



Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France

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Poisoner, despot, necromancer -- the dark legend of Catherine de Medici is centuries old. In this critically hailed biography, Leonie Frieda reclaims the story of this unjustly maligned queen to reveal a skilled ruler battling extraordinary political and personal odds -- from a troubled childhood in Florence to her marriage to Henry, son of King Francis I of France; from her transformation of French culture to her fight to protect her throne and her sons' birthright. Based on thousands of private letters, it is a remarkable account of one of the most influential women ever to wear a crown.

Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France Details

Date : Published March 14th 2006 by Harper Perennial (first published January 1st 2002)

ISBN : 9780060744939

Author : Leonie Frieda

Format : Paperback 464 pages

Genre : History, Biography, Nonfiction, Cultural, France

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From Reader Review Catherine de Medici: Renaissance Queen of France for online ebook

Susan says

I have been drawn to Catherine de Medici's story for some time. After reading Susan Carroll's fictional account of her in her Cheney Sisters books, I became even more interested in her. Catherine was a fascinating sixteenth century woman. She was the Italian-born Queen of France, wife of Henri II.

Catherine Maria Romola di Lorenzo de Medici was born in Italy in 1519. She endured a lonely childhood, isolated in convents most of the time, exiled from her rightful place in her own country. Like many women of her time, she became a tool in the diplomacy of her two powerful uncles, who basically sold her off to marry the future king of France.

Catherine de Medici was married to Henri II when she was just 14 years old. She endured the dominance of Henri's mistress, Dian de Poitiers, with patience and grace, for 16 years. She adored her husband, even though he obviously preferred the company of his much older mistress. She was able to maneuver her way through shifting family alliances, and learned self-possession, deception, and strategy. The twists and turns of life at the French court led her to form brilliant political skills which held her in stead for the rest of her life.

Catherine de Medici had 10 children: three became French kings, one became Queen of Spain (as wife of Philip II). Her youngest son was a serious candidate to wed England's Queen Elizabeth.

The sudden death of Henri in 1552 at a jousting event, launched Catherine into three decades as regent and chief advisor to three sons who ruled France in succession. Her sons were weak kings, and she became the power behind the throne for many years. She was the all powerful Queen-Mother, the ruler of France in all but name. During this time, Catherine gained a reputation as the ultimate schemer, a woman without scruples or bounds.

She presided over eight Wars of Religion: civil wars between Protestants fighting for their right to worship freely, and Catholics trying to keep the country from splitting apart. The author discusses Catherine's many diplomatic efforts to resolve the difficulties peacefully. But treacherous behavior among hardcore Huguenots eventually hardened her attitude, culminating in the disastrous Massacre of St Bartholomew of 1572, which killed as many as 30,000 men, women, and children all over France.

Although her hands will be forever stained by the religious wars that sent France into frenzies during her watch, the author contends that Catherine attempted to reach compromise in the religious strife of her adopted country whenever possible.

Poisoner, despot, necromancer -- the dark legend of Catherine de Medici is centuries old. Catherine is widely seen as a talented, scheming and ruthless power-behind-the-throne figure, doing almost anything to promote and protect her children which included two Kings of France. In this biography, the author reclaims the story of this unjustly maligned queen to reveal a skilled ruler battling extraordinary political and personal odds -- from a troubled childhood in Florence to her marriage to Henri, son of King Francis I of France; from her transformation of French culture to her fight to protect her throne and her sons' birthright. This biography is a persuasive rehabilitation of Catherine, not as a nice woman, but as a shrewd leader who did what she had to.

Melisende d'Outremer says

I love this re-telling of the life of Catherine de Medici - this was my third reading - and still happy to indulge my interest.

LibraryCin says

3.75 stars

In the 16th century, Catherine de Medici came to France from Italy to marry the future king of France, Henri II. She loved him, but had to share him with a mistress, the woman he loved, Diane de Poitiers. Over the years, Catherine and Henri had ten children and Catherine outlived all except two of them. Three of her sons became kings of France, and Catherine was always there to help them rule. There were a number of religious wars in France over the years she ruled.

