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Nancy Mitford , Amanda Foreman (Introduction)

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When Madame de Pompadour became the mistress of Louis XV, no one expected her to retain his affections for long. A member of the bourgeoisie rather than an aristocrat, she was physically too cold for the carnal Bourbon king, and had so many enemies that she could not travel publicly without risking a pelting of mud and stones. History has loved her little better. Nancy Mitford's delightfully candid biography recreates the spirit of 18th-century Versailles with its love of pleasure and treachery. We learn that the Queen was a "bore," the Dauphin a "prig," and see France increasingly overcome with class conflict. With a fiction writer's felicity, Mitford restores the royal mistress and celebrates her as a survivor, unsurpassed in "the art of living," who reigned as the most powerful woman in France for nearly twenty years.

Madame de Pompadour Details

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From Reader Review Madame de Pompadour for online ebook

Artfulreader says

Just read Kelly's review; she says it waaay better then I can but agree with all of it. In short; a good read if You like Nancy Mitford.

Susan says

As well as her wonderful novels, Nancy Mitford also wrote four, less known, historical biographies- Madame de Pompadour in 1954, Voltaire in Love in 1957, The Sun King in 1966 and Frederick the Great in 1970. This is the first of her biographies and it tells the life story of Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, who, despite her comparatively lowly beginnings, was told by a fortune teller when she was nine that she would rule over the heart of a King and believed this prophecy completely. Despite being married with a young daughter, she saw her future as the mistress of the King of France and set about making herself the most influential woman at Court for many years.

The new Marquis de Pompadour comes alive in this biography, as Nancy Mitford delights in recreating the splendour of Versailles. Madame de Pompadour comes across as a generally kindly woman; who treated the Queen with respect, had a great love of family, a good sense of humour and was deeply in love with the King. We read of her love of the theatre, power struggles in the Court, war, politics and an attempt on the King's life which nearly ended her relationship with him.

This is not the most scholarly biography you will read, but it is immense fun. Mitford writes as though she knew Pompadour intimately. Her style is sniping, gossipy, opinionated and she does not even pretend to be unbiased about her subject. The book comes alive when she discusses the world of Versailles, with the power struggles, etiquette, jealousies and rivalries which obviously interest her far more than the world of politics or battles. This is a wonderfully enjoyable read; although even when it was first published it was seen more as entertainment than a serious work of history. Still, her warm and informal style certainly paved the way for many modern history books, aimed more at the casual reader than scholarly works which were the norm at that time. As such, her biographies work perfectly, as they are utterly enjoyable and Mitford's sheer delight in the world of Versailles shines through.

Val says

I am not very interested in Madame de Pompadour or Versailles court intrigues, so the fact that this biography of her is opinionated, unreferenced and probably neither complete or accurate does not matter one bit. The important thing is that Nancy is interested and I enjoy reading her books.

The court was snobbish, with courtiers vying for position and influence. When they were not busy having affairs with other people's spouses, they were gossiping about who else was (apart from one married couple, who used to request a bedroom in the middle of dinner to cement their relationship). Nancy must have enjoyed finding out about all this carry-on and she writes about it wittily and lightly. She has courtiers running, rushing and scampering about the palace corridors. Dull members of the household are quickly

dismissed so she can get back to the more lively adulterous ones. It is all about having great fun and ignoring the consequences.

Even Nancy, not the most enthusiastic proponent of Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité, admits that shutting the King, court and government away in the Palace of Versailles cut them off from the majority of the population and that this was not a good thing. Estate management and consequently food production suffered. She mentions this briefly and includes some historical context, although the War of the Austrian Succession gets less space than the intricacies of court etiquette.

I read very quickly through the constant house moving and decorating, hunting, card playing and all the fixation about who sat next to whom at dinner. It shows what the court was concerned with, when they would have been better employed concerning themselves with the world outside the palace.

Sketchbook says

Louis XV & Mme explain the worldly French sexyouall sensibility : after 5-6 years the pash is over (we should all know *that*), and love deepens while outsider sexercises play on. Yes, some of us know, but few have the French toleration & understanding. Nancy Mitford reports with her usual sparkle.

