



The Porcelain Dove

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Narrated by the irrepressible chambermaid to a French duchess, this exquisite blend of authentic 18th-century memoir and classic fairy tale is a dazzling story of devotion, intrigue, and superstition as literate and compelling as *Possession* or *The Volcano Lover*.

The Porcelain Dove Details

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Author : Delia Sherman

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From Reader Review The Porcelain Dove for online ebook

Althea Ann says

Back in 18th Century France, just at the cusp of the Revolution, a small but wealthy country estate is hit by a fairy curse - and the few people within are trapped. Immortal, comfortable, all their needs seen to by invisible servitors - but they cannot leave. There's little to do to pass the years but put on plays and amusements, and well, to cultivate the acquaintance of the local ghosts.

Berthe, who was once a maid in the house (centuries of being trapped in a small group has done quite a bit to erode class lines), at the ghost Colette's request, writes the twisted tale of how they all came to be caught like flies in amber.

I really enjoyed this book. (I was particularly delighted by it after being really disappointed by Sherman's 'Changeling.') The setting is vivid and fully realized, the flavor of the writing is wonderfully wry and witty, and the cast of crazed and odd characters is fascinating. It's not so fast-moving and does give the reader a sense of stasis - but after all, the characters are caught in such a stasis.

But I loved it - all of the comedy-of-manners-esque interactions, the bizarre obsessions and hopeless quests, and oh yes, how magical objects are something you just might choose to collect, like painted fans or decorative china plates. (I want a cabinet des Fées in my house!)

I'd highly recommend this for anyone who liked Ellen Kushner's 'Riverside' series (Sherman collaborated on one of them).

Robin Rivers says

I wanted to love this.

I never got to the point where I did.

Kali Napier says

An enchanted tale set during the French Revolution, resonant of Beauty and the Beast, Bluebeard, and Sleeping Beauty, and drawing on many more fairy tales. For the most part, this reads as a densely descriptive historical fiction told through the perspective of Berthe Duvet who is the lady's maid to Adele, Marquise de Malvoueux. Names, ranks, hierarchies within the chateau are detailed (and complicated to keep up with at first). Berthe is the traditional lady's maid, devoted and loyal to her lady from childhood. She was raised in Paris, and never really feels at home at Beauxpres, the chateau, but wherever her lady stays, even when under an enchantment and in fear of revolting peasants, Berthe remains.

This is a quest tale, like so many fairy tales. the first two sons set out to break the family's curse, and fail.

The twist in this tale, is that the third child is Linotte, a girl who ventures out dressed as a boy. And she has a little help from magic. There is a deep, dark forest, where the origin story of the family's curse began. With such beauty woven throughout most of this book, of the dresses, jewels, and grand aviary, there is also such dark horror as we learn what men are capable of. As with many fairy tales, there is a black vein of trauma and abuse, which is literally and symbolically buried beneath the castle.

This is much more than a fairy tale. There's a sense of social realism, especially with the hunger and living conditions of the poor, and their treatment by the rich and the church.

I felt some parts were dense and repetitive, but the further I immersed myself in this story, the richer and

more rewarding it became.

Emma Deplores Goodreads Censorship says

You never know with obscure fantasy novels, especially those written by women, whose works are still too often unjustly ignored. There are some hidden gems out there. (Here, have some recs: Firethorn. The Secrets of Jin-shei. Fudoki.) And then there are the books that are forgotten for good reason. This one falls into the latter category. Unfortunately, it's so hard to find that I wound up requesting and receiving it as a gift, at which point I felt obliged to read all of its 500+ pages.

The Porcelain Dove is a historical fantasy, set before – and, toward the end, during – the French Revolution, narrated by a duchess's maid. The story is supposedly about a curse placed on a noble family, but would be more accurately described as the mundane life story of the maid, since all the curse does for the plot is require minor characters to disappear from the narrative as they go off questing for years – or decades – on end. Our narrator herself has nothing to do with the curse or its resolution, nor does she even have access to the people who do. Her mistress is a shallow and flighty woman, who does no more to advance the plot than Berthe herself. Berthe is possessive of her mistress regardless, but to me the LGBT label is a stretch; there is little in Berthe's devotion that reads like desire.

