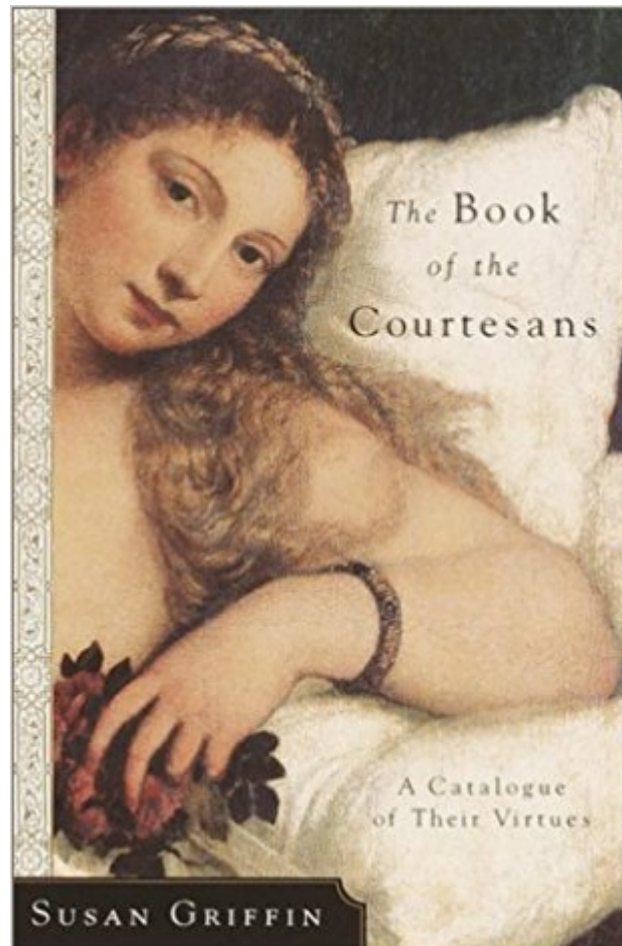


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The Book Of The Courtesans: A Catalogue Of Their Virtues



Synopsis

From Pulitzer-Prize-nominated author Susan Griffin comes an unprecedented, provocative look at the dazzling world of the West's first independent women, whose lively liaisons brought them unspoken influence, wealth, and freedom. While they charmed some of Europe's most illustrious men honing their social skills as well as their sexual ones, the great courtesans gained riches, power, education, and sexual freedom in a time when other women were denied all of these. From Imperia of sixteenth-century Rome, who personified the Renaissance ideal of beauty; Mme. de Pompadour, the arbiter of all things fashionable in eighteenth-century Paris and Versailles; Liane de Pougy, known in France during the Belle Epoque as "Our National Courtesan"; to Sarah Bernhardt, who, following in her mother's footsteps, supported herself in her early career with a second profession, *The Book of the Courtesans* tells the life stories and intricacies of the lavish lifestyles of these women. Unlike their geisha counterparts, courtesans neither lived in brothels nor bent their wills to suit their suitors. They were strong-willed, autonomous, and plucky. An open secret, their presence can be felt throughout our culture. The muses who enflamed the hearts and imaginations of our most celebrated artists, they were also artists in their own right. They wrote poetry and novels, invented the cancan at the Moulin Rouge, and presented celebrated acts at the Folies Bergères. They helped to influence and shape the sensibility of modern literature, painting, and fashion. When Greek sculptor Praxiteles wanted to depict Venus he used a famous courtesan as a model, as in later centuries Titian, Veronese, Raphael, Giorgione, and Boucher did when they painted goddesses. When Marcel Proust was a young man it was the courtesan Laure Hayman who took him under her wing, introducing him to the right people, and providing inspiration for one of literature's greatest masterpieces. And they often had considerable political influence too. When King Louis XV needed advice on foreign affairs or appointments of state he turned to Jeanne du Barry as well as Pompadour. In her witty and insightful prose, as Griffin celebrates these alluring and fascinating women, she restores a lost legacy of women's history. She gives us the stories of these amazing women who, starting from impoverished or unimpressive beginnings, garnered chateaux, fine coaches, fabulous collections of jewelry, and even aristocratic titles along the way. And through a brilliant exploration of their extraordinary abilities, skills, and talents which Griffin playfully categorizes as their virtues "Timing, Beauty, Cheek, Brilliance, Gaiety, Grace, and Charm" her book explains how, while helping themselves, through their often outrageous, always entertaining examples, the great courtesans not only enriched our cultural heritage but helped to liberate women from the social, sexual, and economic strictures that confined them. Intensively researched and beautifully crafted, *The Book of the Courtesans* delves into scintillating but often

