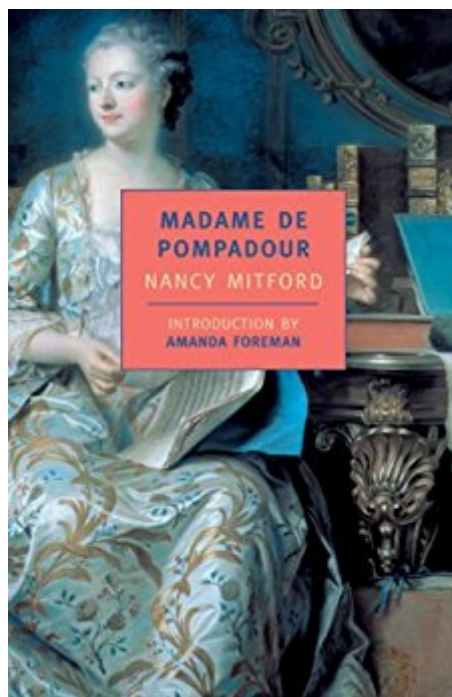


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Madame De Pompadour (New York Review Books Classics)



Synopsis

When Madame de Pompadour became the mistress of Louis XV, no one expected her to retain his affections for long. A member of the bourgeoisie rather than an aristocrat, she was physically too cold for the carnal Bourbon king, and had so many enemies that she could not travel publicly without risking a pelting of mud and stones. History has loved her little better. Nancy Mitford's delightfully candid biography re-creates the spirit of eighteenth-century Versailles with its love of pleasure and treachery. We learn that the Queen was a *coquette*, the Dauphin a *coquin*, and see France increasingly overcome with class conflict. With a fiction writer's felicity, Mitford restores the royal mistress and celebrates her as a survivor, unsurpassed in the art of living, who reigned as the most powerful woman in France for nearly twenty years.

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Customer Reviews

To be a mistress to an 18th Century monarch is no sinecure. First and foremost, the king must be kept enchanted and amused at all times. Friends and enemies must be dealt with. Relatives must be cared for. Appearance must be perfect. Taste must be exquisite. Little Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson was not exactly born for the role; she was a bourgeoisie, rather than the aristocrat, which automatically made her a poor candidate for the King's intimate favors. She was not a sensual

woman, and the Bourbon kings were known as lusty. She overcame all by her total devotion to the king, her kindness, savoir-faire, and brilliant taste in décor, art, and architecture. Luckily for the Marquise, Louis XV was a man of habit. Once he became fond of Madame, his eye might stray, but he saw no reason whatsoever to change his arrangements. Madame is Nancy Mitford's kind of girl. Her biography is affectionate and admiring while not being a puff piece. Her history is good and her style is light hearted and charming. Ms. Mitford gives us a vivid picture of Versailles at its apex, yet does not gloss over the hardships and realities of the day. Court society was sterile in that none of its members had anything to do but be amused by gossip and frivolity. Banishment from Court was a small death because their lives were engineered only by pleasure, and pleasure was only to be had at Court. This is a fine biography with an excellent contemporary view of the times. Highly recommended.

Nancy Mitford has a remarkable ability to blend historical fact with equally factual gossip and cunning insight. The result is a biography of great charm that offers much for both serious students of history and those who also enjoy the backstairs take on famous people -- beauty marks, warts and all. "Madame de Pompadour" is especially rich in limning the life of this great horizontal, with all its struggles, sorrows and triumphs (she was lovely, with elegant taste, a delightful companion, but sadly frigid). Pompadour, beautiful, charming, erudite and influential was the favorite of Louis XV for many years, and was loved and hated with equal intensity by his court. The book is lavishly illustrated with portraits of Pompadour, the King, courtiers, Versailles and its gardens and lush interiors, art and bijou -- all the luxury in over which she reigned and inspired. Ms. Mitford's prose is incomparable in its easy elegance and fluid felicity -- a great read by any standards. But do not mistake her light hand with light history. This is a biography of great richness and learned insight, giving us a portrait of a powerful woman during a fascinating chapter in French history.

I have read that Mitford began this book with amusement and a certain degree of condescension, but finished it with a deep admiration for the woman who had been the mistress of a king. One of the things that I liked so much about this book is that you always see the affection and admiration, and it's so clear that it would be easy not to see that. In the histories that I have read to date that touch Versailles, many of the actual details of the period have been elided. It has come to be such shorthand for artificial elegance and extravagance that hardly any writers bother to explain what it was really about. The manners, the customs, the position of the nobility in France-- all these things were much clearer to me after reading Mitford's sparkling account than they were from any of the

other history that I have read. For all that she chooses a seemingly frivolous main subject, Mitford never fails to point out how her subject applied or related to the key political questions of the time and the contrast is both entertaining and smart. Recommended for almost all kinds of readers-- I think this would be excellent if one would just like some relaxing entertainment and from my point of view it also helped give me a more real look at the historical period in France.

Anyone who has enjoyed Nancy Mitford's novels "The Pursuit of Love" and "Love in a Cold Climate" will appreciate what a deliciously witty writer she can be, especially when describing the lives of the privileged class. Reading her biography of Madame la Marquise de Pompadour (Mitford is strong on the use of proper aristocratic titles) one is not certain where Nancy's life ends and la Pompadour's life begins. Some of her comments are so ultra-sophisticated so as to be hilarious, such as calling the Parc aux Cerfs, where Louis XV kept his women, a "nice little brothel." This book may not be at the top of my list of serious scholarly tomes, but it is not without merit as a work of history, and one is given a colorful glimpse of another world.

History in the hands of Nancy Mitford is centred entirely on the personal - it is history as anecdote, gossip, inside story, in miniature. An earlier reviewer has perceptively identified Lytton Strachey as a literary ancestor for the kind of historical works that Mitford wrote, and there is more than a little of the Mitford novels in them as well ("Love in a Cold Climate," "The Pursuit of Love." In my view, Madame de Pompadour was more enjoyably treated in the other Mitford biography "The Sun King," which might have been a better choice as a New York Review of Books Classic. This book tends to get bogged down in details of geneology (lovingly dwelt on by the aristocratic Mitford), decorating and dresses, and in the end one feels that the author does not quite convince her readers to like her famous subject as much as she does. Nevertheless, "Madame de Pompadour" is well worth a read if you are interested in the period. Mitford's "Voltaire in Love" is a related work that might also be of interest.

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