Meanwhile, the character who acts as the heroine of the novel (at least toward the end) doesn't get along with Berthe and rarely appears. In fact, our narrator has so little interaction with this character that the climax of the novel consists of Berthe's watching a play, which magically reveals to her over 20-odd pages everything that happens in this other character's quest. Riveting drama, that, but it's not quite as bad as the premise itself. As it turns out, the curse is imposed as revenge for a horrific crime, and goes like this, "You (view spoiler)! Therefore, I curse you with a beggar approaching one of your descendants hundreds of years in the future and asking him for something! If he refuses, a family member of his will have to go on a quest, and in the interim his lands will decline!"

What kind of lame vengeance is that? Really, why even bother? The real-life perpetrator who inspired this ancestor was simply hanged, which seems much more appropriate.

But this is one example of a problem that permeates the book. Now, historical fantasy is among my favorite subgenres. Done right, the history brings texture and authenticity to the fantasy, while the fantasy brings imagination and possibility to the history. But here, the fantasy simply eliminates the stakes from history (we learn in the prologue that the entire unsympathetic aristocratic family survives the revolution unscathed, as their chateau is transformed into an inaccessible paradise), without bringing any liveliness to a tale bogged down in mundane details of jaunts to Lausanne and Paris and petty arguments among servants.

So, what are we left with? A slow-paced story, with no plot at all in the first half of the book and an ending we know from the start. A snooty narrator with no discernible goals or struggles, surrounded by a cast of characters too flat to justify the meandering. Dialogue that is often cliché and overblown, and a narrative peppered with French words and phrases (if you don't know what lessons in *comme il faut* might be, or precisely what is meant by the exclamation "foutre ce dedale infernal!", you'll likely feel lost at times). Tedious details about clothing and garden parties. One black guy who exists primarily to be referred to by all as an ape, because those 18th-century-ers sure were racist! Various aristocratic men who get away with assaulting and/or raping whomever they like, and peasants who are dismissed as unintelligent and perpetually discontented, in a setting that, despite the overabundance of mundane detail, still feels

underexplored.

Needless to say, I don't recommend seeking this one out. But for those seeking French-Revolution-inspired historical fantasy, all is not lost! Go read *Illusion* instead. You can thank me later.

H. Anne Stoj says

I must admit I'm disappointed in the novel. Which is a shame, as Greer Gilman gave it praise and I absolutely adore her work. Delia Sherman, not so much.

Ah, the French Revolution--probably one of the most exciting periods in history and yet...somehow in the magical land that I forget the name of, it's a light sneeze. Originally I thought it was going to be about that, the Revolution, but no. It's some very odd combination of fairytale, which I think I would've enjoyed without the French part, and historical fiction, which was not interesting with aristocrats untouched (that's where the fairytale part comes in, I guess) in the country safe from the world at large.

I could not stand the main character. Just, ugh. If she was in love with the woman she was a maid too, I wish it would've just been shown as everything is pathetic innuendo. Really, I got the point that she'd do anything at all for Madame and hated the Duc, blahblah (where's my spoon for my eyes) blah. It's a sad thing when it takes nearly the entire novel to get to the more interesting parts in the last few chapters.

What utterly confused me as well was the use of thee and thou when the characters were actually speaking, but the main character's more modern voice in the first person narration and oh, right, all of the French dropped left and right. Perhaps it was done for feel or some sense of authenticity, but for me it was overkill. Particularly when it came to fashion. Christ on a cracker, use the term but show me what the heck it is. While I do love historical fashion and find it interesting, I'm not sitting there with my guide to 18th century French clothing at my side. Or a French dictionary.