I will NOT expand as Amazon doubles prices on books with good GR reviews. I discovered this when I went to buy a gift etc. Amazon also doubles prices on books that get well-reviewed on its site. ~~ (These lines were writ in 2013).

Sandra says

I'm torn because in parts I was really enjoying this book, but in the end, about 70% of the way through, I had to abandon it. Probably due to my ignorance and also my habit of skim reading, I found the lack of background confusing. Mitford assumes the reader knows more about 18th century French politics than I do.

Amerynth says

Prior to reading this book, all I knew about Madame de Pompadour came from an episode of "Doctor Who" (Which is to say, given the episode involved a space ship that opened into her fireplace, I knew next to nothing.) So I can't really comment on the historical accuracy of Nancy Mitford's "Madame de Pompadour."

I can say that I was delighted by the coffee-table style of the book and Mitford's ability to pick out little, insightful details (a hallmark of her fiction as well.) The book has an almost gossipy style that is well-suited for a mistress of a king.

I've been absolutely spoiled by Alison Weir's wonderful books on the Tudors, where she backs up each and every detail and supposition with evidence from source material. Mitford makes a lot of snooty pronouncements but never produces any evidence, which drove me nuts. She also drops a lot of names but in a way that is still readable.

Overall, a pretty book that is better when it focuses on the more frivolous aspects of the lives of Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour. Still, it made for an interesting read.

Laura says

Her real name was Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Marquise de Pompadour: she was the official mistress of the French King Louis XV.

It was quite interesting to learn that she a major patron of architecture - École Militaire and such decorative arts as porcelain - Manufacture national de Sèvres. She was the direct responsible by the purchase of the well-known Élysée Palace.

She was a patron of the philosophies of the Enlightenment , including Voltaire and Montesquieu.

The author wrote a magnificent portrait of this important historical character who played a positive influence under the Louis XV realty.

Page 232:

Voltaire wrote: "I am very sad at the death of Madame de Pompadour. I was indebted to her and I mourn her out of gratitude. ...'Born sincere, she loved the King for himself; *elle avait de la justesse dans l'esprit de la justice dans le coeur*, all this is not to be met with every day.' "We shall miss her as long as we live.' 'In the end of a dream.'

Diderot: 'Madame de Pompadour is dead. So what remains of this woman who cost us so much in men and money, left us without honor and without energy, and who overthrew the whole political system of Europe? The Treaty of Versailles which will last as long as it lasts; Bouchardon's *Amour*, which will be admired for ever; a few stones engraved by Guay which will amaze the antiquaries of the future; a nice little picture by van Loo which people will look at sometimes, and a handful of dust.'

3* Love in a Cold Climate

2* The Pursuit of Love

3* The Pursuit of Love & Love in a Cold Climate

4* Madame de Pompadour

TR Voltaire in Love

TR Wigs on the Green

TR Frederick the Great

TR Christmas Pudding and Pigeon Pie

TR The Sun King : Louis Fourteenth at Versailles

Sienna says

Ye gods, what a trial. Don't get me wrong — Mitford could write, and Reinette is a worthy subject. But charm simply does not counterbalance the strange sense of authority and entitlement so cautiously, thankfully absent from contemporary historical scholarship, but abundant in this brief biography. Nor does it preclude, well, boredom. For a short book, *Madame de Pompadour* took forever to read. And what have I taken from it? A few funny lines, (slightly dubious) respect for the Marquise (on account of her biographer's

clear bias) and a wee bit of wisdom. I'll distill the good stuff here and save you some time and effort. Try to ignore the comma-spliced sentences.

A bit on the lady herself:

Madame de Pompadour excelled at an art which the majority of human beings thoroughly despise because it is unprofitable and ephemeral: the art of living.

She gave Voltaire some excellent advice:

I see that you are torturing yourself over the hateful things people have said and done to you, but really you should be used to this by now, you must remember that it is the inevitable lot of great men; they are always run down during their lives and admired when they are dead.

