

★ **The Child Is the Teacher: A Life of Maria Montessori****Cristina De Stefano****Gregory Conti, Translator**

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Cristina De Stefano's *The Child Is the Teacher* is an intimate, comprehensive biography of Maria Montessori, whose revolutionary approach to early childhood education provoked storms of controversy, brought about a new appreciation of the mind of the child, and incited a global movement for social change.

Born in Chiaravalle, Italy, in 1870, Montessori became known for her strong will, fiery temper, and drive to make more of herself than was dictated by bourgeois Roman society. A feminist at heart and opposed to marriage, she had set her sights on a career in medicine, even giving up the newborn son she birthed out of wedlock in order to pursue her dream.

A visit to Rome's San Lorenzo slums awakened Montessori to the bleak existence of the poverty-stricken and mentally disabled children who were committed to psychiatric asylums. There, she found her calling. Her success at teaching children considered to be "little idiots" was astounding. Still, she faced almost insurmountable obstacles as she worked to create schools wherein all children could reach their full potentials.

The book's absorbing narrative shows independent, determined Montessori facing health challenges; the effects of war; longing for her distant child; lack of adequate funds; and harsh criticism of her methods. But even when failure appeared imminent, Montessori maintained her indomitable spirit and firm belief in her purpose. She benefited from amazing synchronicities and allies, including an unfortunate link to Mussolini. Ultimately, the fact that her methods were both innovative and successful, enabled her to prevail.

Bolstered by rare access to Montessori's unpublished diaries, personal letters, notes, and texts, *The Child Is the Teacher* is a deep, comprehensive biography that rewards both intellect and emotion.

KRISTINE MORRIS (March / April 2022)

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