Thus, it was okay. I could appreciate the idea behind it and I think it could've been a lovely read save for the fact that it wasn't for me. Maybe for someone else.

BeetleBlack says

I generally really like Delia Sherman's writing, but this was not quite what I expected. I don't mind slow-moving novels about court intrigue or aristocratic households, but most of the characters were over-the-top unlikable to me. The narrator is billed as being clever and sharp-tongued, but she struck me mostly as distant and a little cowardly, rarely able to stand up for herself or anybody else, or even to express a strong opinion, even as everything around her dissolved into pandemonium. The most likable character is Pompey, then Linotte, but both disappear after a while on various quests. The only people Berthe seems to like is Pompey and Adele, her mistress -- for reasons unknown, as this woman displays absolutely no positive personality traits. And of course, (TW) as in every adult novel with women as main characters, a bunch of people inevitably end up raped (including Linotte, in that classically florid faux-historical prose -- think V. C. Andrews, but toned down a notch), not to mention dismembered, then raped again I guess. (TW) Lovely! But it's ok, because the ghosts of the children killed that way come back and Berthe's mistress breastfeeds them into peace. Or something.

Oh well.

Tintaglia says

4.5

Una narrazione ricca e lussureggiante, una fiaba francese lunga quattrocento pagine dallo stile impeccabile e dalla ricostruzione storica grandiosa.

Sfuggono le cinque stelline per il ritmo forse troppo lento, che mi ha imposto ogni tanto una pausa prima di riprenderlo in mano.

Madly Jane says

Review forthcoming. Re-reading.

This book is narrated by the maid of a young girl who is sent off to marry a French nobleman right before the French Revolution. The story follows their marriage and children and what happens to them as a family. There is a curse of sorts, or maybe it is a blessing, but it's magical and separates the family from the world of war.

The more I read this book, the more I appreciate the hard work put into it, the imagination and dedication to re-creating a sense of language, though not literally, but with mood and pacing, and the beats of sound.

It's dense, it's mannered fiction, it's got some really wicked characters. It's also a history, so the narrator at times is distant.

But I love it. It lingers on and on and on.

4th read.

Brittany says

The Goodreads blurb claims that this book is "Narrated by the family's chatterbox chambermaid, it is a rich, sinister, and funny novel of romance, sorcery, and aristocracy." I found almost all of these descriptors to be false. The maid's no chatterbox. While the setting may be rich and the plot and some characters sinister, it wasn't at all funny. But most disappointingly it wasn't even that interesting. I kept waiting for the real book to start. And while I was patiently wading through words to get there, the whole book passed and then ended. I kept hoping for the book I imagined it to be and didn't much enjoy the book that it was.

Juushika says

In eighteen century France, Berthe Duvet becomes chambermaid to Adèle du Fourchet, later the Duchess of Malvoeux. Centuries later, Berthe tells the story of a curse placed on the Duke's family which drove them all

to madness and isolation until the youngest child and only daughter set out, against the backdrop of revolutionary France, to bring back the porcelain dove and break the curse. A lush period piece overlayed by both French society and everpresent magic, *The Porcelain Dove* is somewhat contrived but is still an enjoyable and imaginative novel. The story moves slowly and the period-styled language may turn away some readers, but Sherman's protagonist is sharp-witted, her characters vivid, and the heavy influence of magic sets her book apart. I recommend it.

The Porcelain Dove is somewhat difficult to summarize—the curse placed on the family and the porcelain dove that will break it lies at the heart of the book yet makes up only a fraction of the plot. For the rest, Berthe leisurely recounts her own and Adèle's lives, lingering sometimes on the fantastical—such as the Duke's obsession with birds—and sometimes on the wholly mundane. Nor does the plot tend towards contemporary politics, despite the revolutionary setting. The book moves at a slow pace, pushing the titular aspects to the end and making the text seem somewhat longer than its 400 pages, although it never quite becomes boring. Furthermore, Berthe writes in the language appropriate to her time and setting, and so the text is heavy with "tis" and "twas" as well as more than a handful of French phrases—and these aspects, too, weight down the book. The overall style feels somewhat contrived and just a little unbelievable, and it may deter some readers.