Also, for the animal-lovers among us:

Like many childless women, Madame de Pompadour now turned more and more to the minor but not unrewarding love of dogs and various other pet animals.

However:

Madame de Pompadour's excursion into politics will not give much satisfaction to the feminist. Although she was prettier, better educated, and had a more natural motive for her activities, she was no more successful than those ladies who adorn today the Chambre des Députés, nor had she any more influence than they over the general trend of events. To her, as to most women, politics were a question of personalities; if she liked somebody he could do no wrong — a dear friend was sure to make a good general, a man who could write Latin verses, and amuse the King, a good minister. Political problems in themselves were of no interest to her; her talents did not lie in that direction.

(It is interesting to note changes in feminism over the years, as today we are far more concerned with the role she did play than the success of her aims. Generalizations about women and politics certainly give us a bit more pause these days. To be fair, though, Madame de Pompadour apparently described the imperial army led by General Daun as 'the most beautiful, the gayest army possible to be seen', which is all kinds of amazing to imagine, and to imagine writing.)

On the other hand:

Madame de Pompadour knew her own worth, she suffered neither from an inferiority nor a superiority complex, she saw herself as she was and on the whole approved of what she saw. So she went through life with a calm self-assurance, which increased as she grew older. Only one thing could frighten or upset her, and that was the idea that she might lose the King.

That king, Louis XV, comes across as pretty likable. Still, one can understand Dr. Quesnay's feelings:

'Madame, I only left my village at the age of forty and it is difficult for me to get used to the world. When I'm with the king I say to myself, "This man can have my head chopped off." It upsets me.'

'But the King is good, don't you think of that?'

'Yes, reason tells me so; but I can't help it, he frightens me.'

The fact that Mitford could write the following about moving house and dealing with tradespeople frightens me, to be honest:

...their letters still exist and evoke all the difficulties of trying to get workmen out of a house, all the horrors of a move. 'Much more to be done than we expected; floors and chimneys are in a bad state; the carpenter never sends anything when he says he will; none of the built-in cupboards have come, so the painters cannot get on with their work.' Who has not had these things to contend with?

Who indeed?

And what of our unstoppable journey on the Path of Progress?

We, today, know much more about the seventeenth century than anybody knew in the eighteenth.

Progress that began with seventeenth-century space exploration, apparently:

*As for the Prussians, **when they came back to earth after seven years on their favourite planet**, they noticed that their ally had been acquiring world-wide dominion at the cost of a few hundred English lives, while they had ruined themselves, lost the flower of their manhood, suffered from famine and Russian atrocities, made themselves loathed throughout the Empire, and all, it seemed, for the sake of a sandy plain.*

Ostensibly funny, tragically brilliant lines like this break hearts, because they describe devastation with such self-conscious wordplay. I've seldom seen such uncomfortable charisma.

To wit:

The King very rarely invited husbands and wives together; it did not make for sparkle.

Finally, a bit of humor from the Dauphin:

When asked what he did like doing he replied: 'I like vegetating.'

Fair enough, sir.

This is not a bad book, but I took very little pleasure in reading it.

Ailsa says

"Madame de Pompadour excelled at an art which the majority of human beings thoroughly despise because it is unprofitable and ephemeral: the art of living."

Decadent 18th century French life told in the crisp tones of the 1950's. An unusual and cute biography that I don't think you could get away with publishing today. Nancy Mitford writes as if she knows her subjects personally. Her opinions on the characters of these long dead historical figures are regularly amusing.

"The Queen, who, like many meek and holy people, had a catty side to her nature"

The second half of the book regarding the seven years war and the politics of France was a little dry. I came into this knowing nearly nothing about Madame de Pompadour and I left knowing at least an outline of the events of her life. I think Mitford tends to idealise her. It reminds me of a piece of Jane Austen's juvenilia about Mary, Queen of Scots. However, at only 230 pages long it's a charming curiosity and a nice way to waste an afternoon.

"Nineteenth century historians, so easily shocked it is impossible not to suspect them of hypocrisy..."

Carol ?? says

I've never posted an image before (other than book covers) so this is likely to be painful. & I don't know why I'm starting with La Pompadour, as her brother apparently said that none of the many portraits of her resembled her. But I have always loved this Boucher painting.

