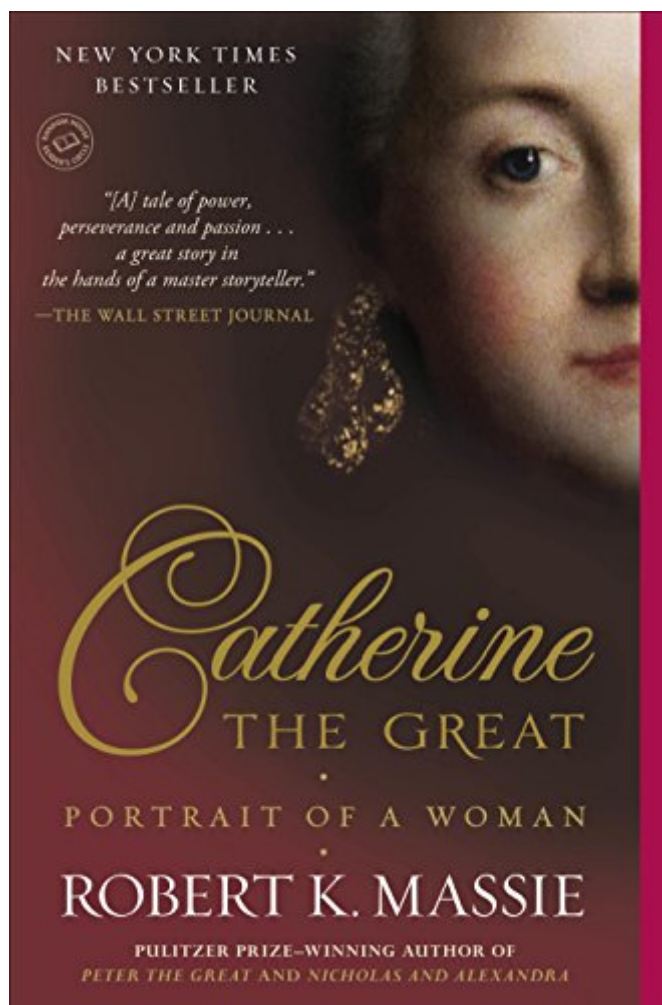


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# Catherine The Great: Portrait Of A Woman



## 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 “An absorbing, satisfying biography.” •Los Angeles Times “Juicy and suspenseful.” •The New York Times Book Review “A great life, indeed, and irresistibly told.” •Salon NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY The New York Times • The Washington Post • USA Today • The Boston Globe • San Francisco Chronicle • Chicago Tribune • Newsweek/The Daily Beast • Salon • Vogue • St. Louis Post-Dispatch • The Providence Journal • Washington Examiner • South Florida Sun-Sentinel • BookPage • Bookreporter • Publishers Weekly BONUS: This edition contains a Catherine the Great reader’s guide.

## Book Information

File Size: 13322 KB

Print Length: 574 pages

Page Numbers Source ISBN: 0679456724

Publisher: Random House (November 8, 2011)

Publication Date: November 8, 2011

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ISBN-10: 158836044X

ISBN-13: 978-1588360441

ASIN: B004J4X9L0

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Screen Reader: Supported

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #22,981 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #1

in [Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Modern \(16th-21st Centuries\) > 18th Century](#) #15

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## Customer Reviews

This took a while to get through, but I am so glad I did. While I am not knowledgeable about Russian history, this filled in a lot of important history over the decades in an interesting tale of Catherine the Great's origins and path to greatness -- and the geo-political history of those years. Understanding this history has a lot to say about the current leader of Russia and the historical motivations in current times.

Phenomenal, classic, well written work by Massie. This tome covers Catherine the Great of Russia from childhood to death. Beautifully written, flows well. It covers all the intrigue and humanism of Catherine's reign. Highly recommend.

When you think of enlightened monarchs in 18th century Europe, fingers will primarily point to Her Empress Catherine the Great (Catherine II). Such a powerful character in the game of European borders, I have yet to find a piece of literature that does her the great justice she deserves. This one lands pretty near perfect in marks. Sans her own recollection of her early life (*Memoirs*), Massie performs a rather accurate examination of the life of Sophie, by drawing from every avenue of information that is available on the enlightened despot. The tapestry that is woven through the pages is a powerful, and rather readable story of a woman who pulled through the cold borders of Russia without knowing the language and rose from the silent wife of Peter of Holstein (Peter III) to the monarchical might that she was known. Inciting a strong sense of nationalism in the hearts of

her people, mastering her political opponents through sheer intelligence, and becoming one of the largest patrons of the arts in Europe during her times is how Catherine the Great pulled her Empire closer to its western borders and continued the connections that Peter the Great years before had attempted to establish. This book captures these pinnacles of her reign and ties them all together into an easily digestible book that renders itself a pleasure to read. The reason I am giving it four stars? I feel that in the end Robert K. Massie appeals to his audience and deviates too much from the life of Catherine the Great - - taking almost a chapter to describe the events of the French Revolution; leaving many strings untied as to why this event was so devastating to the Empress of Russia. Some might wonder if he was growing bored of the Golden Age of Russia in the last pages of writing this book. None the less, an essential and most certainly a toast to a monarch who was able to put her emotion aside and rule a country without much personal emotion.

I initially regretted that my book club chose this 600-page biography, as I read a biography of Catherine the Great many years ago and remembered it vividly, and have also seen a PBS TV show on part of her life more recently. But there was no tedium at all in reading this story that I already knew, as the author swept me up into Catherine's life immediately, so that I was totally absorbed. It took me just over a week to finish it, even though I was busy with other matters. Her determination to be empress was very striking; from the time she came to Russia at 14 she worked hard at it, enduring great isolation, cruelty, and loss to maximize her possibility of succeeding to the crown. Since she was not by any means in the line of succession, related to the royal family only by marriage to the heir, her conviction of the possibility of reigning by herself was astonishing. Beyond surviving vicious palace politics she had little training to be empress -- she was largely self-educated through reading. Yet her grasp of European politics and diplomacy seemed instinctive. She continued Peter the Great's task of turning Russia into a modern European empire, and established the Russian intelligentsia. It seems that it was no more than a polite fiction that her children were by her totally disinterested husband -- she had lovers constantly once it became clear that was the only way she could have children. Once she was empress her favorites were just as acknowledged as those of the kings of France and Britain. I was also struck with how she had to reward her allies and subjects with titles, land and raw cash, essentially buying their loyalty. I had read in other books that the first part of her reign was brilliant and the second part disastrous, but this author doesn't seem to feel that way. Anyone who is interested in 18th century Russian or European history will find this book rewarding and a surprisingly easy read.

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