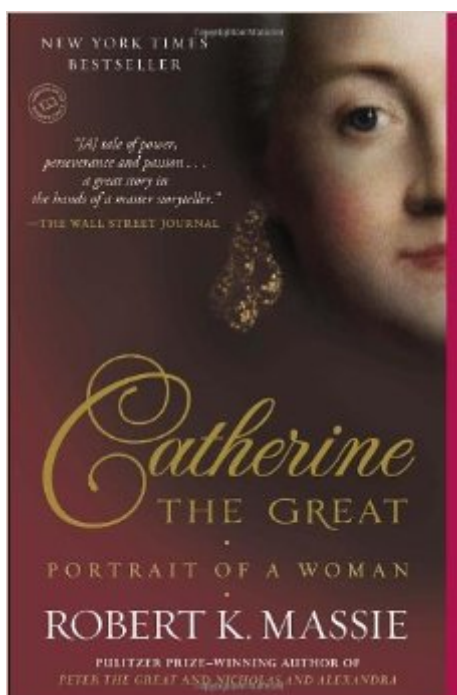


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Catherine The Great: Portrait Of A Woman



Synopsis

“A tale of power, perseverance and passion . . . a great story in the hands of a master storyteller.” —The Wall Street Journal

“The Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Peter the Great, Nicholas and Alexandra, and The Romanovs returns with another masterpiece of narrative biography, the extraordinary story of an obscure German princess who became one of the most remarkable, powerful, and captivating women in history. Born into a minor noble family, Catherine transformed herself into empress of Russia by sheer determination. For thirty-four years, the government, foreign policy, cultural development, and welfare of the Russian people were in her hands. She dealt with domestic rebellion, foreign wars, and the tidal wave of political change and violence churned up by the French Revolution. Catherine’s family, friends, ministers, generals, lovers, and enemies—all are here, vividly brought to life. History offers few stories richer than that of Catherine the Great. In this book, an eternally fascinating woman is returned to life.” —A compelling portrait not just of a Russian titan, but also of a flesh-and-blood woman.” —Newsweek

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Customer Reviews

I really enjoyed this biography of Catherine the Great. Like Robert K. Massie's other biographies, *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman* is well-researched and well-written. His deep connection and understanding of the ways of Imperial Russia are strangely effortless. He steps into his subject's world and takes us there, too. I was immediately struck by the way Massie made Catherine accessible. I felt empathy for her -- an empathy I didn't feel before. The story of her hideous marriage to Grand Duke Peter has been portrayed often in film and in print. All sources agree he was a monster who preferred his mistress to his wife, was scarred mentally as well as physically by small pox, and had he lived, would have gutted the Russian Orthodox Church -- and probably brought down an entire empire. *Portrait of a Woman* shows not only how badly Catherine was treated by her so-called "husband" but also how quickly she learned the "game" of the Imperial Court. Catherine was beautiful and intelligent -- and frankly, a better ruler than Peter could ever have been. She was well-read and well-educated in a time when most women couldn't read or write. In order to survive in the court, she spent years honing her skills in diplomacy. When her husband didn't produce an heir, she found a lover who would. I felt compassion for this Catherine, "because" she was resourceful and "because" she took action when it was needed. And some of those actions as Empress were taken with her subjects in mind. Reading *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman*, allowed me to rediscover a strong, intelligent woman who wanted to bring her Imperial Russia forward.

Catherine the Great is second only to Peter the Great as a great modernizing ruler of Russia, a country which repeatedly falls behind the rest of the world, then races to catch up, at least on the surface, within a few years' time. Catherine's story is even more remarkable than Peter's, since she was not born in Russia and had not a drop of Russian blood, and her original name wasn't even Catherine. Sophia Fredericka of Anhalt-Zerbst was an impecunious little princess in an insignificant principality buried deep in Germany. In her early years she seemed destined to marry someone just as obscure as she and to remain unknown to the larger world. Her ambitious mother, who had the good fortune to be related by marriage to the Swedish and Russian royal families, had other plans. She kept in touch with the Empress Elizabeth of Russia, whose nephew and heir was just the right age for Sophia, for many years until Elizabeth sent word for mother and daughter to come to St. Petersburg for a visit. Shortly after they arrived, Sophia's mother and the Empress had arranged for a marriage between 14 year old Sophia and the 15 year old Grand Duke Peter, heir to the Russian throne. Sophia converted to Orthodoxy and had her name changed to Catherine, then married the

future Emperor. It sounds like a fairy tale, but it turned into a nightmare. Peter was a snivelling little wretch who hated Russia, his aunt, and Catherine. Covered with smallpox scars, mentally undeveloped and psychologically unbalanced, Peter refused to have anything to do with Catherine and spent night after night playing with toy soldiers. Catherine, tucked into bed beside him but completely ignored, spent her time reading and learning all she could about her new country.

Portrait of a WOMAN, not an empress, not an autocrat. In his own highly talented way, Pulitzer Prize winner Massie is going to tell us what made Catherine tick underneath the ermine. Massie feels a huge kinship to the House of Romanov, because his son, Robert K. Massie IV, has hemophilia, the disease that devastated many royal families, the most famous sufferer being Alexei, the only son of Tsar Nicholas II. If you've read "Nicholas and Alexandra" "Peter the Great" and other Massie biographies you know how beautifully he writes about Russian royalty and the reader feels that part of Massie's heart is in Russia. He understands and appreciates the handsome and captivating Catherine well as he brings her to life in this splendid biography. We are going to see a fourteen year old unknown German princess, Sophia of Anhalt, the future Catherine, morph herself into a ship of state with enormous powers. If it is possible for a royal personage to pull herself up by her own bootstraps, Sophia did. Sophia was ignored by her own mother, Johanna, who wanted a boy, until Johanna realized Sophia was marketable as a bride and peddled her around Germany and later Russia. Massie points out that Sophia-Catherine, denied love as a girl, had a psyche that was seriously wounded, and as an adult and empress she would demand both love and admiration perhaps to an excessive degree. Nevertheless, at fourteen years old Sophia was astonishingly mature and participated with relish in the search for a husband. That husband would be Peter, nephew of the Empress Elizabeth. The Empress was the daughter of Peter the Great.

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