To the Scaffold: The Life of Marie Antoinette Study Guide

To the Scaffold: The Life of Marie Antoinette by Carolly Erickson

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

To the Scaffold is Carolly Erickson's biography of Marie Antoinette, the last Queen of France who was executed at the end of the eighteenth century. Born the daughter of Queen Maria Theresa of Austria, the pretty Antoinette was promised at a young age to the young Louis, the Dauphin of France, who would later ascend to the throne as King Louis XVI.

Erickson depicts Antoinette as a charming woman who was ill-prepared for the plotting and intrigue she encountered among the courtiers at the palace of Versailles, the main seat of the French court. Her lack of pretense and kindly disposition won her many friends, but also enemies, including Madame du Barry, the powerful mistress of her husband's grandfather, King Louis XV. Erickson documents Antoinette's lavish spending on clothing, furnishings, decorations and entertainments for the hundreds of courtiers who inhabited Versailles and followed the French court.

As Antoinette and the rest of the court was spending itself into unfathomable debt at Versailles, conditions among the French people deteriorated, particularly in nearby Paris, where riots over the high price of bread became more and more common. King Louis XVI, Erickson writes, was not the vacant and ignorant aristocrat that he has sometimes been portrayed as being. Rather, he had too much faith in the love of the French people for their king and more interest in hunting and his own hobbies than in addressing matters of state. On the advice of her experienced mother, Antoinette pressed her husband into action whenever possible, which started rumors that it was she who was actually in charge of the country.

Popular dissatisfaction with the monarchy grew, and Antoinette became a prime target, Erickson explains. Popular songs and newspaper articles exaggerated her lavish spending and political influence over the king. She was accused of sexual indecency and negligent disregard for the well-being of the people. Whenever she appeared in public, she was assailed by insults from the public. As demonstrations grew more violent, the royal family was forced to move to their rundown palace in Paris, where they lived under house arrest. Antoinette pressed the king to try to escape France along with their children, but they were discovered and returned to Paris.

Meanwhile, political revolution was underway in France as the national parlement worked on creating a constitution for a constitutional monarchy based on England's government. The helpless king had no choice but to agree and the new government limped along for a short while as the French economy continued to deteriorate. Sentiment against the monarchy continued to rise and the royal family and many of the nobility were imprisoned. Louis was finally tried for treason, found guilty and publicly beheaded. Soon afterward, Antoinette was separated from her children and also sentenced to death. She faced her fate with dignity, Erickson writes.

Chapters 1-3

Chapters 1-3 Summary and Analysis

Chapter one opens with the birth of Maria Antonia Josephina Johanna, the fifteenth child of Queen Maria Theresa and Emperor Francis of Austria. She was an undersized child, but soon began to flourish. She received a typical education for a royal daughter, educated in literature and music, although she did not prove to be an especially remarkable student.

Queen Maria Theresa was the ruler of the Austrian empire, the daughter of Charles VI. Erickson depicts her as a hard-working, intelligent and efficient ruler who had little time for direct parenting of her large family. She provided regular written instructions to the noblewomen charged with caring for her children and took a genuine interest in their upbringing, however. As the youngest daughter, the Archduchess Antonia, as she was known, was not notable among the large royal family.

In chapter two, Erickson continues in her description of Antoinette's royal parents and their court in Vienna. Her father, Francis, held the title of Holy Roman Emperor, which had been held by Queen Maria Theresa's father, but it was Maria Theresa who was the actual ruler of the empire. Francis was an easygoing man who did not interfere much with state affairs and spent much of his time gambling and visiting other women. Erickson postulates that Francis' debauchery was behind Maria Theresa's appointing of a special task force to root out and punish prostitutes and brothel keepers and impose large fines on gambling. Erickson explains that Maria Theresa's efforts only drove the vice out of sight and did little to reform the morals of her subjects.

Chapter three describes Maria Theresa's strict instructions to her children on morality and the proper attitude of the nobility. They should not live overly luxurious lives, she warned them. As royal children, the matter of their marriages were important state decisions that Maria Theresa took seriously. Erickson describes the arranged marriages of several of Antoinette's older siblings and imagines what Antoinette might have expected after seeing her older sisters married off to unattractive noblemen.

