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Consort to Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria, Elizabeth was a modern woman who fled the confines of Habsburg to roam free--she fancied dangerous riding, sailing and poetry--but her life ended with her assassination in 1896. "Haslip writes with vividness and immediacy... a serious book which is highly readable." --*Edward Crankshaw*.

The Lonely Empress: Elizabeth of Austria Details

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Brendan Steinhauser says

I just finished this book about the Austrian Empress Elizabeth, or "Sisi" as she was known. After visiting the various imperial palaces in Vienna, I wanted to read more about the Habsburg dynasty. This book is a good read, but sometimes meanders through her life.

Sisi is a tragic figure in European history, spending most of her life being miserable and unhappy, before she is murdered by a self-proclaimed anarchist in Switzerland. I got to know the Habsburgs and Wittelsbachs a bit in this book, and will definitely read more about them. "The Lonely Empress" is a decent start to exploring this topic, and I hope to find more books that are slightly better reads.

Siria says

This biography is now over forty years old, but Haslip's writing, and the common sense approach which she takes towards her subject means that it is still as readable now as it was when it was first printed. Haslip is extremely good at taking an insightful and sympathetic, yet objective and critical, approach towards her subject, Elizabeth of Austria, the woman better known to history as Princess Sisi. Elizabeth was a complicated mixture of charm and frigidity, intelligence and neurosis, self-conscious beauty and shyness, and I think Haslip does a very good job at capturing those. I would agree with her assessment of Elizabeth's character to a large degree.

The book has its faults, though they are minor. I would have liked a greater deal of analysis of her legacy and of the immediate impact of her death; to end the book with her murder makes it seem curiously truncated, especially considering how great a mythos had grown up around Elizabeth even by the time Haslip was writing. It is also curious that she didn't use make more use of those who could remember Elizabeth and her family, and who were still alive at the time of her writing; I think the last of Elizabeth's children had died maybe only twenty to thirty years before; still, it's probable in that case that they had simply closed ranks.

The book could also have used a stronger technical editor; there was one instance where Elizabeth returned to Austria 'for Xmas', which I cannot see as being appropriate for a biographical work, and the number of comma splices was truly astronomical. Despite that, though, this is still probably one of the best books dealing with the life of the empress.

Lauralee says

Elisabeth of Austria is considered to be one of Europe's most beautiful queens. At the age of 15, Elisabeth caught the eye of Emperor Franz Joseph, who was at the time courting her sister. The Emperor immediately fell in love with her and decided to marry her. At first Elisabeth's marriage seemed to be a fairy-tale. However, her love for Franz Joseph quickly deteriorated. Suffering from an overbearing mother-in-law and a stiff court, Empress Elisabeth left her husband, her family, and her duties as an Empress. Over the course of 35 years, she traveled the countries of Europe, sightseeing and going to spas. This is the story of the Empress

who was never happy with being queen.

I came away from the book intensely disliking Elisabeth of Austria. While the author gives us the impression of the Empress having a mental illness that was inherited from her mother's side, she was still a very unsympathetic figure. Mrs. Haslip portrays Elisabeth as self-absorbed, vain, and narcissistic. She did not care about her husband and her two eldest surviving children. She did not care for her country, and politics bored her. The Empress only cared about her beauty and her personal pleasures. She spent millions traveling the world and even built a palace that she quickly tired of. She wanted everyone to fawn over and worship her like a goddess on Mount Olympus.

Mrs. Haslip also paints a one-sided portrait of Franz Joseph. The author shows that he does not have any flaws. Even when he has affairs, Mrs. Haslip quickly dismisses it and blames the Empress's sentimental behavior. Franz Joseph is described as a lonely man. He always misses and longs for his wife. He writes her many letters during her absence. He is overindulgent and never refuses the Empress anything. He spends millions trying to make her happy, much to the disapproval of his subjects.

Overall, this was a very unsympathetic but fascinating look at Elisabeth of Austria. Elisabeth is a very complex figure and it is hard for anyone to try to understand her. However, *The Lonely Empress* was very well-written and meticulously researched. It shows the splendor, glitz, and glamour of the Austrian court. *The Lonely Empress* tells a tragic tale of a woman who longed to escape the harshness of reality into a world of dreams and fairy tales.