Mitford's style is conversational - I felt like I was was back in the 18th century having a good old gossip over a cup of tea . No doubt Nancy & I would have been whispering behind our hand painted fans. Mitford's writing style involves a lot of jumping around & probably a lot more familiarity with famous names of the time than I have. & even if my schoolgirl French hadn't changed from poor to non-existent I don't think I would have been able to translate all the French verse Mitford included. I tried a couple of times with Babelfish, then gave up. Mitford's own explanation is that *some* of the more insulting doggerels are untranslatable being a play on Pompadour's maiden name (poisson is fish in French)

& there is a mention of the Princess of Hesse-Rhinevelt's mother giving birth alternately to daughters &

hares! There is no explanation of this & no cite either.

So you just have to go with the flow!

Pompadour's rise to the top was remarkable A bourgeoisie with a beautiful but rather common mother (who had made a very fortunate alliance after the banishment of her husband) she was educated at home, but as Mitford writes, " a more accomplished woman has seldom lived."

After she attracted the attention of Louis XV her taste was given full rein! Theatres were built for to act houses for her to decorate, gardens to create. Although apparently not that fond of jewellery she had plenty of it. She was a patron of the arts (notably Voltaire who wasn't always touchingly grateful) & the creation of Sevres porcelain. & unlike the aristocrats she (or rather Louis!) paid her bills.

Mitford theorises that history & her French contemporaries don't always judge her kindly because of her extravagance & because her fondness was more for beautiful small things rather than large monuments that would stand the test of time. Also she is condemned for her part in the Seven Years War.

Even more amazingly the physical side of their relationship ceased around 1750, but although Louis XV started sleeping with other women, none of them could replace her in his heart & he was heartbroken at her relatively young death. Mitford believed the jolly Mme du Barry would have only had the status of these other women if Pompadour had been still alive.

Mitford's final line (view spoiler)

I can imagine.

Edit; the image worked! Go me!

Hanneke says

An enjoyable biography of that greatest of all courtesanes, Madame de Pompadour, told in the extremely posh voice of Nancy Mitford. Nancy Mitford is through her own aristocratic upbringing very apt in commenting on the ways of the French court and courtiers. I must confess that I was sometimes getting a bit bored by the abundance of noble names and affairs, but not bored enough to stop reading. The biography certainly provides many hilarious anecdotes and interesting stories. I had no idea that Madame de Pompadour had such an influence at the French court that, through her actions, she changed the course of the war with Prussia and England and, consequently, had a great influence in the course of French history. She had a direct correspondence with very influential people, such as the Empress of Austria and most of the French ambassadors in the European capitals. According to all accounts, she was highly intelligent, a good strategist, lovely to look at and never told a lie. Especially this last characteristic must have been pretty rare at the French court! Nancy Mitford was a witty woman and that made this biography pretty pleasant to read.

Jessi says

I've wanted to read a biography about Madame du Pompadour ever since I saw her on a Doctor Who

episode. Yes, I am a dork. When I found out that one of the Mitford sisters had written about the King's mistress, I couldn't wait to read the book. Even though it was published in the '40s, the book was still highly enjoyable. The book was centered around Madame du Pompadour but also included the major players like King Louis and his wife. I don't know the history well enough to know how well researched the book was but I tore through this book in two days even though I normally plod through biographies and loved almost every word.

Margaret says

Let's get this out here first: if I wanted to bring back one 20th century British person to go to tea and just hang out, it would be Nancy Mitford (sorry, Jessica, you are my go to girl for rallies and being snide about people, I promise). Nancy Mitford's account of the life of Madame de Pompadour is immensely readable and well presented. From her beginnings as Jeanne Antoinette Poisson to the cultural curator of the French court, Nancy Mitford chronicles the rise and death of the most famous French king's mistress. Along the way she turns the characteristic Mitford sarcasm towards many of the people at court, especially the court physicians that readers of *The Sun King* will remember.