I've only read a little bit of fiction about Catherine (this is nonfiction). It was good. Being nonfiction, though, there were dry parts to it, but there were plenty of interesting things going on, as well. It's funny, from the fiction I read, I remember the rivalry between Catherine and Diane more than anything else, yet she is apparently best remembered for her part in a massacre pitting Protestants against Catholics (which I don't recall from the fiction at all, though it must have been there!). I did feel particularly bad for her when Henri was alive and she had Diane de Poitiers to contend with, but she did have a ruthless side, particularly when it came to protecting the crown for her sons.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

'I wonder that she did not do worse'

I very much enjoyed this biography. Catherine deMedici is so often painted in the blackest of terms that it is actually a delight to read a more balanced account.

This is a biography of Catherine de Medici (1519 -1589). Her husband became King Henri II of France, and three of their sons in their turn became Kings of France after Henri's death in 1559. As Queen Mother, Catherine was both important and powerful in France for thirty years.

Catherine was orphaned as an infant and imprisoned as a child. As heiress to an ancient name and a vast fortune, Catherine was brought up in the Florentine court and married off by her self-styled uncle (Pope Clement VII) to Henri, Duke of Orleans son of King Francis I of France. The history itself, full of dynastic and political intrigues, is fascinating, and it is a credit to Ms Frieda's style that she is able to accurately render the history without confusing it.

At various times it has been fashionable to paint Catherine de Medici in the darkest of hues as a murderer, and as a self serving intriguer who presided over the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre of 24 August 1572 when thousands of French Protestants were slaughtered. Such a picture of Catherine is incomplete. She was a contemporary of Queen Elizabeth I of England and while she may have lacked some of Elizabeth's ability

and skill, she equalled her in courage and determination.

This is a very readable biography which puts some much needed context around the life and times of Catherine de Medici. The Valois dynasty ended some months after Catherine's death with the death of Henri III. The French crown then passed to Henri IV (Henri of Navarre): a fascinating monarch in his own right. I recommend this book both as an example of a wonderfully written biography but also as a study of a multi-dimensional woman who was fascinating in her own right.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

Brittany says

This book was really rough for me to get through which, given the reviews and my fondness for historical biographies, was a surprise. It may be one of those cases that it just wasn't the right time for me to read this book. However, there was also a sort of bloodlessness and pedantry about the way the text read that was off-putting. The *events* were quite exciting, and sometimes even scandalous, but the dry tone of the narration put them at a remove and made them read like a textbook. Frieda also had an irritating habit of referring to items it seems "everyone" knows (or assumes they know) about Catherine de' Medici, but she never goes on to elaborate. Perhaps I didn't pay attention to this section in school, but I didn't know (or assume) much of anything at all about her. It would have been nice for her to fill in the gaps of how Catherine is painted and then contrasted with the actual historical record.

I may give this book a try again later. I did make it several hundred pages in before completely losing interest.

Lois says

This is well researched and interesting.

It's not a biography of Catherine de Medici though. Catherine is not the center of this very interesting narrative. The men in her life are.

This is a detailed account of the politics that led to Catherine becoming queen and what happened during her reign.

I gave this one star because the author makes a bizarre reference to 'white slaves'. Slavery is not tied to black skin or west african ancestry. White people do not even exist in the time period in which this occurred.

Neither Catherine or ANY of her contemporaries worldwide would not what a white person was or what it referred to. These people would've been identified by their country or city state of origin. Even west african enslaved peoples were referred to as 'angolans' during this period, not black. So it's shocking to me that someone who speaks 5 languages and has a Ph.D would make this kinda of racist error. Yikes.

Ivana says

Jeden z najlepších (ak nie najlepší) a zároveň jeden z mála životopisov Kataríny Medicejskej v dostupnom jazyku. Komplexný, vychádza z prameňov, s dobrým poznámkovým aparátom, ktorý podľa mňa spoľahlivo to, čo

poznámkový aparát sp??a? má - ke? chcete vedie? viac, pod?a odkazov sa viete dopátra? k ?alším textom ?i priamo prame?om (ja som to po?as diplomky rozhodne robila :-)).

Napriek tomu, že je to odborná kniha, ?íta sa ve?mi dobre, pamätám si, že ma tešilo si ju pre?íta? od za?iatku do konca, nielen v nej vyh?adáva? potrebné fakty k práci.