Leya says

I started my obsession with Empress Elizabeth of Austria when I was eleven or twelve. That's when I watched a series of movies starring Romy Schneider as Sissi (the Empress's nickname). At that time I didn't care about historical accuracy, I thought that the setting was so beautiful (Bavaria, Vienna, Venice, Madeira), the actors were amazingly attractive, and they had a great love story. And of course I thought all of what happened in the movies were true fact... Was I ever wrong!

The biography, *The Lonely Empress: Elizabeth of Austria* by Joan Haslip, shows us the young girl who fell in love, the young woman who lost something precious and the loneliness that she felt throughout her life. No longer I am the starry eyed girl who fell in love with the movies, but the woman who can (sometimes) understand the intricacies of life and love.

Has the obsession quieted down? No, not really. I will still watch the movies, and read about the actress that portrayed that special character that I love so much.

Simon says

I liked it, but would recommend it with reservations. The chief necessity is that you are interested in Elizabeth of Austria *before* you read the book, because you won't be when you finish it. Haslip, who specialized in this kind of biography, has basically deconstructed the romance of Elizabeth's life to let the reader grasp how essentially empty both her interior *and* exterior existences were. She also lays partial blame for Rudolf's suicide at his mother's feet, and rather thoroughly destroys the entire Mary Vetsera romance. Essentially the Crown Prince was looking for a companion in death, and the poor 18 year-old bought into it

(she was naked and holding a rose when Rudolf shot her, *and then spent eight hours with the corpse on the bed before finishing himself off*). Haslip will occasionally try and excuse Elizabeth, but it is a half-hearted attempt at best. By the end of the story, what story there *is* --- if Elizabeth accomplished anything worthwhile at all in her aimless life, Haslip doesn't mention it --- the reader is fed up with the reality, and longing for Ava Gardner or Romy Schneider, who both played her in the movies.

Ghost of the Library says

Having long been fascinated by the Romy Schneider movies portraying the very "pink" version of Elizabeth's life i over the years read and heard bits and pieces of information that gradually made me realise there was more there than just 3 movies, stunning gowns and the evil mother-in-law/aunt Sophia. a few years back i stumbled upon a spanish novel - VALS NEGRO by Ana Maria Moix - that, although short and somewhat romanticized, gave a very engaging and interesting description of Sissi's life and times - my personal "obsession" thus began.

Over the years i have bought, read and come accross quite a few titles regarding the empress so this one did eventually find its way to my bookcase!

Haslip does a decent enough job of describing the facts we all already more or less know from the movies - she was in the wrong place at the right time and ended up charming Franz Joseph so badly that he faced his formidable mother to marry her! then the bad honeymoon, the hard relationship with her mother-in-law, the constant travels, the never ending dread of Vienna and the court life!

in what Haslip fails is that she delves too much into feelings and possibilities, what Elizabeth could have done, what she was thinking, how should she have reacted and all such stuff...hardly the ideal road to follow in writting a bio on any subject, much less a woman with such a fascinating personality that no conjecturing is needed....let the proven facts speak for themselves and each reader will have his/hers own opinion.

all in all it is an easy to read, even if it clearly shows its age...unlike some other books on the same matter. For a light introduction, perhaps not a bad choice, but if you really want to know more about her i would recommend the french historian Jean des Cars who has some absolutely wonderful books on both Elizabeth and the Hapsburg Dinasty and then of course, the essential book - Count Egon Cesar Corti's Bio of the empress, its dated yes, but it tells the story of her life admirably well, with access to great sources and it lets the facts do all the talking! - these may not be easy to find (i got my copies from amazon france). but they are worth it.

Claire says

I became interested in Sisi after a trip to Europe this year where she came up in our visits to Budapest, Munich and then of course Vienna where we saw her palace and exercise equipment. She seemed really interesting, not necessarily likeable, and I asked my husband to get me what's considered the best biography of her (his parents did, so thanks Stan and Tudy.) I have a weird thing for royal biographies from bygone eras so this was right up my alley. Haslip was practically bitchy in the way she wrote this, everyone's ugly or inbred or insane--and it was great! I think she was at once sympathetic to Sisi but also clearly saw her critically which was great, because I think I would have been annoyed if she tried to convince us all Sisi was just a poor misunderstood gentle soul. I dog-eared a lot of pages of references to other 19th century European

nobles and palaces that sounded tantalizing to look up. I just wished it had ended a bit later after Sisi's (spoiler alert) death. I loved reading this book!

