



Sarah Bernhardt: My Erotic Life: France's Second Most Famous Woman

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Kudos to Cassimally, who harnessed the freewheeling escapade of Bernhardt's life and polished this gem of a woman.

Sarah Bernhardt: My Erotic Life is a titillating glimpse behind the bedroom door of arguably the second most famous woman in French history. The book takes a first-person approach, with Sarah Bernhardt narrating her own intriguing story of growing up the daughter, sister, and niece of supposed prostitutes. Her story is the casual remembrance of the woman who grew up to be a world-famous actress. Whether she truly was a prostitute is questionable, but there's no doubt Sarah enjoyed sex, and, in the context of this narrative, isn't afraid to say so.

The thought that she was never insulted when a man wanted to take her to his bed summarizes this take on Sarah. She enjoys her casual sexual encounters with men, although she begins her adult sex life somewhat regretfully and hesitantly. The character is self-aware and introspective, realizing her own weaknesses—like wanting to please an emotionally distant mother. It may have been her prostitute mother's "patron" who pushed Sarah onto the stage and perhaps saved her from a life of all-in-the-family prostitution. Speculation or not, it's a fascinating glimpse into early nineteenth-century France and the life of a complicated, progressive woman.

Interwoven in Sarah's fascinating narrative are her experiences in the bedroom and on the stage with men ranging from gay actors to royalty. There are humorous and outrageous moments when Sarah spills the secrets of her assortment of lovers. Over the years, she is given money, jewels, and other favors, but essentially Sarah's reward is freewheeling sexuality. It is this tone that carries the book. There is no shame in Sarah, though she may be a woman full of contradictions. The brief glimpses of historically based characters like Victor Hugo and Bertie, the Prince of Wales, make the story truly intriguing. The assertion that most stage actresses occasionally supported themselves by selling sex is plausible.

The style of writing is conversational and relatable, with voyeuristic sex scenes in bedrooms, dressing rooms, and ships. Supporting characters are just as complex as Sarah: her withholding, money-driven mother; her emotionally cruel husband, whose dynamism in the bedroom was what kept her with him despite his addiction and infidelity; and her assortment of female friends who defy Sarah's rumored personae of a self-centered diva.

The cover illustration is graphic and alludes to the content, though the title font is a bit hard to read. There are a variety of French words and phrases sprinkled throughout the text, lending authenticity to the thoughts and words of Sarah and her entourage. Readers are able to get inside the mind and heart of the main character, sympathizing, marveling, and reveling along the way. The story flows from an up-close play-by-play to introspection and retrospection.

Readers who enjoy soft erotica with a credible and rich historical backstory should enjoy *Sarah Bernhardt: My Erotic Life*.

FELICIA TOPP (August 11, 2014)

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