Je to prosto stará kamoška :-)

Emilie says

I'd read a little about Catherine de Medici in passing when she was mentioned in other historical works, but I'd never read an entire biography. I'd read about her dark reputation and the whispers of her using witchcraft and poison but it was incredibly interesting to read about her as a person, not just a dark figure. She is painted in as dark a light as Richard III has been to English history, and it is refreshing to read a work that presents her in a more realistic way.

Frieda accepts that Catherine did have a dark side, but she also makes sure that the reader understand that some of the things she did and said have been taken out of context. Catherine was a strong woman, married to a man that she was passionately in love with (even obsessed with) that did not seem to care for her romantically one way or the other. He did grow to respect her near the end, giving her political power, but she was cast into the shadows by Diane de Poitiers. The story of Diane and Catherine is well written by Frieda; the two women were rivals, yet they sometimes did share a mutual respect, even banding together a couple of times when politics called for it.

Frieda makes Catherine a real person; one of not just evil desires, but one with a complex personality. She explains that Catherine did have compassion; for her country, her husband and her children. She loved her adopted country and wanted it to be unified during the times of the religious wars. Her relationships with her children were complicated, she clearly loved them, but did not know how to show it. Catherine was a woman of power in a time when women were not supposed to hold any power, and she managed to hold onto it, even if some of her actions (acknowledged by Frieda) were not in good taste.

Frieda also spends time on Catherine's interest in the occult and fortune telling. Catherine clearly believed that she could see the future (she is said to have dreamed of Henri's death before he died), and took others who were said to have the sight seriously.

All in all, an exceptional work about a complicated woman.

Madeline says

Catherine de Medici has always had a pretty bad historical reputation. Like pretty much all women who wielded even a little bit of power, she has been often portrayed as greedy, power-hungry, manipulative, and a general psycho bitch. Add that to the fact that she came from a family *known* for their Machiavellian power grabs (Machiavelli literally *wrote the book on despotism* for the Medici family), and then there's the little detail of one of the worst religious massacres in history happening on her watch.

The deck is stacked against Catherine from the beginning, so Leonie Frieda has a difficult task ahead of her: write a fair and balanced account of Catherine's life, explaining her motivations and her point of view, not quite absolving her but seeking to explain and explore her actions. She goes through Catherine's life, from her birth into the Medici family during a time of danger and turmoil (Catherine spent the majority of her childhood being hidden away in a convent so her family's enemies couldn't find her and kill her) to her death after being the regent of France during decades of civil war.

What I found interesting about Frieda's account of Catherine is that she doesn't try to divert blame or make Catherine out to be a victim of historical bias. Leonie doesn't shy away from the, frankly, evil aspects of Catherine's personality: she ordered the assassination of several prominent Protestant leaders who threatened her power, was extremely protective of her crown and wanted to stay in control at any cost, and openly hated her daughter Margot. Most interesting is Frieda's account of the infamous St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, where as many as 20,000 Protestants were murdered. Frieda's explanation is that the massacre started as a carefully orchestrated execution, where about a dozen Protestant leaders were supposed to be quietly and effectively assassinated, which would leave the Protestant cause leaderless and powerless. That, Frieda insists, was all that was intended to happen, and things got out of hand when the targets' bodyguards had to be killed as well, and some of them got away, and then the killing was happening everywhere, and many people used the chaos as an excuse to settle old scores - many of the dead weren't even Protestants.

Okay, so Catherine de Medici didn't order the deaths of 20,000 people, she just ordered the deaths of a selected few. *This is not better*, and Frieda's justification is basically, "she did what she had to do, and anyway, it was a different time!" Sure, whatever. As far as I'm concerned, if you're going to do a biography of an evil person, just embrace it. Catherine de Medici was a shrewd, smart, power-hungry psychopath, and that doesn't make her any less cool.