Young Antoinette was unusually pretty, however, and at the age of te,n the idea of marrying her to the Dauphin of France was first explored. As she approached her thirteenth birthday, the idea was again brought up and arrangements were made to cement an alliance between Austria and France by marrying Antoinette to Louis, the heir to the French throne. Preparations were made to teach Antoinette French and the ways of the court at Versailles.

Chapters 4 and 5

Chapters 4 and 5 Summary and Analysis

In the summer of 1769, the Austrian and French diplomats began to work on the elaborate contracts that would accompany the marriage of Antoinette and Louis. The betrothed had never met one another, although they had exchanged portraits. Louis, Erickson writes, was "overweight, uncouth, badly dressed and painfully self conscious," at this point in his life and deemed by many to be of a dull intelligence (p. 43). He had become the "dauphin," the title given to the heir to the French throne, after the death of his father and older brother. He showed little interest in marriage or in much of anything beyond his favorite pastime of hunting. Antoinette was "dismayed" at the appearance of the young dauphin, Erickson writes, having already seen her older sisters married off to unattractive and boorish nobles.

Negotiating with the French on behalf of the Austrians was Count Mercy, a diplomatic envoy who would later become the eyes and ears of Maris Theresa at Antoinette's court. Mercy undertook to expand Antoinette's education to serve her better at Versailles. She was given French lessons and taught French history, as well as the names and functions of hundreds of courtiers she would need to know.

In the spring of 1770, an entourage arrived in Vienna to carry Antoinette to France to be married. A lavish celebration and proxy wedding was held in Vienna with over 1,500 guests. A few days later, she began the slow journey by carriage to France, leaving behind most of her personal belongings and taking with her some written advice from her mother and late father.

Chapter five continues the description of Antoinette's journey to France. After over two weeks, the entourage approached the border with France. It stopped at an abbey near the border, where an official ceremony took place as Antoinette formally renounced her claims to her Austrian inheritance and was handed over to her French escorts. They continued on to the forest of Compiegne, where Antoinette first met Louis in person, as well as his grandfather, King Louis XV.

Antoinette charmed the king and her pretty appearance no doubt pleased the dauphin, Erickson speculates. For her part, Antoinette took pity on the awkward and shy figure of Louis. She was introduced to the rest of the royal family at a nearby chateau, and put under the care of the Comtesse de Noailles, charged with making sure Antoinette was shown the complicated rules of courtly etiquette.

The royal marriage was a grand affair, and officially made Antoinette the "dauphine," the heir to the throne of Queen of France. As such, Erickson writes, she was "in theory at least, the most powerful woman at court," although she was still quite young and had no experience in the complicated web of court life. She was instantly "feared, hated and resented" (p. 57). Her main ally at first was Count Mercy, the Austrian envoy to France.

Mercy regularly provided Maria Theresa with word of her daughter and the other happenings at Versailles. He reported the news that the fifteen-year-old dauphin mostly ignored his new wife and that the rumors were that the marriage had not yet been consummated sexually. Speculation about the reasons abounded, Erickson writes, but the real reason for the dauphin's reluctance was most likely a physical condition that made sexual intercourse very painful and unpleasant. It was something an operation might remedy, but the young dauphin had not yet consented to the delicate procedure. The good news, Mercy informed Antoinette's mother, was that Louis had started to warm to Antoinette more and more, which he attributed to her glowing charm.

Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary and Analysis

Antoinette was ill-prepared for the intrigue of the French court, Erickson writes in chapter six. She had an ally in County Mercy and King Louis XV was charmed by the young dauphine, but his attentions were taken by his mistress, Madame du Barry, who at this time was exercising considerable influence over the King and his court.

Madame du Barry was a former prostitute whom Louis XV had arranged to marry one of his courtiers, thus elevating her into the court society. He made her his official mistress, presenting her formally at court. She soon set her sights on Antoinette and her small faction of supporters, cutting her down and snubbing those she considered Antoinette's friends. Opponents of Madame du Barry, such as the king's sisters, sought to align themselves with Antoinette and encourage her to participate in the imagined rivalry. When Antoinette was convinced to snub Madame du Barry by not speaking to her, the king became involved. He called Mercy into a private conversation, asking him to impress upon Antoinette that the king wished her to acknowledge Madame du Barry. The king understood that his own sisters, particularly his sister, Adelaide, to whom Antoinette had grown close, were using Antoinette in their own rivalry with du Barry, and he asked Mercy to discourage Antoinette from listening to their advice.