Mitford refrains from judging Mme du Pompadour too harshly. Mitford's narrative consists of Mme du Pompadour going up against an engrained nobility (which in retrospect was not far from failing miserably) as a more bourgeois but also more authentically French personality. Mme du Pompadour couldn't help her upbringing, let alone rumors about her parentage, but she could renovate homes, collect art, and act as advisor to the King as well as be captivating enough to be the principle and steady mistress for twenty years. Mitford pulls no punches when discussing Pompadour's successor, Mme du Barry, as a classless woman of ill repute. Imagine the wrath of an English aristocrat for the French. And now make it witty, classy, and dismissive. Mitford retains some of her academic tone while also putting those she does not care for in their place, striking a balance between substance and commentary.

Once again, Mitford has captured the spirit of a time as well as accomplishing an incredibly readable biography of a famous figure from pre-Revolutionary France.

Also recommended are Voltaire in Love and *The Sun King*, and I am very much looking forward to her biography of Frederick the Great that was just re-issued last month. Before Mitford Enlightenment France was not particularly a favorite subject, though now it is through Mitford's incomparable English style.

Kate Sherrod says

Reading Nancy Mitford's biography of "Reinette" Poisson, whom history knows as Madame de Pompadour, is like sidling up to a knowledgeable guest at a vast party full of strangers and asking her what's what. She's happy to tell you, but being Mitford, a Jazz Age aristocrat, a Bright Young Thing, she'll assume you know who all the people are already, and that you have a passing command of French, and focus on how they relate to the one she came to admire, La Pompadour.

In other words, it's a shame that NYRB Classics neglected to include a family tree or, better still, a *dramatis personae*, for the casual reader unfamiliar with the late *Ancien Regime* of Pompadour's lover, King Louis XV's France will likely be lost in a sea of unfamiliar names, political issues, and bewildering Versailles

etiquette. I was fortunate to have numerous secondary sources at hand to answer my questions and help me remember what I did already know; those without such will want to have a browser window handy, as even just Wikipedia will be a help for which they'll be grateful.

That is not to say this is at all a bad book. Mitford is great fun to read, breezy, well-informed and opinionated. She feels her subject has been unfairly maligned by history and wants to redress that, in the process giving us all a wonderful look at a most fascinating woman.

Lobstergirl says

Mitford's biography pales in comparison to a book like Claude Manceron's *Twilight of the Old Order*, 1774-1778. Now, granted, Manceron's book (the first in a tetralogy) is much vaster and covers a wider range of personages and geography. But if you extracted only what he wrote about Mme. de Pompadour and Louis XV, it would still be more sparkling and informative than what Mitford had to say. Both books have been called novelistic. And interestingly, neither writer had much formal schooling; Mitford was tutored only in French and riding, and Manceron's education ended at age 11 when he became crippled by polio. I know which author I'd like to read more of.

It was interesting to learn the origin of mayonnaise. I mean, *mahonnaise*...invented in the Minorcan city of Mahón, which was under military siege in 1756 and had no supplies of butter or cream, necessitating a sauce made only of eggs and oil.

Gina says

I didn't think that Nancy Mitford was a very organized or clear biographer. She didn't tell the story chronologically and assumes the reader knows all the titles of royalty and courts. She often would quote French poetry or phrases without translation. Even without these flaws, I don't think that she was a particularly skilled writer. She seemed to let her own fascination with Madame de Pompadour skew her writing.

Pink says

Biographies are my kind of book. I've probably said it before, but if they're well written they're an instant 4 star read for me. This one I rated 3 stars. Looking back, that's probably harsh, but while I liked it, I didn't *really* like it. Sometimes Nancy's writing got a little confused, jumping around in chronological order and made a lot of assumptions about our knowledge of French life and courts, as well as being able to read passages in French. There was a lot to like though. Nancy has an intimate way of writing, that really draws you into the story. I bet she'd have made a great palace gossip of this period. I also liked how well Madame de Pompadour came across. It was obvious that Nancy found her fabulous and this was infectious, I loved her too. In fact, I wonder now why I didn't rate it 4 stars.