However, beyond these aspects (and in the case of the slow storytelling, sometimes because of them), Sherman nevertheless weaves an intriguing tale. Berthe is a servant, but her story is larger than life—a witty narrator, she writes from isolated, heavenly immortality; the house she serves is plagued by curses and obsessions; magic overlays almost all of her story. Sherman is not shy of magic and does not constrain it to hints and glimpses, but rather, almost like a character, it takes a central role. As a result, everything becomes brighter, a little more absurd, and is set on a grander scale. These magical aspects are not always positive, but where they are dark they are also amusingly absurd, and even where they create conflict they do so in a way which, not unlike the a fairy tale, spin a fantastic story for the reader.

I picked up *The Porcelain Dove* because I've recently begun reading "fantasy of manners" novels, but this book contains little of the plotting and social intrigue that generally defines the genre and concentrates much more on those overt fantasy elements which are usually dismissed. In that respect the book was something of a disappointment, but read for its own right I'm quite glad I picked up this novel. For those with an appetite for slower moving novels and with the patience to read through the contrived language, this book offers a magical tale. While not perfect and in some ways unmemorable, *The Porcelain Dove* is a welcome change from usual historical fiction, mixing a period setting with imaginative fantasy and a sharp narrator. I enjoyed it, and I recommend it.

Ashley Sigmon says

A delightful novel inspired by and written in the style of the fairy tales of Madame d'Aulnoy. Highly recommended, especially for fans of Susanna Clarke, Sarah Waters, and, of course, Ellen Kushner.

Jessica Fulk says

A slightly mad fairy-tale, although, maybe more of a historical fiction/fantasy with a sub plot of peculiar magic. A tale told slowly, (not for everyone hence some of the disgruntled reviews) recreating pre-

revolutionary France, in wonderful detail, narrated by the maid devoted to her Duchess. All the magical action is saved for the last quarter of the book, but it's the detailed story and prose that is delightful.

Debbie Notkin says

I liked this book a lot when it was new in the 1980s, but I loved it when I re-read it before I interviewed Delia at a recent convention. Anyone who likes historical detail (especially women's historical detail), France, or thoughtful off-trail fantasy will be very happy.

Wealhtheow says

This mostly reads like a historical novel set in pre-revolutionary France, but fantastical elements slowly creep into the plot. I absolutely adored the main character--I wanted her to be a friend of mine, and I wanted her to figure out why she liked cuddling and kissing her mistress so much. Her unwitting lesbian love is *adorable*.

Lisa says

Have you ever wondered what an epic fantasy quest story would be like if told from the perspective of the regular people who got left behind?

Yeah, me neither. But apparently someone has, and that was clearly the inspiration for this book. However, it's 95% historical fiction and it just keeps going...and going....and going....

I should have given up a long time ago. Generally if it takes me more than a month to read a book, it's not worth it. But I got halfway through it and felt like I had spent too much time on it to just walk away. More fool me! Basically, fully half the book is a "dear diary" account of a chamber maid who seems to be in love with her mistress. Some magicky stuff happens but everybody acts like it's just another Tuesday. The French Revolution happens but they're not in Paris, so all the main characters survive. A theater troupe comes to town and puts on a play and THE ENTIRE FANTASY PLOT IS RELAYED IN THE LAST THREE CHAPTERS OF THE BOOK.

If you're realllllllly into historical fiction, then be my guest! If, like me, you were expecting a clever variation on a classic fairy tale, or even a historical fiction novel that detours into magical realism (a la Felix J. Palma's "The Map of Time") you're going to be sorely disappointed. It's very rarely that I view any book as a complete waste of my time but this was it. Two stars only because the author clearly did some painstaking research on the era, and the narrator is well developed (even if she is dull as dishwater).
