

Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman

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✓ Verified Book of Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman

Summary:

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23 hours, 52 minutes

Pulitzer Prize winner Massie offers the tale of a princess who went to Russia at 14 and became one of the most powerful women in history. Born into minor German nobility, she transformed herself into an empress by sheer determination. Possessing a brilliant, curious mind, she devoured the works of Enlightenment philosophers, and reaching the throne, tried using their principles to rule the vast, backward empire. She knew or corresponded with notable figures of her time: Voltaire, Diderot, Frederick the Great, Maria Theresa of Austria, Marie Antoinette & John Paul Jones. Wanting to be the "benevolent despot" Montesquieu idealized, she contended with the deeply ingrained realities of Russian life, including serfdom. She persevered, and for 34 years the government, foreign policy, cultural development and welfare of the Russian people were in her hands. She dealt with domestic rebellion, wars & the tides of political change and violence inspired by the French Revolution. Her reputation depended on the perspective of the speaker. She was praised by Voltaire as like the classical philosophers. She was condemned by enemies, mostly foreign, as "the Messalina of the north." Her family, friends, ministers, generals, lovers and enemies are vividly described. These included her ambitious, scheming mother; her weak, bullying husband, Peter (who left her sexually untouched for nine years after their marriage); her unhappy son & heir, Paul; her beloved grandchildren; and her favorites—the young men from whom she sought companionship and the recapture of youth as well as sex. Here, too, is Gregory Potemkin, her most significant lover & possible husband, with whom she shared a correspondence of love & separation, followed by 17 years of unparalleled mutual achievement. All the qualities that Massie brought to Nicholas & Alexandra and Peter the Great are present: historical accuracy, deep understanding, felicity of style, mastery of detail, ability to shatter myth & a genius for finding and expressing a human drama.

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