hidden worlds, telling stories gleaned from many sources, including courtesans' memoirs, presented along with stunning rare photographs to create memorable portraits of some of the most pivotal figures in women's history.

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Customer Reviews

I wanted to love this book, due to its fascinating subject matter and highly lauded author. However, I found myself continuously irritated with it, for a number of reasons: 1. The author has a talent for stating the obvious, ad nauseum. 2. The scholarship seems sloppy. Griffin makes much of a Courbet painting that includes a courtesan wearing a Kashmir shawl, placing a feminist significance upon the shawl as an object "made in a far-off country by women for very little money." If the author had done her homework, she would have discovered that 19th-century Kashmir shawls were made by men (for very little money.) In another chapter, the author tells of a man supposedly named "Alfred Sert," the husband of the 19th-century art patron Misia Sert, who divorced her to marry a courtesan. However, the dastardly cad in question was actually Misia's second husband, Alfred Edwards. (Her third husband was the artist Jos  Maria Sert.) These are just a couple of facts that I happen to know about, which causes me to speculate about what other errors might be lurking in the text. 3. The avoidance of grammatical sentence structure is annoying rather than artistic. There are at least two sentences on every page that start with the word "But." (In one place the author begins two sentences in a row with that word.) The text is also littered profusely with sentence fragments. A skilled writer can use such devices judiciously to good effect, but it makes for choppy reading when they are employed on every single blasted page. Alas, I wanted to be beguiled and seduced by the

courtesans, but instead, my ardor was dampened by the foibles of their champion.

The Book of the Courtesans: A Catalogue of Their Virtues by Susan Griffin. Not recommended. In The Book of the Courtesans, Susan Griffin tries to capture the magic that made courtesans some of the most noteworthy and notorious women of their times. According to Griffin, a courtesan would need to have several virtues to succeed, including: timing, beauty, cheek, brilliance, gaiety, grace, and charm. Mixed with these virtues are seven "erotic stations": flirtation, suggestion, arousal, seduction, rapture, satiety, and afterglow. Griffin uses biographies to illustrate how various courtesans exhibited these virtues, for example, courtesan and poet Veronica Franco's beginnings and career are covered under the chapter on "Brilliance." Griffin, who earlier separated the concept of courtesan from those of mistress and prostitute, runs into trouble, for many of her plentiful examples do not fit her definition of courtesans. For example, she talks at great length about Mme. de Pompadour (mistress to Louis XV), Marion Davies (mistress to William Randolph Hearst), and "Klondike Kate" (gold rush saloon dancer). The point of naming these virtues is lost if a courtesan cannot be found who exemplified them. Griffin's information is untrustworthy. She states that Jeanne du Barry's father was a monk as though this is an accepted historical fact. Most biographical information on du Barry, however, states that her father is unknown but could have been a cleric. There are numerous instances of this kind of misleading information throughout. She talks of a suggestive sculpture in the Musée d'Orsay based upon a body cast of courtesan Apollonie Sabatier, but art sources say this story is unconfirmed and originated from a rumour circulated at the salon where the sculpture debuted. It is difficult to separate Griffin's blithe statements from the established facts. The author doesn't stop there, however. She engages in flights of fancy that sound poetic but have little basis in fact or reality. As a child, Mogador and her mother lived in fear of one of her mother's former lovers. She escaped him twice, and, according to Griffin, "the exhilaration of these two escapes must have livened her [dance] steps" later in life. How the terror of running from being beaten and brutalised as a child could lead to "exhilaration" while dancing is clear only to Griffin. She uses "exuberance" in a similar context. In addition, Griffin stretches metaphors past their limits, to the point where they are ludicrous rather than apt or poetic. For example, "even while destiny was robbing C  leste [Mogador] of any sense of safety, like the careening rise and fall of the polka, it also conspired to tempt her with something grander than simple security." She says Marie Dorval "nearly asphyxiated herself for each performance," which seems comparable to being a "little pregnant." She states that, like the other poor people of Paris, Mogador saw the melodramatic events of her own life reflected [on stage]" and that "even today a pulse can be felt to