As these intrigues swelled around her, Antoinette found solace in the regular packets of letters from Austria that she received from her mother.

Chapter seven summarizes the first two years of Antoinette's life at the court of Versailles as she gained influence and learned how to better navigate the treacherous environment and follow the demanding and intricate necessities of court etiquette. Antoinette was a constant frustration to her governess, Madame de Noailles, who struggled to get her enthusiastic young charge to address the hundreds of courtiers properly and to maintain the proper fashions. Antoinette's rooms were constantly disheveled, a mess made worse by her pet dogs, who had the run of her apartments.

Antoinette began to understand the importance of her position as well as her responsibilities as the future queen. She did not like politics, but learned enough about them to stay informed. Erickson depicts Louis XV as an indifferent ruler who nonetheless understood the need for economic reform in the face of an ever growing government debt. Louis XV shuffled his advisors around and took the controversial step of dissolving the local parlements that had been stifling his proposed reforms. This seed of discontent among the public grew into fruition after his grandson took the throne, as Erickson will explain in later chapters.

Meanwhile, Antoinette and Louis apparently still had not consummated their marriage, despite their growing fondness for one another. Erickson imagines Antoinette's dismay at seeing other women at court get pregnant and have children while all eyes were on

her to produce an heir to the throne. She was still only in her teens, however, Erickson explains, and continuing to grow. She was gaining in health, drinking milk every day at the advice of her mother, and taking long, quick horseback rides for exercise.

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary and Analysis

By 1793, the health of King Louis XV had deteriorated markedly. Although still just in his fifties, he appeared older, Erickson writes, and the opinion of his courtiers was that his lavish life was hurrying him to his grave. Seemingly unaware that her influence at court was entirely dependent on her connection to the king, Madame Du Barry continued to spend extravagantly and plan enormous parties, which fewer and fewer people attended.

Also seemingly unaware of the impending situation was the seventeen-year-old Antoinette, who would soon wield considerable power once her husband became king. Her contemporaries wrote that she seemed indifferent or ignorant of her growing responsibilities, Erickson explains, but the author speculates that Antoinette was instead intimidated by the prospect of becoming Queen of France and sought to put it out of her mind by pretending nothing was happening.

The courtiers at Versailles continued to worry that the royal couple had not yet produced an heir, and talk began to circulate that one of Louis' younger brothers might be needed to continue the line. There was also concern that Antoinette was ineffective in curbing some of her husband's less desirable behaviors. The king was fond of working at manual labor and often joined in with the workmen who came to the palace to make repairs. That the young dauphine was not properly discouraging him was a sign to them that she was perhaps not ready to be queen.

As the king's health worsened, preparations were made for the installment of the dauphin upon his death. Part of the tradition was the formal presentation of the dauphin and dauphine in Paris, in a grand procession. The royal couple were greeted in Paris by an ecstatic and cheering crowd. Antoinette wrote that they received an ovation of half an hour as they stood at a high balcony before thousands of cheering Parisians. It was like nothing she had ever experienced.

Erickson opens chapter nine as King Louis XV is on his death bead, unresponsive to the family and courtiers who surrounded him. Knowing that as soon as the king died, the entire court would move to another palace, the courtiers began making arrangements to pack their belongings and prepare for the journey.

They also began to flock to Antoinette, who they believed would soon be the central power at court. Antoinette, only eighteen, made fun of them privately, viewing anyone over the age of thirty as comically old.

Upon the king's death, the dauphin immediately took on the title of King Louis XVI. His word was now law, and at first he seemed to take a serious interest in the affairs of state. Antoinette was now the arbiter of French fashion, and women began to wear their

hair like she did, placed high on the head in increasingly complex and somewhat ridiculous hairstyles.

Antoinette's life changed dramatically. As queen, she no longer was allowed any private life and her day was highly regimented. She spent the mornings being dressed and greeting courtiers and ministers, following the proper form of greeting due to each based on his rank. She attended religious mass every day with the king, followed by a large meal with the king and several others. She had free time in the evenings, which she often spent with friends, relaxing. She also created a retreat from her formal life in the gardens at Versaille, in pavilion called the Petit Trianon which she had surrounded by an English style garden.

Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary and Analysis

In chapter ten, Erickson continues the description of the elaborate system of duties at the French court. There were nearly nine hundred court officials and servants in the court of Louis and Antoinette, each with a specific duty. The duties of attending the king and queen were bestowed as honors to noble men and women, each performing his or her office in the formal procession of the royal day. The queen had someone whose sole duty was to hold her handbag as she proceeded to mass each day, and the king had a special attendant for reloading his hunting guns.

The servants were organized to work on a tight schedule, sweeping into the queen's rooms while she was away at mass and having her bed made and the room tidied in under five minutes. Appointment as a palace page was a special honor usually given to the young sons of noblemen at court.

In chapter eleven, Erickson opens with a quote from the Scottish philosopher David Hume about how beautiful and luxurious he found Versailles on a visit to the enormous palace. She then pulls back the luxurious facade of court life and provides some of the uglier details. Versailles was filthy, she writes. Villagers dumped their garbage on the grounds and dogs, cats and vermin roamed the halls. The palace was mostly open to the public, who came and went as they pleased, watching the king and queen as they proceeded to mass and took meals in public. Both courtiers and the public used the back hallways and stairs as bathrooms and Erickson imagines a horrible stench.

Court officials appointed by the king could expect to receive a considerable income from their positions, Erickson explains, but they were nevertheless usually deep in debt because of the extremely high cost to maintain their lifestyles. Always on the lookout for a way to advance in power and influence and thus increase their incomes or ability to borrow, the French courtiers were often targets of unscrupulous fraudsters who would pretend to be wealthy and influential noblemen and women. Erickson provides examples of a few of the more successful imposters who managed to bilk some of Louis' more gullible courtiers.

Chapters 12 and 13

Chapters 12 and 13 Summary and Analysis

In late 1775, the Comtesse d'Artois, the wife of Louis XVI's youngest brother, Artois, became pregnant. It was painful for Antoinette, Erickson writes, as she had not yet become pregnant herself. She persisted in trying to persuade the reluctant king to have the operation needed to treat his sexual dysfunction, but the king resisted.

Rumors began to spread that as the king was apparently not giving Antoinette the proper attention, she had taken Artois his brother as her lover. They were often seen together, and the handsome young Artois often treated his older brother derisively, adding fuel to the talk that he was flaunting his affair. Erickson does not give these rumors any credence, however.

The extravagant spending continued unchecked at the French court. Antoinette developed a passion for diamonds and expensive jewelry, clothes and elaborate hairstyles. The king did nothing to reign in his wife's outrageous spending, to the frustration of his financial minister, Turgot.

Turgot informed the king that the court was spending the country dry and that drastic economic reforms were necessary. Louis recognized that reform was needed, but still defended the large bills run up by the court. The reality of the economic situation was brought before the king and queen when loud protests sprung up in Paris over the high price of bread. The protesters marched to Versailles and were only dispersed when they were promised bread at the old price of two sous per loaf.

Meanwhile, the planning was underway for the official coronation of the king. At the urging of Turgot, the budget for the event was trimmed somewhat, but the ceremony was still very extravagant. Following the coronation, Louis and Antoinette once again enjoyed the moving cheers of the crowds.

Antoinette's joy at the adulation of the coronation crowds was dampened when the Comtesse d'Artois gives birth to a boy.

In chapter thirteen, Erickson provides an outsider's view of Antoinette and the French court. Antoinette's brother, Joseph, traveled to France in 1777 to learn what he could about the country and the court. Although Joseph was at this time the Holy Roman Emperor and the co-ruler of Austria with his mother, he traveled in simple clothes and with a single servant, calling himself Count Falkenstein to avoid bringing any attention to himself.

Traveling incognito also eliminated the need to follow the ridiculous etiquette that surrounded royalty, which Joseph despised. He stayed at a hotel in Paris and went to visit his sister at Versailles. He had come at the urging of their mother, who was afraid that Antoinette's runaway spending and seemingly uncontrolled lifestyle would endanger

not only herself but the alliance between France and Austria. Joseph was sent to try to influence Antoinette to pay more attention to her regal responsibilities, since it seemed that her husband the king would or could not control her.

Joseph's report on the French court was highly critical. He was put off by the elaborate costumes and extravagance and found most of the royal family ugly and boorish. Antoinette, he reported, was pretty but "empty-headed." He gave a detailed report of the king's sexual dysfunction and showed a glimmer of sympathy for his sister's position. He left the court and continued to tour Paris. The courtiers were glad to see him go, Erickson writes.