Frieda is biased in Catherine's favor, hardcore, and her bias shows most clearly whenever she's discussing Diane de Poitiers. Diane was the mistress of Henri II (Catherine's husband) and she was really cool - smart, politically involved, super hot, and twenty years older than Henri, which you just have to respect. And holy shit, guys, Frieda *hates* her. The way Frieda tells it, Diane was a greedy whore who kept meddling in politics and keeping Henri away from Catherine while also forcing him to give her all these jewels and castles. She's always throwing in these snide lines about how Diane was so greedy and showed "false humility" whenever she was at court functions (like Diane was somehow upstaging Catherine by keeping to the sidelines?) and it's like, u mad, Frieda? If I was the sort of person to put gifs in my reviews, this is the part where I would insert a "haters gonna hate" gif, but I respect you all too much to do that. Most of Frieda's statements about Diane have no evidence or basis aside from the fact that Frieda just really doesn't like her, and it was disheartening to see her let her own opinions intrude on the book.

All in all, this is a good biography of a complex, admittedly cruel but competent, and fascinating woman. It's a great introduction to the other side of Catherine, and for more information about who she was and why she did what she did. Frieda just needs to step off Diane.

Timothy Urban says

I'd read somewhere that Catherine de Medici introduced France to the concept of eating food with a fork. This was a detail I was hoping to learn more about when I started reading this rather huge and thorough book.

There was little mention of forks, it turned out, but there were so many other rich and absorbing details, historical and personal, that this turned into an unexpectedly gripping read. History really came to life for me with this one, especially as it gave context to the Protestant movement and mirrored events of the Elizabethan era (our monarchy murdered Catholics, the French monarchy murdered Protestants, and everyone fretted about Spain).

And I love that this was written by a Swedish former fashion model - confounding all writerly stereotypes -

and someone who unashamedly wanted the always demonised C de M to be reappraised.

Orsolya says

There is much more to Catherine de Medici than just her adversity to her husband's popular mistress (Diane de Poitiers) or her involvement with the St. Bartholomew Day Massacre. Not only was she an important political figure for over 30 years; but she also has "fun facts" (such as introducing and popularizing nicotine, handkerchiefs, female pantaloons, forks, and side saddles) and had two VERY interesting children amongst her 10 (transvestite –tendency induced Henri III and independent but scandalous Margot). Leonie Frieda attempts to bring all of Catherine to light in her biography, "Catherine De Medici". Sadly, "attempt" should be emphasized.

Leonie Frieda's "Catherine de Medici" begins in a dry and overly scholarly style, albeit in an easy-to-understand language. Starting with a background description of the Medicis, Francis I, Charles (Holy Roman Emperor), etc; Frieda's knowledge is extensive and all-inclusive. Unfortunately, the reader doesn't feel closeness to Catherine and more to the events surrounding her. Although this is supposed to be a biography; it is merely a window-look at events with Catherine as a mere side-character. Frieda's work lacks the desired amount of quotes or insights into Catherine's actions and/or feelings. I kept feeling like I had to wait to REALLY get to Catherine... and that never arrived. Despite this, the "Catherine de Medici" encourages page-turning due to Frieda's evident knowledge and passion on the topic.

The flow isn't smooth, as the writing is filled with dry moments, exciting parts, and back to dryness without a clear intertwined effect. Most often, the focus revolved too much on the political landscape versus on Catherine's role or how she was affected. Again, she felt too much like an afterthought. On the plus side, it was very well annotated and noted with pieces of compelling information (even if these facts didn't involve Catherine, directly).

The point being that Frieda depicts each of Catherine's sons' reigns to an all-encompassing level but the claim of the book to present the enigmatic woman that she is, never shined through. Yes, her actions are described at times, but there is a massive filter between her and the reader. The rare moments when Catherine did stand in the spotlight only (sadly) lasted a few pages at a time. Frieda's work is an excellent resource and history account but not a complete Catherine biography. I have read better representations of Catherine in historical fiction books, even. This lack of getting to know Catherine's true nature leads too much frustration and a void in forming an emotional tie to her personality. Only ¼ of the book is truly about Catherine. "Catherine de Medici" isn't a terrible book; just very lofty, large in scope, and is presented as something that it isn't.

The best part? Not one, not two, but three sections of glorious colorplates. However, I was seeking to read a biography that would bring Catherine to life; not a coffee table picture book. Another positive note was the lack of glittery bias and truer focus on factual accounts.

One thing is for certain: unlike many females with slandered reputations known for their romantic or sexual liaisons; Catherine was known for the political arena which demonstrates her sense of character and strength. There is always a reason to look beyond propaganda.

