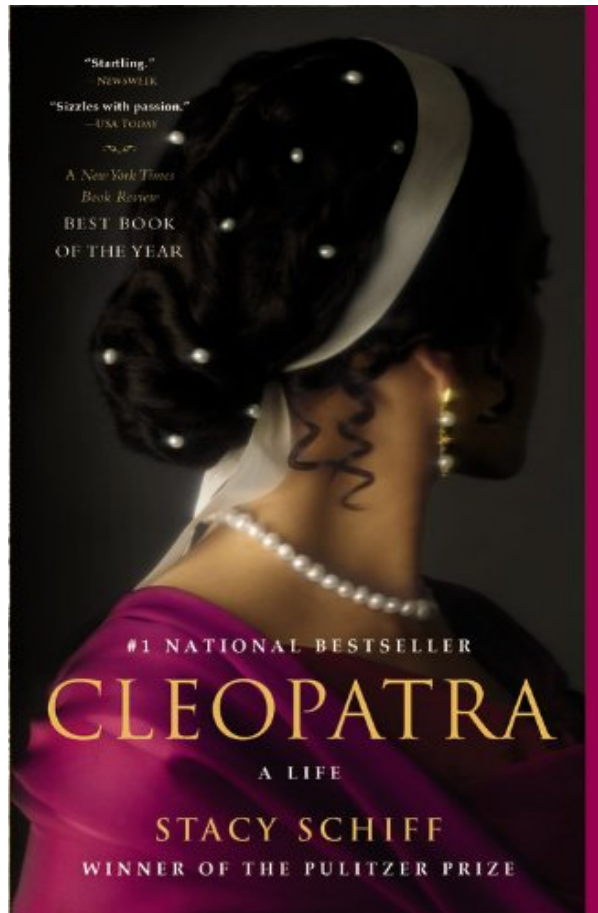
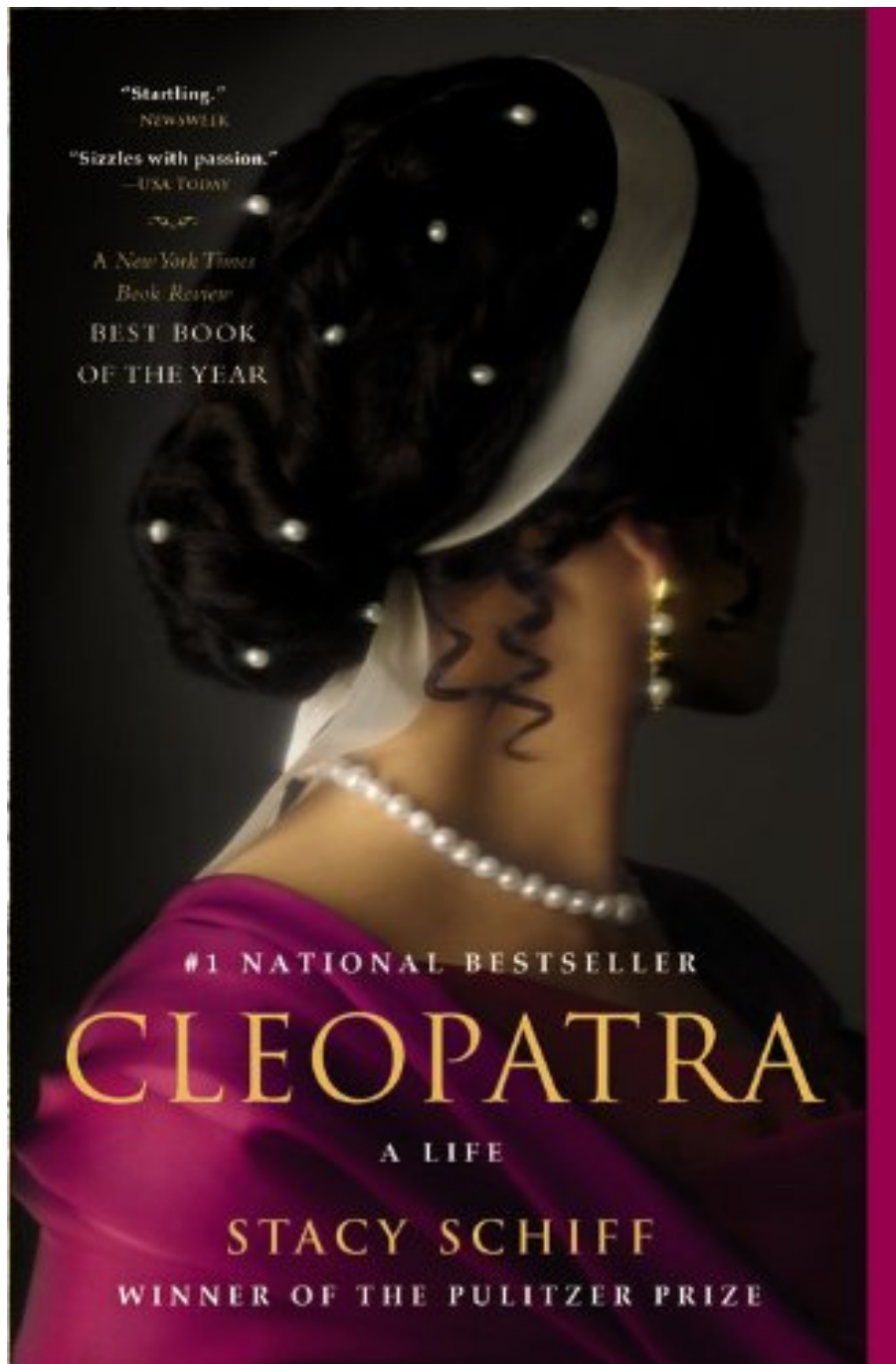