Kelly says

"Nineteenth century historians, shocked by the contemplation of such a merry, pointless life, have been at great pains to emphasize the boredom from which, they say, the whole Court and the King suffered. No doubt a life devoted to pleasure must sometimes show the reverse side of the medal and it is quite true that boredom was the enemy, to be vanquished by fair means or foul. But the memoirs of the day and the accounts of the courtiers who lived through the Revolution .. do not suggest that it often got the upper hand; on the contrary they speak on and all, of a life without worries and without remorse.. of perpetual youth, of happy days out of doors and happy evenings chatting and gambling in the great wonderful palace... If ever a house radiated cheerfulness, that house is Versailles; no other building in the world is such a felicitous combination of palace and country house..."

"..The case of the Duc de Richelieu illustrates the fact that once a man has been convicted of treachery, he is better dead; the traitor will always betray...If, when the Regent had enough proof to cut off four of M. de Richelieu's heads, he had cut off just one, the history of France might have been different indeed."

If you guys read those paragraphs and aren't smiling or shaking your head or clapping your hands or some other expression of delight, then perhaps this book isn't for you, but I'm doing all of those things and LOVING IT. I absolutely adored this book from start to finish, and Nancy Mitford's narrative charm is the reason entire. It is of course helpful that her subject is fascinating in her own right, and her cast of supporting characters were leading men and ladies in many other stories and indeed can't help but steal the spotlight from time to time (if the Duc de Richelieu is playing sidekick #2, you've got a damn good thing going is all I'm saying). But this biography reveals two women, not one, and it is a picture of two times and two mindsets, and the primary one is not the one that takes place in the 18th century.

What is it about these early 20th century women? These British women writers in particular? There's something about their assurance, their ability to opine and pronounce and tell a tale with such utter confidence and pull it off without the slightest self-consciousness. There's a way some of these women have of staring you down with utter unconsciousness that anyone could sensibly feel anything different that makes you blink even when you know there's something wrong with that reasoning.

I think part of it really does have to do with the fact that so many of them descended from the aristocracy. It might have been an aristocracy whose material rights had in many ways long since gone, but please do let's remember that it is just possible for women of that generation to have had grandfathers who fought Napoleon. The values being imbibed, the educational program, and the history being taught was not so different, and the society was still to a great degree closed. It still mattered who you were born... but of course there is a consciousness that that is all fading away, so quickly. And you know that when things are falling away, oftentimes that is the first time you see them, clearly.

Nancy Mitford's book was all about this. It manifested itself in two ways: the first was the way that she approached the world of Versailles, the nobles, the King, and Madame de Pompadour herself. She approached her as an equal, and actually rather as her sympathetic superior. While other historians might have spent a great deal of painstaking time explaining the social codes of Versailles and entangled family trees and have lists of names and navigational charts, Nancy Mitford's book assumes a warm familiarity with her readers and her subjects. She is not intimidated by Versailles, and she expects that you will be equally comfortable walking about the ancient pile while she waves her hand at *"oh that old Hall of Mirrors, it really is just too dusty I keep telling Mother the maids really do forget to dust in there, oh mind your dress darling the step is just a bit uneven there, this way loves, we'll have a picnic lunch by the lake today, shall we, it's*

lovely outside..."... as we pass on easily from room to room, watching the men and ladies come and go, confident that the people we meet will be in perfect accord with us. The dresses might be different, and the wigs, but Mitford makes that all seem a matter of fashion- as if we had been out of the country for a year and just needed to pay a morning call to our good friend the Duchess who would fill us in. We just need to make sure our friends don't see us in this *shocking* state before we've had time to get rigged up properly.

As the quotes above might show, her aristocratic ease and sense of belonging to this world means that she feels free to make many pronouncements on it. In telling the story of Madame de Pompadour, she lets us know when she feels the lady has gone wrong, when she's been clever, and what she could have done better- the same judgement and really the same understanding is applied to the other characters in the story. For instance, she sets up a careful contrast between the marriage of the King and the Queen and how the Queen was a clearly inferior creature to Madame de Pompadour because she hadn't *the least idea* of how to manage a man- and nor should she poor lamb, taken out of poor obscurity with her poor Polish king father, with her dowdy religiosity and her frigid refusal to sleep with the King (who otherwise, apparently, might have been faithful)... much better to have stayed at home. When Madame de Pompadour ceased sleeping with the king, by contrast, Mitford applauds how well she manages to keep his love despite it all, though she is realistic about the nearby brothel that develops to replace her. She has a fairly down to earth view of things and when she is sentimental, it is well hidden behind a practical argument.

