ForeWord Reviews

YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION

Historical Heartthrobs: 50 Timeless Crushes-from Cleopatra to Camus
Kelly Murphy
Zest Books
978-1-936976-10-2
(Jan 7, 2014)

From villains like John Wilkes Booth to heroes like TR and Tesla, they all had that certain something.

While there have been many ways to capture the public imagination throughout history, being attractive has certainly never hurt. Some of the world's most famous figures owe their legacies at least in part to their charisma, their romantic reputation, or just their looks. For *Historical Heartthrobs*, Kelly Murphy has compiled profiles of fifty important historical figures who became sex symbols in their time, ranging from the obvious to the quirky to the flat-out infamous. Though aimed primarily at a teen audience, it's a fun book for any reader, with a balanced mix of historical anecdotes, romantic trivia, and witty, accessible writing.

As the introduction explains, the book focuses primarily on figures from more recent history, whose physical attractiveness could be captured by photography, or at least a painted portrait. (The few exceptions, like Cleopatra or Lord Byron, are famous at least in part for their legendary attractiveness and romantic exploits).

Murphy casts a wide net in selecting who qualifies as a heartthrob and for what reason, allowing her to mix in stories about people who have little else in common. Some, like dancer Josephine Baker or author George Sand, were famous as sex symbols, while others like Benjamin Franklin and Marie Antoinette used their charms to influence the course of history, for better or worse. The subjects even include notorious figures like actor-turned-assassin John Wilkes Booth, gangster Bugsy Siegel and filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, who were known for being easy on the eyes before becoming household names for significantly less-desirable traits.

Each chapter includes a “heat factor” rating of the subject’s heartthrob-worthiness and a description of their “best feature,” along with a blurb about their romantic history and a series of quotes by and about them. There’s enough biography in each short chapter to introduce readers who aren’t history fans to figures they should know, while also providing short anecdotes and sidebars that will keep history buffs entertained.

The writing is conversational and dryly funny without crossing the line into goofy, as the subjects’ historical accomplishments are treated seriously despite the book’s casual tone. For example, Murphy considers Teddy Roosevelt “the perfect combination of rugged adventurer, egg-headed brainiac, and enthusiastic charmer,” recounting the highlights of his famously rough-and-tumble career. As for Nikola Tesla’s celibacy, the book has this to say: “Scientific integrity was so important to this guy that he lived an entirely sexless life so as to not get distracted from his scientific pursuits.”

The graphic design is equally well balanced, with lots of elements for the reader to peruse without the visuals overwhelming the content. For a book like *Historical Heartthrobs* to work for its intended audience, it has to find a balance between informative and entertaining, and Murphy had managed to find that mix.

Jeff Fleischer