CLEOPATRA: A LIFE BY STACY SCHIFF



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Her palace shimmered with onyx and gold but was richer still in political and sexual intrigue. Above all else, Cleopatra was a shrewd strategist and an ingenious negotiator. She was married twice, each time to a brother. She waged a brutal civil war against the first and poisoned the second; incest and assassination were family specialties. She had children by Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, two of the most prominent Romans of the day. With Antony she would attempt to forge a new empire, in an alliance that spelled both their ends. Famous long before she was notorious, Cleopatra has gone down in history for all the wrong reasons. Her supple personality and the drama of her circumstances have been lost. In a masterly return to the classical sources, Stacy Schiff boldly separates fact from fiction to rescue the magnetic queen whose death ushered in a new world order.

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Features

- CLEOPATRA VII

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A fuller, deeper, much more interesting take on Cleopatra.

By Karen Kells

I'm an avid reader and certainly don't mind books by and/or about men, however, I've always wished there were more books about dynamic, interesting women. "Cleopatra: A Life" more than fulfilled this wish. What I knew about Cleopatra before I read this book came from long ago college classes, the movie with Elizabeth Taylor, and a viewing of the play about her and Antony at a Shakespeare festival. I had the vague impression that Cleopatra was first and foremost a woman who would cast an unbreakable sexual spell on any man who was convenient for her to control. I'm so glad and thankful that Stacy Schiff shows us that Cleopatra was so much more than a seductress; Cleopatra had wit, charm and superlative intelligence.

The fact that Cleopatra lived through her 20's is a tribute to her intelligence alone, as I simply could not believe just how commonplace murder was for those with power in the ancient world. Then, to maintain her position as Egypt's sovereign, Cleopatra's circumstances dictated that she had to ally herself with the Romans, the world's greatest power at the time. For a time, Cleopatra maintained the upper-hand in the power relations with two of the most powerful Romans, Julius Caesar and Marc Antony; with both men she had much written about sexual relationships. In the end, Rome became her enemy, and they also became her biographer. After reading "Cleopatra: A Life", I get the sense that the patriarchal Romans couldn't bring themselves to write a narrative showing that two of their greatest leaders were outwitted by a woman. Imagine what a biography of Monica Lewinsky would be like if it were written by ardent supporters of Bill

Clinton.

Now, on a separate note, I've read all the reviews thus far for this book, and I've noticed a trend in some of the negative reviews. Although "Cleopatra" was written more for a general audience than Schiff's prior biographies, this is still a work of serious scholarship. I doubt this is a book that most people could easily read at the beach. So with this in mind, if you love the intriguing stories of antiquity, but a book that will demand your attention, then this book is for you. If you want a historical version of "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo" then you probably won't like this book.

In closing, I loved this book. I hope Stacy Schiff's next book is about an overlooked, or misunderstood woman.

196 of 212 people found the following review helpful.

Masterfully researched and written biography of a great woman

By The Hibernian Autodidact

Stacy Schiff took a great risk when she wrote "Cleopatra: A Life." Can a woman branded a "whore" by the Great Bard himself, ever really have a reputation as anything else? Directly challenging 2,000 year old assumptions that were enhanced by the likes of Dante, and director Joseph Mankiewicz, is a tall order for even the most accomplished writer. Ms. Schiff brilliantly rises to the task.

Ms. Schiff brings to vivid life a very different Cleopatra from the one depicted to us by playwrights and movie directors. Instead of a wanton seductress relying solely upon her looks, Cleopatra was one of the most authoritative rulers in the history of humanity, inheriting at the age of 18 one of the greatest kingdoms ever known, during a time in history when women had about the same social stature as farm animals.

Furthermore, Ms. Schiff is a wordsmith extraordinaire. In beautifully constructed prose that reminded me more of Nabokov than your typical biographer, Ms. Schiff paints a lovely, nuanced portrait of a great and vastly misunderstood woman. And what life the author brings to ancient Egypt too! The descriptions of the ancient world in which Cleopatra lived were so vivid that you would think the author was Cleopatra's contemporary, and not her 21st century biographer.

Ms. Schiff had a tough act to follow with herself; all her previous books have won, or been nominated for, just about every prestigious literary award you can think of.