vibrate back and forth between the stage and the audience." What is lost here is that the members of today's audiences are unlikely ever to have been poor in the same sense as Mogador. *Courtesans* is replete with these kinds of disconnects. When discussing beauty, Griffin gives an example of a canyon, then claims that beauty "needs" to be enhanced-but fails to explain why or how one can enhance the natural beauty of a canyon. In other words, she demonstrates the opposite of her point-beauty does not need to be enhanced, and her concept of beauty is phony and ephemeral. She also says Blanche d'Antigny, at age 10, hid in the attic because of a "desperate longing" to stay in the "beautiful countryside." The obvious never occurs to Griffin-that small children are rarely eager to leave the only stable home they have ever known, even an ugly one. Another leap of logic occurs later when Griffin says, "Many men would have been threatened by such potency in a lover." Perhaps this is generally true, but Griffin seems oblivious to the fact that "many men" aren't Louis XV, king of France. His sense of security about du Barry's "potency" is hardly remarkable, since he is the primary source of it. Mostly, Griffin idealises the courtesan's career, and much of *Courtesans* seems to reflect her personal regret that this lifestyle opportunity belongs to history. She quotes Veronica Franco as writing, "You can do nothing worse in this life . . . than to force the body into such servitude . . . to give oneself in prey to so many, to risk being despoiled, robbed or killed . . . what fate could be worse?" Franco's advice is quite clear-except to Griffin, who says, "In fact, the impassioned tone of her letter does not contradict the passionate defense she made of courtesantry [where?], but instead outlines the perils courtesans faced . . ." "What fate could be worse?" than subjecting one's will and body completely to others seems a very specific condemnation of the lifestyle, but not to Griffin. We can't expect anything more of the author who peppers this "history" with page after page of fiction and who says, "But that is why fiction exists-so we may see the undocumented moments that would otherwise pass out of history, and thus out of our understanding, unwitnessed." In other words, don't file *The Book of the Courtesans* under "History/Women's History," as the cover suggests. Shelve it under "Susan Griffin's idealist imagination." Better yet, consider reading a different book altogether. *Grandes Horizontales* by Virginia Rounding has been recommended as an alternative. As an aside, there is no index, which also detracts from any value this book may have had as a reference. Diane L. Schirf, 12 May 2004.

The subtitle of the book is "a catalog of their virtues". They are: Timing, Beauty, Cheek, Brilliance, Gaiety, Grace and Charm. The author tries to tie in these virtues with short biographies of, mostly French, *cocottes* of the 19th century. This simply does not work, no matter how much source material is dragged into the book. Besides, I have trouble describing Klondike Kate or Marlene

Dietrich as courtesans. Besides, Ms. Griffin uses rather harsh and basic language, although she is given to occasional flights of lyrical fancy that can evoke a chuckle or two. Any courtesan having all of the required seven virtues would be Wonder Woman. And the main item missing here is CLASS.

Certainly the subject material is interesting. It's the writer's style that is lacking. It's like she is writing a thesis for university and has to increase the size of the paper and so she writes on and on. It's overly scholarly and analytical when the reader just wants the story/history of these courtesans. As others have said, I mostly skim-read it, skimming over the paragraphs to try to pull out the tidbits of interest.

One of my friends gave me this book as a late Christmas' present. I like reading about courtesans ever since I enjoyed reading "Nana" by Emile Zola. The subject is a meaty one, filled with lots of whimsy and cheekiness. This writer, however, managed to deflate every ounce of excitement I had for this book. Her writing style is best described as a mix of stream-of-consciousness and ultra-flowery wording. I managed to hang on for three chapters before I ended up donating this book to a local library. A total snooze on a very interesting subject. I would give it no stars if it was possible.

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