



## Sena Jeter Naslund

**Abundance, A Novel of Marie Antoinette**  
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### The Story Behind the Novel

In 1999, when I was on book tour with my novel *Ahab's Wife*, I stayed in an unusual bed-and-breakfast in the quaint and beautiful town of Darian, Georgia, beswagged with Spanish moss and Christmas decorations. My museum-like room was "The Woman's Room" and it featured a shelf of books about famous women, among them Stefan Zweig's biography titled *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman*. After the community clambake (where I read from *Ahab's Wife*), I settled down with the musty biography, which had been a 1930's Book-of-the-Month-Club main selection, translated from the original German. When I couldn't finish my reading, the dear proprietress of the B&B allowed me to take the biography with me on my travels.

Given a contemporary, feminist sensibility, I soon found myself protesting Zweig's view of Marie Antoinette as a shallow, totally untalented, "ordinary" woman. When he quoted pieces of her letters to illustrate her limitations, I found in those same quotes evidence of a sensitive and insightful person, and a good writer. I began to suspect that history had not treated the unfortunate Queen of France very fairly.

Even as a child, I had found the Marie Antoinette story a fascinating one. No matter how much power and prestige one might have, one was never safe. Even a Queen could wind up with her head on the chopping block. To me, her story was a cautionary tale about the vulnerable human condition, and that inescapable vulnerability was a reason why we should all be kind to one another.

As an adult contemplating the unjust and brutal execution of Marie Antoinette, I saw a story with the contours of classic tragedy. *Ahab's Wife*, unlike Melville's Shakespeare-like tragedy *Moby-Dick*, was intended to be a triumph. Now I wanted to explore what it would be like to write in the tragic mode. Of course in the Shakespearean sense, all tragic heroes triumph in a certain way: by being true to their natures, however flawed, and by transcending the depths of suffering. I wondered if by the end of her life, Marie Antoinette had learned enough about compassion, suffering, and courage to achieve the stature of a tragic figure, a certain nobility as a human being. Even Stefan Zweig found the way Marie Antoinette faced her death to be inspiring.

Before I embark on writing a novel, I usually ask if I myself have some things in common with the main character. Certainly I'm not facing a guillotine during the French Revolution, but we are all facing "the great guillotine in the sky"—our own mortality. I can only hope to have as much courage as Marie Antoinette. Like Marie Antoinette, I lost my father at an early age; her mother and my mother both were independent women of intelligence and courage. Like Marie Antoinette, I like to imagine and to pretend. She had a whole village built, like a set where she could pretend to be an ordinary peasant, not the queen. As a novelist, I, too, spend a lot of time imagining. And also like Marie Antoinette, I have a passionate love of music and of flower gardening. But I needed to know a lot more about Marie Antoinette.

When Antonia Fraser's biography came out only a few years ago, I found scholarly confirmation for what I had suspected about how earlier historians had misrepresented Marie Antoinette. For example, she never said of starving people lacking even bread, "Let them eat cake." On the contrary, there are many instances of her immediate and direct compassion for people in distress. True, she was extravagant and ill educated, but she was a charming conversationalist and a person of great courage. Throughout her life, she was kind; and she was not untalented, being a fine harpist.

At this point, I felt I could legitimately create a tragic fictive character of depth, intelligence and sensitivity accurately based on the historical last queen of France.

The world of Marie Antoinette has been a fascinating one—such refinement and elegance, such cruelty and violence, during the Reign of Terror. Marie Antoinette's story has repercussions for our own time. As in 18th century France, there is an ever-widening gap between the super rich and the poor, and between political ideologies. Terrorism and infringement of human rights are as much a menace to our world as they were during the French Reign of Terror. *Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette* celebrates what is precious to us in our own lives while promoting compassion that transcends economic and class divisions.

### A Brief Timeline of Events: Marie Antoinette and the Age of Revolution

1755 The youngest daughter of Empress Regnant Maria Theresa and Holy Roman Emperor Francis I is born in Vienna on November 2. She is christened Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna von Habsburg-Lothringen.

1766 A French marriage alliance is proposed by Vienna to preserve the amity established by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) and the Seven Years' War.

1769 Louis XV requests the hand of the Archduchess Maria Antonia for his grandson and heir, the Dauphin Louis-Auguste.

1770 Bridal journey commences from Vienna through southern Germany and Strasbourg and on to Versailles for the royal wedding of Louis-Auguste and Marie Antoinette on May 16 (see *Abundance*, Act One, Chapters 1-10). The marriage is not consummated for many years.

1774 Louis XV dies on the tenth of May; Louis XVI and nineteen-year-old Marie Antoinette ascend to the French throne (Act Two, "Catastrophe").

1778 Marie Antoinette gives birth to Marie Thérèse Charlotte on December 19 (Act Three, "The Générale Is Tardy!" and "Giving Birth").

1781 Louis Joseph is born October 22 (Act Four, "The Hope of France").

1785 The Affair of the Diamond Necklace does much to accelerate popular dislike of the queen and burnish her reputation as "Madame Déficit" (Act Four, "A Hoax in Diamonds" through "Portrait in Red"). The beloved Louis-Charles is born March 27.

1787 Marie's second daughter, Sophie Béatrix dies shortly before her first birthday (Act Four, "Sophie"). This loss is followed by the death of seven-year-old Louis Joseph in June of 1789 ("Grief").

1789 Mob destroys the Bastille Prison in Paris on July 14. Outbreak of the French Revolution. Royal court forcibly moved to Paris (Act Four, "The Revolution of 1789"; Act Five, "The Tuileries"). Market women of Paris march to Versailles and force the Royal Family to live under supervision in Paris.

1791 The Royal Family's flight from Paris is foiled near the French border ("Escape from Paris").

1792 Revolutionaries storm the Tuileries and imprison the family in the Temple Fortress. Louis XVI is tried for treason on December 11 and subsequently condemned to death ("The Tower, 1792," "Terror, Fury, and Horror Seize the Earthly Powers").

1793 January 20<sup>th</sup> King Louis XVI is executed.

Marie Antoinette is separated from her children and incarcerated on the Ile de la Cité in the Seine River.

October 16<sup>th</sup> Queen Marie Antoinette is publicly executed by guillotine.