Laura says

Somehow the author doesn't seem to be able to decide if she thinks Elisabeth was a misunderstood poor little thing or a horrendous bitch, and both opinions affect the narrative quite a lot - too much for a biography, if you ask me. Haslip gets too much into Elisabeth's head, telling what she must have thought when this or that happened, which makes the book feel more fictive than biographical.

Barrett says

After maxing out on library renewals -- twice -- I had to accept I would never finish this one.

Picked this up after a visit to Vienna and Budapest, some of Sisi's own stomping grounds. In Viennese tourist shops, Sisi has almost cultlike status. We found her portrait splashed across shirts, prints, playing cards, umbrellas.

Unfortunately, I don't get the impression the author really cared much for Sisi. The Empress led a fascinating yet tragic life, the stuff of a movie. Clearly Sisi was a woman with her own demons, potentially from the stress of being launched into the position of Empress, definitely from the grief of losing her first born. Her husband is never around and burdened with the needs of an empire with a lot of unrest and threatened by war. Her mother in law dictates how the children are raised, and even what they are NAMED. The freedoms Sisi enjoyed as a young girl are all but obliterated when she becomes Empress. She is trotted around Europe basically as arm candy, and no doubt comes to understand her worth only in terms of her own physical beauty. Yet Haslip treats Sisi with little sympathy. The book is peppered with comments like:

"It must've been hard for a normal full blooded man, infatuated with his young wife, to have to humor her whims and treat her with the gentleness and restraint no other woman had ever expected of him." (This was right after a passage about Sisi struggling with her first pregnancy, and how she felt "deformed.")

Or "This was Elizabeth's opportunity to help and comfort her husband, and with patience and understanding make herself indispensable to his well-being, but she had too little knowledge of men in general and Francis Joseph in particular to give him the help he needed. She did not realize that there was nothing a tired discouraged man disliked so much as family rows." (This after a looong passage conjecturing what may have been ailing Sisi mentally and or physically.)

I acknowledge that was a different time...But Haslip was writing this in the early 20th century. And as a woman, I would've expected some sympathy. I got the impression that Haslip didn't really want to write about Sisi. Maybe she originally wanted to write about FJ or Sophia, and her publisher steered her here.

Gloria Mackay says

Another family whose "nervousness" created political and social upheaval for their countries. This is what

results from all the intermarrying cousins.

Elisabeth probably merits an updated, scholarly study of her life and legacy. This book is a work of historical fiction rather than a biography. There are big leaps in the logic, speculation about what happened and disregard for missing or available evidence.

Since it was written in the 60s, it also needs an additional filter for the prejudices and racism of the time. Haslip's blatant dismissal of the Mexican statesman, Benito Juarez, is appalling.

But if it's your first foray into the history of this period, it lays out a good basic framework.

Bogdan Liviu says

A vivid, wild beauty trapped in the royal cage, full of boring conventions. A woman whose happiness consisted in riding horses and being in nature, was condemned to lifeless, royal meetings full of hypocrisy and lack of a natural, fresh air. She had too much passion for a royal life, and if that wasn't enough, all her life she was followed by melancholy - her shadow.

Doris says

horrible, finished it only for historic value. very romanticized. author makes a lot of naive assumptions.

Katri says

I'm extremely interested in the Empress Elisabeth of Austria, and Joan Haslip's biography is one of the better books on her. I like Ms Haslip's balanced approach to the people she is writing about, the Empress as well as those around her. Haslip is both understanding and critical, she doesn't judge anyone extremely harshly but tries to also see their point of view, but neither does she make anyone seem perfect. Far too many books paint Sisi in either completely positive or completely negative ways, and the same goes for the other people around her, but Ms Haslip seems to have realised that we are all human, even the people who have died.