What I loved about this whole viewpoint was that she successfully individualizes history to the extent that she makes it all seem a matter of "person X was rather cranky that day and lady Y just didn't quite know how to manage him properly, and person Z was a nasty little beast who should have been strangled at birth and made things very much the worse..." It's a *personal* view of history that makes the work of deciding the fate of millions, declaring war and peace, dealing with complex financial matters as just another damn thing that must be done after inspecting what's on for dinner and sorting out a dispute between the cook and the housekeeper. There's really no reason to make it a bigger drama than that and those who do well... loves, perhaps that is a sign you don't really belong here, isn't it?

So this is the second thing that fascinated me about this one. Similar to the work of Isak Dinesen, to Vita Sackville-West and Evelyn Waugh (in *Brideshead* at any rate), this is a lament for the decline of the aristocracy. It might seem an odd approach to celebrate the life of one of the world's most successful bourgeoisie social climbers while also making a case for why the aristocracy has been unjustly maligned and why it should still exist, but it's actually a rather clever way of doing it. I don't think it was necessarily a conscious agenda of hers, but her opinions on the subject seemingly couldn't help but come through. Mitford presents Jeanne de Poisson (as yes, the poor lady was born before she became La Pompadour) as a good upper middle class girl who never forgot her roots or pretended to be anything other than she was (both a prime English virtue and something the class conscious aristocrat would have been on the lookout for), and yet as someone who was "naturally" born with an upper class feeling and point of view and taste- she is fiercely loyal to her friends, a lovely, warm person who doesn't gossip behind other people's backs, a lady who throws wonderful parties and makes even shy people feel welcome, a woman who can discuss important issues with men, but knows when to retire, a woman who knew how to keep her looks and her friends as she aged. An unusual case, but much like Cinderella hiding in her dirty clothes, a case where the way we are born nonetheless does tell. She constantly defends Madame as having gotten a bad rap, and completely unfairly too- she rather mindblowingly and continuously argues for why she may have gotten a lot of money from the King but a) it wasn't as much as has been thought (oh, you know fifty million, not a hundred million, so that's totally okay!), and b) that what money she did have was well spent. Nancy Mitford rather crushingly tells us that she was skilled "in the art of living," and people who were starving for their bread just can't properly *appreciate* that apparently. She goes on rapturously about the beautiful houses she built and decorated with her exquisite taste, and seems to save the greatest of her pity for these troubled times for how

her houses didn't last long after her death- after all, beauty and art are what should be appreciated above all. (Once again, the starving and the bread and the oppressed peasants with no rights get no mention- or if they do, it is in mentions of Madame's charity or her helpfulness in certain sticky political situations to save an innocent.) With regards to the King, she takes him to task when she feels he is not fulfilling his proper role in the world, and honestly blames a lot of what comes after on the fact that he does not know how to lead properly.

There are some mentions of the Revolution to come, of course. How she approaches this though is to phrase the problems as a peculiarly French extreme of oppression and particular problems of the personalities at the top. She does once or twice acknowledge that Louis XVI was rather shut off from the world in Versailles, and speaks of the political abuses that went on in France. However, she phrases it as if there really would have been no need for the overthrow of the system, which is perfectly fine in theory, thank you, if France hadn't gone about it all the wrong way.