His visit did seem to have an effect on Antoinette, Erickson explains. She did not go out to Paris as often and started to read more. Shortly after Joseph's departure, the king finally agreed to undergo the operation intended to address his condition, and it was a success. Soon Antoinette was pregnant.

Meanwhile, relations between France and Austria were strained when French ministers condemned Joseph for having taken lands from the Frederick, the King of Prussia. Antoinette's mother urged her to use her influence to soothe the tensions, but Antoinette did not possess the political understanding to do much. The king's primary advisor, Maurepas, had manufactured the rift with Austria to free France from having to come to Austria's aid should they go to war with Prussia. This was done so that the French could instead aid the Americans against the British, with whom France was already at war. Antoinette tried what she could on Austria's behalf, but only managed to do herself harm in the eyes of the king's important ministers. Mercy advised her to show favor to Maurepas, but Antoinette could not bring herself to do it. She became depressed and started to spend all her energy on preparing for her impending birth.

Chapters 14 and 15

Chapters 14 and 15 Summary and Analysis

Antoinette gave birth to a girl, surrounded by expectant court officials and family who had crowded into her chambers to witness the event. Erickson imagines Antoinette's great disappointment at having a girl, as she had been hounded by her mother and others for so long to produce a male heir. Shortly after the birth she became pregnant again, but had a miscarriage. On her third pregnancy, however she did give birth to a boy, to the joy of the king and the nation.

Before the birth of the new dauphin, Antoinette learned of the death of her mother, Queen Maria Theresa. Although she had not seen her mother since leaving Austria, she had remained in close contact and was devastated with grief.

The problem of an heir to the throne had been solved, Erickson writes, but not the problem of France's severe financial problems. Since 1776, financial matters had been in the hands of a Swiss minister named Jacques Necker. Necker attempted to make sweeping reforms and curb the incredible spending but ran afoul of Maurepas and other court officials who went to the king and threatened to resign of Necker was not sent away. The king caved in to the pressure and Necker was forced out, despite being very popular with the French public. Necker continued to criticize the government after leaving.

Near this time, the court was rocked by the bankruptcy of one of its members, the Prince de Guemenee, a high-ranking nobleman whose wife was close to Antoinette. Like many of his peers, Guemenee had borrowed extensively to finance his expensive court lifestyle. His property and assets were heavily mortgaged and he finally came to end of his resources. It was a sign of things to come, Erickson writes, as the lavish French court began to wonder if they might not be able to borrow more and more.

In chapter fifteen, Erickson introduces Axel Fersen, a handsome young Swedish nobleman who came to Versailles on occasion. He had met Antoinette and been impressed with her beauty and lack of pretense. She in turn was attracted to the tall young man of simple manners. Fersen managed to get a posting to Versailles and the two developed a close friendship that tuned into an affair.

Food shortages became worse across France and the monarchy was increasingly blamed. Antoinette was singled out for her lavish lifestyle. She had built an idyllic small farm village in her section of the gardens at Versailles, and received a large new palace from the king as a present, which she prepared as a home for her children. She had a third child, another boy.

Resentment for Antoinette extended to the Polignac family, which had grown close to the queen through her good friend, Yolande. Yolande may have truly been a good friend

to Antoinette, Erickson speculates, and not looking for anything in return. Her family, however, took advantage of her friendship with the queen and obtained lucrative positions through her.

In 1785, a scandal in the court came close to involving the queen. A church official named Cardinal Rohan was scorned by the queen and wanted to improve his connection to her to secure his own advancement. An impostor named Jeanne de Saint-Remy told Rohan that she was a good friend of the queen and promised to help his cause with her. In reality Jeanne was not close to the queen at all. She convinced Rohan that the queen wished him to deliver to her a large diamond necklace that she had ordered from a famous jeweler. Rohan picked up the necklace and delivered it to Jeanne, thinking she would give it to the queen. In actuality, the necklace was given to Jeanne's husband, who took it to England to sell. Eventually, the jeweler's bill was presented to the queen for a necklace she never ordered and had not received. The entire affair came to light and Rohan was tried for his involvement.

Antoinette, who was now pregnant with her fourth child, expected Rohan would be convicted of theft or fraud, but public opinion blamed her more than him. Although she knew nothing about it, the public still blamed Antoinette and sympathized with Rohan. He was acquitted while Jeanne and her husband were convicted.

