

Madam Belle: Sex, Money, and Influence in a Southern Brothel

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Belle Brezing made a major career move when she stepped off the streets of Lexington, Kentucky, and into Jennie Hill's bawdy house -- an upscale brothel run out of a former residence of Mary Todd Lincoln. At nineteen, Brezing was already infamous as a youth steeped in death, sex, drugs, and scandal. But it was in Miss Hill's "respectable" establishment that she began to acquire the skills, manners, and business contacts that allowed her to ascend to power and influence as an internationally known madam.

In this revealing book, Maryjean Wall offers a tantalizing true story of vice and power in the Gilded Age South, as told through the life and times of the notorious Miss Belle. After years on the streets and working for Hill, Belle Brezing borrowed enough money to set up her own establishment -- her wealth and fame growing alongside the booming popularity of horse racing. Soon, her houses were known internationally, and powerful patrons from the industrial cities of the Northeast courted her in the lavish parlors of her gilt-and-mirror mansion.

Secrecy was a moral code in the sequestered demimonde of prostitution in Victorian America, so little has been written about the Southern madam credited with inspiring the character Belle Watling in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*. Following Brezing from her birth amid the ruins of the Civil War to the height of her scarlet fame and beyond, Wall uses her story to explore a wider world of sex, business, politics, and power. The result is a scintillating tale that is as enthralling as any fiction.

Madam Belle: Sex, Money, and Influence in a Southern Brothel Details

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From Reader Review Madam Belle: Sex, Money, and Influence in a Southern Brothel for online ebook

Becky says

The title of this book was woefully misleading. There was very little in it about Belle but lots about Lexington society and racing. If it had been properly titled it would've attracted readers who were looking for historical information about Lexington, KY and its history. They would be very pleased with the book. If you're looking for a lively story about the famous Belle you will want to read something else. The author herself stated at the beginning of the book that there would be long sections when Belle wouldn't even be mentioned & boy, she wasn't kidding.

Andrea says

I have a soft spot for women living outside the social norms and Belle Breezing certainly fits in that category. This book turned out to be a delightful surprise and a well-timed read in the lead up to the final race (now historic) race of the 2015 Triple Crown. Belle lived in the late 1800's in Lexington, KY – a city described with some condescension as a real horse town. Politicians and even presidents complained that folks from Lexington could talk of nothing but horses – breeding, racing, and bloodlines. This book provided a really interesting perspective of the impact of the Civil War on Kentucky and just the life and times of folks in this time period. Some of the most vivid details were simply about everyday life, including the existence of a training school for fire horses, animals trained specifically to pull the water and chemical wagons to fires. Belle starts out working in one of the many brothels in town and through hard work, some generous benefactors and her own know-how, rises to run “the most orderly of disorderly houses” in the city. Belle was very private during her life, making this book more about everything BUT Belle, but it felt like there was plenty of detail from other sources about Belle's business and the town of her day to make this a meaty and interesting read. Readers are also left with an intriguing mystery – was Belle Breezing the inspiration for Belle Watling in *Gone with the Wind*? You decide!

Colleen Estep says

A fascinating book about the last third of the 1800's in Lexington, KY. There is actually little known about Belle Brezing, this is more about the time she lived in and how she rose to be the influential madam she became. Belle was born into a poor family to a mother who drank and slept with any man who wanted her. Her father divorced her mother and was never in Belle's life again. Her mother's second husband was her match and beat her mother often. After he leaves her and with her mother's death she is put out on the street and makes her own way.

At 15 Belle makes her way to Jennie Hills, a well known madam and learns the trade. Two years later, Belle leaves Jennies and opens her own brothel and never looks back. Through the years she makes powerful friends, from the governor to the wheelers and dealers in the horse racing community. The history of the powerful men who controlled Lexington and spent time at Belle's makes you realize how powerful she was in her right. Belle was a very private person and more is known about the men in her life than herself. From a young age till her death at 80 in 1940 Belle was addicted to morphine, and gave birth to a daughter that never lived with her and spent her life in institutions and later a stillborn baby. Mary Jean Wall has

written a great history of Belle and I hated to see it end. I recieved my copy from Goodreads.

Bruce says

Very disappointing. Way too much horse racing and not enough Belle. I couldn't finish.