I don't mean to present this as a political program of a book- that's not the dominant feeling of it, just something that underpins the approach. More of a viewpoint, really- her biography dominating Madame's biography. I wouldn't have it any other way. It's incredibly well written- relatable and warm, sparkling and close. She knows how to tell a story in just the right way to make you laugh, how to deploy an anecdote to tell you all you need to know about a situation. Her knowledge about her subject is clearly deep, but she is able to use it in the way that only the most eminent of scholars do these days- without footnotes, without careful demonstration of knowledge and self-conscious admissions of "I could be wrong"- just one long, continuously flowing story that is written not to prove she knows something, but because it's a story worth telling and perhaps it will pass the evening until you go to bed. One could picture her as a good hostess handing these out to her guests to busy them at a house party rather than gossiping to them herself all night long since she has a cold in her throat.

Her ultimate verdict on the story of Madame de Pompadour and its meaning really is that of a hostess, or someone who has been a guest for many years. As her funeral cortege leaves the palace, and the King turns to go inside with tears streaming down his face, she remarks only: *"After this a great dullness settled over the Chateau of Versailles."*

By that point in the book, you know what that means- and bells ringing out and a Requiem blasting at full strength couldn't have said it better.

Eric says

Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour hold the center but are not always as interesting as the supporting players. Voltaire appears in his fascinating duality, flattering and satirical, unctuous and petulant, apt to bite the hands that feed him. Mitford describes the "laudatory poem" he penned after the victory over the English at Fontenoy in 1745:

Richelieu, a great friend of Voltaire's, got even more praise than he deserved; and the cunning old poet mentioned a lot of other people who might be useful to him. Soon he was besieged by women begging a line or two for sons and lovers. This poem sold ten thousand copies in ten days, mostly to the army; subsequent editions brought in so many sons and lovers that the thing

became a farce.

That friend of Voltaire's, the Duc de Richelieu, is another of the book's scene-stealers. Apparently the perfection of *Ancien Régime* libertinage, he supplied Laclos with a model for Valmont in *Les Liaisons dangereuses*. "The financier La Popelinière discovered a revolving fireplace in his wife's bedroom, by which the Duc de Richelieu used to come from the next-door house and visit her." "[H]e was observed sneaking into the bedroom of one of his mistresses, by means of a plank thrown over the street from an opposite house." After forbidding his daughter to marry a man of bourgeois antecedents, he quipped coldly that if the young people really were in love, they could, after more suitable matches, find each other in society, and begin an affair. He said he feared only two things, impotence and Frederick the Great's French verse—verse Frederick hired Voltaire to correct and encourage. During the Seven Years War, Richelieu, while in command of the French army over the Rhine, accepted bribes from Frederick in return for pulling his punches and generally easing up on the winded Anglo-Prussian forces. With the bribes he built a lavish Parisian pleasure palace that a visiting Horace Walpole described to a friend as having "a chamber surrounded with looking glasses and hung with white lutestrings, painted with roses. I wish you could see the antiquated Rinaldo who has built himself this romantic bower. Looking glass never reflected so many wrinkles." Richelieu, Mitford writes, got away with everything. He lived to a ripe old age (or a withered one—Tournour's line about "a parched and juiceless luxur" could not be better applied), to die in 1788, just a year before it all came crashing down:

The old mummy, as they called him at Versailles, was now sixty-two. His military career came to an end...his amorous career went on until he died, at the age of ninety-six. When he was eighty-four he pensioned off an old lady whose chief occupation in life had been finding girls for him and making all arrangements, and settled down with his fourth wife, a pretty young widow. She, worshipping him as much as all his other wives and mistresses, presented him with a son, who died at once, however—greatly to the relief of M. de Fronsac. Richelieu made up his quarrel with Maurepas when that minister was recalled, after twenty-seven years of exile, by Louis XVI; they used to sit together for hours on end at Versailles, which they alone, now, could remember under Louis XIV, regretting the glories of the past...

Laurie says

I love biographies that not only give a good historical overview (any history book can do that), but also somehow communicate the essence of the personalities involved. This biography is beautifully and engagingly written, but Mitford gives more: there is a charming, humorous quality that I find completely engaging. She has a wonderful facility of language, of vocabulary, that is so intelligent if at times a bit flippant. I would (and have) read anything Nancy Mitford writes simply for her voice alone, and then, of course, Madame De Pompadour is such an interesting subject. I highly recommend this book.