Still, sometimes she likes to romanticize things a bit too much and let her imagination run away with her, especially when it comes to Elisabeth's possible romantic interest in men like Guyla Andrassy. She also tries too often to tell what someone is feeling in a particular moment, without telling how she can know this. I really wish that Haslip had used footnotes and clearly credited her sources, so that a reader might know from where she has got her information and what is based on research, what on imagination. The book seems pretty well researched regardless, although by now the research is a bit outdated. I like it that she also tells a lot about the other people around Elisabeth, as they are also extremely interesting and help to understand her personality. She has a good deal of information on the Crown Prince Rudolf as well, and I was happy to discover she didn't fall into the trap of imagining that his affair with Mary Vetsera was a great true love.

I'm rather annoyed by the anglicized versions of everyone's names, though I guess it was the custom at the time of writing. The book could also use better editing here and there. But generally it reads easily and is quite informative. I still think Brigitte Hamann's biography on Elisabeth is better, as it's better researched and

more professionally written, and of course more up-to-date as it's newer. But if you can't find that book or if you want to read something else besides it, perhaps get another viewpoint to some events, this book is a good choice. But you should not pass up on Hamann's book if you really are interested in Elisabeth, as that book tells you much more.

Louise says

Empress Elizabeth was considered the most beautiful woman in Europe. Joan Haslip shows her living life on her terms, ignoring the wishes of her husband, the needs of her children and the responsibilities of her position. Doing what she wanted did not make her happy and her maintenance and emotional requirements imposed on everyone in her wake.

With each chapter, you see Empress Elisabeth become more and more self-involved. In the end while she is loved by the Emperor and, perhaps, admired for her (former) beauty by many, but she loves no one but herself. She has no happiness, no fulfillment and no real life.

At age 16 she left her childhood in the Bavarian countryside anticipating her sister's betrothal to the Emperor of Austria. The Emperor chose her instead and loved her for the rest of her life. She may at one time have loved the emperor, but hated court life and her role as empress - always. Her initiation to her new life by an overbearing mother-in-law did not help. As Elisabeth slowly gained control of her life and her children, she satisfied herself and ignored the needs of her children.

Haslip's significant research shows the Emperor pining for his wife as she gadded about Europe. He approved the trips and their expense (the entourage, the horses and yachts) and sometimes had houses built for her. He ignored her serious flirtations with Hungary's Count Julius Andrassy and her British riding instructor Capt. Bay Middleton and many lesser episodes with tutors and those met through happenstance. She ignored the protocol expected by her position, visiting countries where Austria had delicate relationships and often snubbed friendly host royals.

Of her surviving three children, two Crown Prince Rupert and Princess Gisela, were basically ignored except for the intentionally undesirable marriage Elisabeth engineered for Gisela. The third child, Valerie, was doted on. Prince Rupert lived a fast life, suffered an arranged marriage (Princess of Belgium) and eventually died in a suicide pact. In this, he finally got his mother's attention.

Today, we would call her anorexic. Until her 50's its results seemed to contribute to her allure. Her 10 hour walks (which her ladies in waiting had to join) took place rain or shine. She weighed herself 3 times a day. Her obsessive riding may have been part of it.

For me, her attitude is summed up in two vignettes. One is a costume party that she attended incognito. She flirted with a handsome commoner picked out by one of her costumed ladies and later sent him anonymous messages that were all about her. The other is her attraction to unfortunates whom she invited to social outings to amuse guests as oddities.

You wonder, with all this ego and extravagance, why the people who are paying for all this cheered for her. Apparently not everyone did. Her life surely provided the imagery that inspired the anarchists, one who took her life and 20 years later another ignited the war that brought the end of the institution that supported and enabled her.

The introductory pages are a slog if, like me, you are not versed in this history. It reads better as she immerses you in the person. The text is sprinkled with untranslated German and French expressions. There are references to names and places that even when the Index shows a previous mention, require more context for understanding by general readers like me. Haslip covers the life and her diligent research is shows.

Candida Silva says

I read a few paragraphs about this family years before and found the story of the murder suicide involving her son so interesting that when I found this biography in the library I had to read it. This book did not disappoint. Reading it explains many things in the history of Europe. I had seen some of the amazing castles built in Austria in that time and was fascinated with the crazy guy that built it and it was interesting to learn more about him. Like I said this book fills in lots of blanks.