Ernie says

Maryjean Wall is well suited to write this biography. She has been a student of the horse industry, especially as it relates to Kentucky, and a student of local history. She spent most of her career as an award winning sports writer, then retired to earn a doctorate in history and published an earlier book entitled, "How Kentucky Became Southern". It concerned the late 1800s and early 1900s in Kentucky and the social, political and economic forces that transformed the image of Kentucky from that of the Western Frontier to one of Antebellum South. And why. --- This book focusses on one of the most interesting local "characters", Belle Brezing. The author credits her with creating a model for upscale houses of prostitution around the country. Brezing operated a house that included quality furnishings and decorations, music, a bar and women. Belle Brezing is reputed to be the model for the kindly madam in the book "Gone with the Wind". A lot of her business was built around the growth and development of the horse breeding and racing community in Kentucky. She frequented the tracks and her best clients and sponsors were major actors in the horse business---- Wall describes Belle as being an astute judge of the community, schooling the women who worked for here such that they would minimize clashes with the community, in such ways as scheduling shopping during after hours appointments and dressing and behaving in matters that were consistent with the mores of the community. Lexington, like most cities of the era, had a red light district which tolerated prostitution. Around 1915 the social sensibilities of the general and voting public were adverse to gambling, alcohol and prostitution. Prostitution was completely outlawed in Lexington in 1917 and Belle Brezing closed her house. Many of her friends and supporters passed away and she lived a reclusive life until she died 23 years later at the age of 80. It must have been a tough 23 years.

The author was thoughtful and thorough in seeking out information from various sources and weaving it together in a cohesive story. Belle Brezing had a tough origin and her ascension into such a successful business is remarkable. Clearly she lived her life outside the mainstream of society, but she did it so well! The paucity of first hand material makes it impossible to really know Brezing. But the author has used her wonderful knowledge of Kentucky, her understanding of the origins of the horse industry and the limited resources to paint a fascinating and sympathetic portrait.

The book is well written and well researched. The author is authoritative, without question. But I admit that someone who does not live in Kentucky might not find it quite as fascinating. My enjoyment of this book is derived, in part, from having read the author's first book; this one builds on that history.

Carolyn Tassie says

The book is interesting reading for Lexington and the horse-racing industry, but it seems to be mis-titled.

Angela says

Not just about Belle Brezing - the inspiration for Belle Watling from GWTW- but an interesting history of Lexington and its horse racing industry as well

Rachel says

I thought this book was great. I found it held my interest cover to cover, and full of surprises. In a relatively short nonfiction book, it covered a wide variety of people and topics as well as spanning decades. For me, however, I found that it really came together in the end. I understood the connection between everything covered in the book and how it related to Belle, the central topic. I feel this book gives a very good picture of what Lexington was like throughout Belle's life, and helped me understand more about the history of Lexington and Kentucky in that particular time period. I do not feel the book was too sparse, but it has certainly served to peak my curiosity about a number of topics I had never taken an interest in. As to complaints that the book strays too much from following the story of Belle herself, I do not feel this is a fair complaint as this issue is more than adequately addressed in the preface.

Lynn says

I thought this would be a fun and interesting book to read and was happy when I was sent a free "advance reading" copy from Goodreads. I read about the first 50 pages, hoping that I would like it better once I got through the first detailed descriptions of Belle's youth and the Southern Victorian history. It just seemed to go on and on and on. I turned to the middle and even nearly to the back of the book. It is the same all the way through - endless details and not much story. If you are looking for a history book or want to study this era, this might be the book for you. For me it was not a fit at all! I am not going to spend my time on it!

Aiko says

Belle Brezing likely led a fascinating life, but the glimpses of it in this book are too few and far between to do anything but speculate. Unfortunately, the historical backdrop Wall chose to create was so dull I almost wished she'd just chosen to write a 10 page book with all of the facts she could actually gather on Belle. There certainly wasn't enough solid information to make "Madam Belle" the title of this book. Perhaps "A History of Lexington and Guesses As To How it May or May Not Have Affected One Brothel Owner" would have been a more appropriate choice.

Michelle (Champ) says

There was a warning at the beginning of this book that it would NOT be all about Belle. There is simply not enough known about her that it can be written. What is here about her, I thoroughly enjoyed! What I did not

enjoy was all the history about horse racing, but then I live in Kentucky. Horse racing is what we do and this give a history of the sport. I think many people that enjoy horse racing might enjoy this history. A history of horses woven through a story of a brothel.

I also enjoyed the "look" into Lexington's past. It was pretty cool to see some things have not changed much, many have changed TONS!

Peter Brackney says

Belle Brezing died in 1940 and her business had closed some twenty-three years earlier. Despite the passing of years, Ms. Brezing remains in the conscience of Lexington and a part of our communal lexicon.

Maryjean Wall's *Madam Belle: Sex, Money, and Influence in a Southern Brothel* is filled with colorful and illustrious characters just as were Brezing's brothels. Wall tells the story of a business-savvy woman who had risen from the most difficult of circumstances.

This is a portion of a review that appears on my website, kaintuckeean.com

Cat says

It's clear that a lot of research went into this, but a lot of speculation went into it too. There's a great deal of Lexington history and assumption as to what *Madam Belle* may have been affected by. It's fine.

Stacey says

Three stars is generous since the writing is terrible and there is no congruent timeline. BUT the history is very cool. I also like how the book was more of a history of Lexington starting with Reconstruction through the 1920's with Belle as a central character, instead of a straight biography.

Maya B says

I was hoping this whole book would have been about Belle Brezing, but it was not. it was mostly about the history of Kentucky and author talked about this famous madam throughout the book. It would have been better as a fiction book based on her life.
