacre of St Bartholomew of 1572, which killed as many as 30,000 men, women, and children all over France. Catherine loved architecture, ate heartily (she was fat), and was an enthusiastic horseback rider. She adored her husband Henry II even though he preferred to spend his time with a mistress.

Catherine de Medici has been called many things over the centuries: Madame La Serpente, The Black Queen, The Maggot from Italy's Tomb, but one thing she hasn't been called is boring. Leonie Frieda has crafted an engrossing biography of a much maligned Queen. Catherine de Medici came to France at the age of fourteen to marry Henri, Duke of Orleans, later known as King Henri II. She was not a princess, in fact she not of royal blood at all. Instead, Catherine was the daughter of wealthy Italian merchants. Her father was Lorenzo II de Medici and her mother was named Madeleine de la Tour d' Auvergne. Shortly after her birth, Catherine lost both her parents and became a pawn (and prisoner) of her powerful Medici relatives. Frieda's biography is intended to provide a sympathetic and diverse view of a woman that history has branded a poisoner and murderer. Far from straying from Catherine flaws, the author openly discusses the events that helped cast the Italian-French Queen as a villain. To better understand Catherine's later disastrous actions, one has to follow Catherine's history from her tragic childhood to her fortunate but unfulfilling (to Henri anyway) marriage to Henri II. The author does a superb job at identifying the key events that helped form this courageous and powerhouse Queen. The gist of the author's argument is that Catherine's greatest fault was loving her children to the extreme. She writes "No mother has done more to promote her children at whatever cost to herself, themselves, and their times." Even before conceiving a child, Catherine was going to the extreme for her unborn children. Barren for a decade, Catherine subjected herself to dangerous and bizarre treatments to increase fertility.

This book is an interesting failure. It is well worth reading and contains many interesting passages, but Ms. Frieda fails in her stated aim of creating a more sympathetic understanding of Catherine de Medici and the difficulties under which she labored. Catherine is widely seen as a talented, scheming and ruthless power-behind-the-throne figure, doing almost anything to promote and protect her children which included two Kings of France. Catherine's era overlaps that of a truly great queen,

England's Elizabeth I, so her story includes figures such as Mary Queen of Scots and Philip II of Spain and includes the great waves of violence that crashed across Europe following the Reformation. You just can't come up with better historical material. Ms. Frieda does a creditable job of telling her story, at times rising to gripping narrative as when she describes events around the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, an orgy of killing in which something on the order of ten to twenty thousand Huguenots were slaughtered, many having their throats cut in their beds. Ms. Frieda's explanation of Catherine's role in the Massacre is that she only wanted to have a small group of leaders killed while conveniently gathered for the wedding of Henri of Navarre, a Protestant of Valois blood, and Catherine's daughter, Margot. Ms. Frieda's thesis is that what was to be a small "surgical operation" got completely out of hand with Paris mobs taking to killing anyone even suspected of being a Protestant, as though killing a group of guests at a royal wedding, had it gone no further, would have been just fine. Ms. Frieda is not the first to put the thesis forward, but it fails utterly to soften our view of Catherine.

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