Chapters 16 and 17

Chapters 16 and 17 Summary and Analysis

Antoinette emerged from the Cardinal Rohan scandal with even more enemies at court than before. The acquittal of Rohan was an "atrocious insult," she told her friend Yolande (p. 173). Eight months pregnant and under increasing strain from the Rohan affair and the worsening economic conditions of the country, Antoinette took solace in caring for her children, Erickson writes.

Her oldest daughter was now seven, and Antoinette kept her nearby constantly. The dauphin was five and suffered from a deformed spine. Her third child was a healthy boy of fifteen months. She gave birth to her fourth child, a girl, who was undersized and sickly at birth.

The king's new finance minister, Calonne, warned the king that France was on a path to economic ruin unless drastic reforms were implemented. The king was no more decisive than before Erickson writes. The French court made the expensive annual move to the king's palace at Fontainebleu in October of 1786, where the king could spend his days hunting.

In chapter seventeen, Erickson opens by outlining the failure of Calonne's reforms to receive the backing of the French dignitaries whose support was needed to enforce them. Calonne was removed from his position by the king. The episode was important, Erickson suggests, as it demonstrated that the king was virtually powerless without some type of consent from the population.

The climate at the court was cloudy. The king was mistrustful of his ministers. Lurid pamphlets that told of Antoinette's supposed indecencies were widely circulated, even among the servants at the palace. Under the eye of the new chief minister, Lomenie de Brienne, the palace budget had been deeply cut. He fired hundreds of servants. Antoinette began to have her clothes repaired rather than replaced.

Politically, France was starting to simmer. There were thirteen regional parlements around the country, local assemblies gathered to deal with civil matters. The Paris parlement had begin to show open opposition to the economic reforms proposed by the king and only responded with more defiance when the king tried to coerce them into supporting him by banishing its members from the city.

Without the support of the Paris parlement, however, France was unable to institute the reforms needed to restore its credit. War with the Dutch and English loomed as a possibility, and without funds to support the military, France was in danger. Paris was in chaos.

Finally, the king relented and summoned the Paris parlement to Versailles to debate the proposed reforms. He was astonished at the open and intense criticism of the French court that was presented openly at the session. He stormed out in anger.

Chapters 18 and 19

Chapters 18 and 19 Summary and Analysis

In early 1788, Louis was constantly wrangling with the Paris parlement over the financial edicts he wanted implemented and which they refused to support. Lomenie de Brienne was in very ill health, reducing the confidence of the financiers who could restore France's credit. A new man was needed, and Antoinette stepped in and took action.

It is one of the few examples Erickson offers of Antoinette acting competently at politics. She understood that the man needed to gain the support of the Paris parlement and the international financiers was Jacques Necker, the former finance minister who had openly criticized the government and was very popular among the French. With the help of Mercy, Antoinette saw to it that Necker was reinstated.

Necker's return was greeted with great enthusiasm and optimism by the French public, who demonstrated in the streets of Paris. Their optimism was short-lived, however, as the following winter of 1788-89 proved to be one of the coldest ever. The river Seine froze solid, halting the transport of grain and shutting down the flour mills. Food became very scarce and the threat of famine loomed.

Necker took no immediate action. The Estates General, a national legislative body was scheduled to meet some months after his appointment.

Erickson opens chapter nineteen as the members of the Estates General are converging on Paris to meet in session. The assembly was made up of members of the clergy, called the First Estate, the nobility, called the Second Estate, and a Third Estate of property holders and other important citizens. The 1,200 deputies came together at the church of Notre Dame in Paris to walk in procession on the day before the assembly. The king and queen also took part in the procession, following the deputies. The king was widely cheered, Erickson writes. Antoinette was met with silence.

The assembly opened with a speech by the king announcing his pleasure at the gathering. Following the king, Necker rose to speak. He spoke for a long while, but to the disappointment of the attentive assembly he had no specific reforms or programs to recommend. Erickson speculates that the king may have prevented him from speaking openly about his recommended program.

Antoinette sat quietly through the opening of the assembly, looking uncomfortable at times according to an observer. Erickson guesses she probably had the declining health of her older son on her mind and was eager to return to him as soon as the session was over.