The best way to sum up this book is a conversation between myself and my boyfriend, Michael:

Me: "This Catherine book is poo. Well, it isn't REALLY poo. It just doesn't really focus on Catherine's psyche or an insight into her life. It is a GREAT resource for a student writing a paper on the events of her husband's reign or that of her children but I thought this was supposed to be a biography on Catherine. So, it isn't poo, per se..."

Michael: "No, it sounds like poo".

Kiesha ~ 1Cheekyllass says

I enjoy learning about Catherine de Medici... The wife of one King and the mother of 3. My only gripe about this book is it's too short as it's Abridged (eww). Great narration by Anna Massey...She has the raspy voice like Davina Porter but not quite as talented. ♥

Lady of the Lake says

I read this in its paper form and then again recently I listened to an excellent narration by Anna Massey. I liked the audio version better... As this read well enough I felt Anna Massey had a wonderful pleasant voice with just enough lilt & inflections where it was as she was telling me personally the life of Catherine. The information in this bio was much more favorable to Catherine than many other bios leave out. So many paint her as a dark cold woman who even may have practiced witchcraft. It's nice to read a much more balanced story...even tho nothing new came from it I enjoyed this excellent read.

Elizabeth Sulzby says

This is a real history, full of facts, relationships, and events that filled the long life of Catherine de Medici who became queen (consort) of France's Henri II and then was the queen regent of three of their sons during the era of France's Religious Wars. Fortunately, there are numerous records, letters, and memoirs from this era. This Italian descendant of the de Medici family was hard to "marry off" in France because she was not of royal lineage, but from a "merchant family." The book begins with a summary of the Medici family but did not stress the contributions to the arts by the family, especially Lorenzo "The Magnificent." Catherine herself continued the family history of sponsoring the arts.

Catherine de Medici was treated as an evil manipulative queen and she certainly was manipulative, including using her voice and statements to ingratiate herself when needed. Childless for 10 years, she then rapidly had 10 children and she made certain that her sons inherited the crown but she was the real ruler of France. As Freida portrayed her, the real period of evil was the Massacre on Saint Bartholomew's day in which Huguenots and Royal armies battled gruesomely under her rule. Prior to that time she had led to many treaties that were intended to pacify the land. Frieda distinguished the treaties that allowed for freedom of religion and, later in Catherine's reign, freedom of thought.

While Catherine was regent, she continued to rule and advise her sons long after they reached a normal age of rule on their own (18 usually but "contracts" could set different ages). While her Catholicism would have led her to support Mary, Queen of Scots, she and England's Queen Elizabeth communicated quite often near

the end of Catherine's life.

After finishing this history, I read the historical fiction by Jeanne Kalogridis, *The Devil's Queen: A Novel of Catherine de Medici*. The novel appears to be based on much of the documentation of this history with two large differences. In the novel, pages and pages are based on Catherine's meetings with astrologers and other students of magic throughout her life. In the history, it is barely mentioned and the characters of the astrologers and Nostrodamus are not mentioned. In the novel, the author says she only depicted 5 of the children because it would "take up too much space" to have the others born. Ironically, the history deals with the births and names of all the children on ONE PAGE.

Elena says

A solid biography about Catherine de Medici, wife of Henri II of France, and mostly remembered for the part she played in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

Catherine is definitely a controversial figure, but Frieda always shows her in a very positive light (and sometimes she is too biased), focusing on her best qualities, like a lively intelligence and a strong resourcefulness. Despite how you feel about Catherine, you cannot deny she possessed formidable strength and bravely faced many hard challenges.

For example, at just fifteen, the pope dies without having paid her dowry nor having given the promised lands to king Francis. This is catastrophic for Catherine, who is despised by her husband and the whole country, and even worse childless. But she already shows an incredible political acumen by allying herself with the most important people at court, first of all king Francis. Her dramatic speech to him, where she tells him his husband deserves a better wife, is fantastically daring and smart.

Frieda's style is a little dry but I still appreciated it. She always stays very focused on her subject and is able to tell many complicated intrigues and events without being confusing at all. If you are not overly familiar with the subject, you will find this biography very readable and easy to follow.
