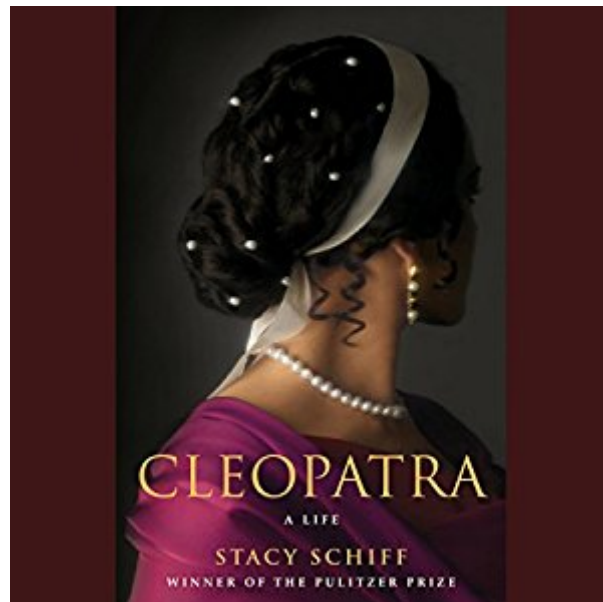


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Cleopatra: A Life



Synopsis

Her palace shimmered with onyx, garnets, and gold, but was richer still in political and sexual intrigue. Above all else, Cleopatra was a shrewd strategist and an ingenious negotiator. Though her life spanned fewer than 40 years, it reshaped the contours of the ancient world. She was married twice, each time to a brother. She waged a brutal civil war against the first when both were teenagers. She poisoned the second. Ultimately she dispensed with an ambitious sister as well; incest and assassination were family specialties. Cleopatra appears to have had sex with only two men. They happen, however, to have been Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, among the most prominent Romans of the day. Both were married to other women. Cleopatra had a child with Caesar and - after his murder - three more with his Antony. Already she was the wealthiest ruler in the Mediterranean; the relationship with Antony confirmed her status as the most influential woman of the age. The two would together attempt to forge a new empire, in an alliance that spelled their ends. Cleopatra has lodged herself in our imaginations ever since. Famous long before she was notorious, Cleopatra has gone down in history for all the wrong reasons. Shakespeare and Shaw put words in her mouth. Michelangelo, Tiepolo, and Elizabeth Taylor put a face to her name. Along the way, Cleopatra's supple personality and the drama of her circumstances have been lost. In a masterly return to the classical sources, Stacy Schiff here boldly separates fact from fiction to rescue the magnetic queen whose death ushered in a new world order. Rich in detail, epic in scope, Schiff's is a luminous, deeply original reconstruction of a dazzling life.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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.

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 liaisons 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.

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