I wouldn't be surprised if she at least gets on the short-list for the Pulitzer with "Cleopatra: A Life."

427 of 485 people found the following review helpful.

Her gorgeous life--what there is to tell of it

By Tracy Hodson

2 stars for the first half; 4 for the second half -averaged out to 3

"Cleopatra: A Life" is not the book one wants it to be. A new biography of one of the most fascinating women in history who had liasons with two of the most fascinating men in history should, at least, entertain us. After all, she was Isis personified, the Queen of the Nile, the last Pharaoh of Egypt, the end of the 300-year Ptolemaic dynasty, the woman who held the keys to the granaries that fed Rome, a legendary beauty of great charisma, the wealthiest woman on Earth, the symbol of all that was exotic and enticing about the sensual East--surely a biography of Cleopatra has got to be great. Stacy Schiff's book, however, disappoints. Certainly a good deal of that disappointment stems from the fact that there is simply very little information extant about Cleopatra, and much of what is "known" is questionable. There are no primary sources except her enemies, who wrote what served their purposes, while the three main secondary sources, Plutarch (writing primarily about Antony), Appian, and Dio lived well after her lifetime and all contradict one

another. Even Caesar himself only mentioned her briefly. Her capital city, the Alexandria she knew, lies under the sea or has been destroyed by war and modern building; other than the profiles on her coins, there isn't even a portrait of her. Ms. Schiff acknowledges the almost total lack of reliable information right from the start, but can't quite overcome the enormity of that obstacle. Her prose is often stilted as she fills pages with everything but Cleopatra's life. We learn what her education probably consisted of, what the people of Alexandria ate and therefore what Cleopatra probably ate, how they partied (and they really partied); we get lots of sentences beginning with "she probably," "she may have," "she might have," "we can guess she..." This becomes both frustrating and tedious to read. We do get a good picture of Alexandrian life in the 1st century B.C., and lots of incidental details (the importance of the great goddess, Isis, the racial and religious make-up of the city, a great deal of detail about the wealth and importance of Alexandria at this time, even birth control methods), but there is very little justification for filling the first 150 pages with so much that sheds no light on Cleopatra or her life. That which is known about her background, her early life, and her relationship with Caesar takes little time to relate, and the author gets bogged down in irrelevant information. It becomes further mired as we are forced to listen to Cicero whine about Alexandria, Antony, and his favorite object of scorn, Cleopatra herself (who apparently upset him over a book). One can't help but wish that Ms. Schiff had decided to get through this material more quickly in order to bring us to the moment of Antony's appearance in Cleopatra's life, for his effect on the book is much as his effect on Cleopatra's life: things get much more interesting.

The second half of the book is dedicated to the exploration of that most intriguing of relationships, though Ms. Schiff doesn't seem to subscribe to the idea of theirs being a great romance. She doesn't really seem to have a point of view about many things, including the source of Cleopatra's great power over two of the greatest men of her age. Instead, she presents various accounts about all the major events of the last ten years of Cleopatra's life, during which she was Antony's faithful lover and mother to three children by him in addition to her son, Caesarion, by Julius Caesar (his only son and only living child), and Antony's eldest children by an early marriage. The details of their life together--as much as can be known--are covered well, and the tension mounts as they plummet headlong into war and the final, fatal, showdown with Octavian. All of this is well-written and exciting to read; clearly, when Ms. Schiff has something to write about, she writes vividly. And this is a story worth telling--whether Cleopatra and Antony partnered out of passion, or politics, or both, it is certainly one of the great couplings of all time. The bewildering and disastrous Battle of Actium, Cleopatra's building of her own Mausoleum, Antony's botched suicide and subsequent death in Cleopatra's arms are the stuff of high opera. Octavian's cold, ruthless gamesmanship versus Cleopatra's determined, intelligent survivalism made for a dramatic end-game, regardless of the veracity of the varying accounts (poison or an unlikely, very handy, cobra? Cleopatra's suicide or murder by Octavian?).

The chief problem for any biographer of Cleopatra is that she is primarily known as the mistress of Caesar and Antony--she really had no "life" of her own as far as history is concerned, unlike Elizabeth I or Eleanor of Aquitaine whose lives stand on their own merits. While she was allowed to rule Egypt on her own, unlike the other "client kings" of Rome, apparently no one chronicled her life during the periods when she was not having a direct impact on Rome and its leaders. Rome had a unique problem on its hands with Cleopatra. She was more than just an expendable dragon sitting on a great pile of treasure--she was a beautiful woman, able to insinuate herself into Caesar's life sufficiently to end up carrying the greatest card of all: his son. With that Ace up her sleeve, she couldn't be paid off or killed, and she certainly couldn't be ignored. She became a force to reckon with, and as such, a major player on Rome's stage (despite its resistance to this disquieting reality); for this reason we know more about her than we likely would have ever known about some other Ptolemy who just happened to be the nominal Pharaoh under Rome's jurisdiction. Her story, for all its gaps and mythologized elements, has inspired artists and writers for more than two thousand years; that will just have to be enough for us.

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