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Abundance, A Novel of Marie Antoinette
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Q: What inspired you to write a novel about Marie Antoinette?

A: The story of Marie Antoinette has fascinated and frightened me since I was a child. To me, it was a reverse fairy-tale not a story about a deserving poor girl who became a princess but one about a princess who lost her position and power. I knew that if such a reversal could occur in the life of a queen, then no person was safe. For me, this vulnerability represented the basic human condition. Then the question became for me "How can we face adversity, even death?" I thought I might learn something from imagining the Marie Antoinette story.

Also, the sheer splendor of her world fascinated me, both its beautiful artificiality and its earthy realism. Like Marie Antoinette, I too have loved flowers, music, theatre; like her, my family and friends mean more to me than I can say.

Q: *Ahab's Wife* was celebrated by scholars and critics as a kind of "feminist corrective." Is *Abundance*, with its intimate portrait of one of the most maligned and arguably misunderstood female figures in history, a similar act of revision or reassessment?

A: Yes. I think the historical treatment of Marie Antoinette has been motivated, in part, by the tendency to demonize women. She's been depicted as a sort of sinful Eve, responsible if not for the fall of humankind then for the fall of the French monarchy. Most people associate her with heartless materialism, with the phrase "Let them eat cake" if they have no bread but there's no historical evidence that she ever said such a thing. She displayed many more acts of kindness and compassion throughout her life than I had space to include in the novel.

With *Ahab's Wife*, I wanted to create a female fictive character of intelligence and courage, one capable of sustaining an epic quest for meaning that was both physical and metaphysical. When we look at the American literary landscape, we see far too few such creations. With *Abundance*, I wanted to explore the complexity of a woman who has been included in the historical picture but usually misrepresented.

Q: How does *Abundance*, set during the French Revolution, relate to your most recent novel *Four Spirits*, which is set during the Civil Rights movement? In some ways, they seem worlds apart.

A: In *Four Spirits* I wanted to affirm the value of every individual life (including four unknown African-American school girls who were killed). I wanted to say that the same principle applies to the well-known and the privileged, even to a person who occupies a throne: all of us share a basic humanity; we're born and we die. Every life is precious. Questions about justice and the nature of government arise in both books.

Q: Which of the secondary characters in the novel particularly interested you? Would you consider writing about any of them?

A: I wanted to know and understand Marie Antoinette's women friends more the surprising Princess de Lamballe, the manipulative Duchess de Polignac, the self-made portrait painter Elisabeth Vigee-Le Brun. In all my novels the central women characters need and establish close friendships with other women who often differ widely from one another. We know of these historical women I've just named mainly because they were the queen's friends, but they each had lives of their own and I'd like to know more about them.

And of course Axel von Fersen is an endlessly intriguing character. He liked American woman a lot while he was helping Washington with the American Revolution, and I'd love to explore him more.

Q: Is it fair to call your depiction of Marie Antoinette's relationship with Fersen deliberately ambiguous?

A: Yes, it is. I read a great deal about this relationship in various biographies all of which disagreed some or completely with one another. I don't think the historic record allows a conclusive reading at this point.

Q: Do you believe they ever had a physical relationship?

A: Actually, I'd rather not say. However, I would like to add this information (not in the novel because the book is limited to Marie Antoinette's point of view): historically, Fersen definitely did have many sexual relationships with a great many women though his deepest love and total loyalty also remained with the Queen. How can I make this dual claim? I see his sensibility as basically that of an earlier age: he is a chivalric knight devoted to his lady; this devotion is like that of a medieval Christian who lives in the world yet profoundly venerates the Virgin Mary.

I would love to write a novel about the paradoxical Axel von Fersen.

Q: What are your ideas about what fiction can capture or reveal that biography or history cannot?

A: Every form has its own powers. Fiction takes us inside, through imagination, in the way that an objective reporting or picturing of external actions or behavior cannot. I have always seen the imagination as a great spiritual and moral force because it helps to take us beyond the bounds of ego. But all the ways of knowing are complementary to each other. Lately Marie Antoinette has been the object of films: while films picture appearances, novels augment those visual impressions by transporting us inside the character. We can look out through the eyes of another person and also know that person's secret thoughts and feelings, which are beyond the reach of the camera: Fiction can make history seem more alive and thus more kin to life as we know it.

Q: An especially affecting element in your novel is the recurring image of young Mozart in Marie Antoinette's memories and dreams. His haunting, pleading refrain, "Now do you love me?" seems to inspire in Marie Antoinette powerful feelings of identification and empathy. Talk a bit about this thematic linking of Marie Antoinette and Mozart.

A: She did hear him play the harpsichord for her mother at court in Austria; the two were the same age. In her subconscious, Mozart did

what she would have liked to have done to occupy her mother's lap and to demand her mother's love and acceptance. Mozart had the audacity of genius, even as a very young child. Marie Antoinette had the gifts of great personal charm and grace, and she also truly loved music. It was only at the end of her life that she became her own parent forgiving, accepting, and affirming her own nature.

Q: *Abundance* seems to be an ideal choice for book clubs, as there are so many possible threads and directions to pursue. If you were somehow able to participate anonymously in a group discussion of *Abundance*, what subjects and themes would you most want to explore?

A: I've already found that my readers vary widely in how sympathetic they are to Marie Antoinette. In some ways, she is a kind of mirror that reflects our attitudes toward ourselves. To what extent does she deserve praise or blame? The idea of "goodness" expands for her as she matures how have I evolved morally, spiritually, as a friend, as a family member, in political awareness, she asks me. I'd like for readers to tell me, if they trusted me enough to be that honest with me, how the life of Marie Antoinette might illumine life as we live it.

I always like to learn which parts of my novels readers particularly enjoyed or found meaningful.

Q: Where will you be taking your readers next?

A: So many novels I'd like to write! The question of time and place is certainly a crucial one, more so than that of subject matter or thematic material because my fiction always embodies ideas that are important to me. I've worked so hard in researching the 18th century that in some ways, I'd like to stay there, not necessarily to write about Fersen. There are many other wonderful characters of that era: I recently visited St. Petersburg and Moscow because Marie Antoinette's friend and portrait painter Elisabeth Vigee-Le Brun considered Russia to be her second home, after she fled the French revolution and traveled through Europe. But I'd also like to draw on my own life and times, as I did in *Four Spirits*, set in Birmingham, but this time about the street where I live now, literally, in Louisville, and about a woman of my own age and experience. And in just the last few weeks, I've had yet a third idea, one that would carry me very far back in time and yet partake of the present. It's a riddle. I'm enjoying puzzling about my next project. I love the act of imagining, the polishing, and the creating of an artifact in words.