Chapters 20 and 21

Chapters 20 and 21 Summary and Analysis

The dauphin was in very bad health. Born with a spinal deformation, he was never a healthy child and now his deformed ribs were crushing his internal organs. Antoinette and the king visited him as often as possible in his final days. When the young boy finally died, they were both extremely saddened.

The Estates General was bogged in procedural issues over how to formally recognize its members. The public grew increasingly impatient with the deputies for their lack of action. The Third Estate, which had been chosen by the king in large numbers because he thought they would the most likely to support him, decided to leave the Estates General and form what they called the National Assembly, a new body that claimed sovereignty from the people. They invited the other members of the Estates General to join them, and soon most of the clergy had gone over to the National Assembly. Necker resigned, causing the public to march on Versailles, leading Louis to consider the use of troops against the protesters and to send troops to Paris to stand ready if the violence escalated.

Rumors started that the king's troops were marching toward Paris to attack the crowds. Believing they would find a large cache of weapons in the old Parisian fortress called the Bastille, the mob stormed it. Most of the defending soldiers were sympathetic to the citizens and reluctant to fire on them, but some of the invaders were killed in the event. They overran the Bastille, freed the few prisoners that were kept there, took what weapons they could find, and captured several soldiers who were then beaten and killed. The event became symbolic of the power of the citizenry over the corrupt monarchy.

In chapter twenty-one, Erickson describes the "great fear" that swept France after the storming of the Bastille. Similar uprisings took place in smaller cities and towns around France, with local governments being overrun and new ones set up on the model of Paris. Rumors of royal troops being dispatched to pillage rebellious citizens sent the public into frenzies of looting and pillaging of their own. Louis was called to Paris by the Parisian municipal government, despite Antoinette's fear that he would be taken prisoner. Instead, he made a show of supporting the new government by donning the colors of the new government and pledging his service to the French people.

Meanwhile, many noblemen and members of the royal family were making plans to escape France completely, fearing for their lives at the hands of the French citizenry. Antoinette herself began to explore possible escape routes, but Louis refused to consider leaving the country. A delegation from Paris visited Antoinette and expressed their devotion to the queen, but she could not hide her anger from them, and they went away disliking her even more.

Chapters 22 and 23

Chapters 22 and 23 Summary and Analysis

By 1789, Antoinette was urging her husband to get the court far away from Paris, which was just a couple hour's walk from Versailles. The lawlessness and animosity toward the royal family grew every day and she feared they would be kidnapped or killed. Her fears were not unfounded, for a mob of Parisians marched to Versailles and stood outside the palace demanding that the king come to Paris. The king addressed the crowd and said he would come to Paris, but only with his family.

In chapter twenty-three, Erickson describes the family's move into the Tuileries, a dilapidated old palace in Paris that was quickly made inhabitable. Sentiment against Antoinette was at a peak among the outspoken Parisians, and they were now closer than ever, surrounding the Tuileries and mocking her whenever she came in sight. The family lived under virtual house arrest.

The National Assembly also moved to Paris and continued their work toward a constitution, slowed by constant infighting. A deputy named Mirabeau emerged as the leader of the most popular faction, and he approached the king with a deal to help protect the monarchy in the drawing up of the new constitution in exchange for a pension and the payment of some of his debts. Mirabeau hoped to create a constitutional monarchy such as England had, which would preserve the nobility. There were more and more calls among the citizens every day to abolish the monarchy altogether, and Mirabeau could be of great help to the king. The king gave Mirabeau what he wanted.

Mirabeau urged the family the get out of Paris and offered to help arrange their escape to some other part of France.

Chapters 24 and 25

Chapters 24 and 25 Summary and Analysis

In 1790, Paris was still a dangerous place, full of crime and immorality. Everyone was suspicious of one another. Political clubs formed, including the Jacobins, named after the monastery where they met. Still under house arrest at the Tuileries, the king spent his days napping, reading and working at his hobbies.

The first anniversary of the invasion of the Bastille was celebrated widely across France. In Paris, a public ceremony was held with each of the notable figures in government taking an oath to support freedom and democracy. The king himself took such an oath, pledging to support the constitution that the National Assembly and he would implement. At the king's oath, the assembled crowd went wild, cheering him on enthusiastically. For the moment, he was back in good favor.

Not so for his wife, however. Plots were uncovered to assassinate Antoinette, as Erickson explains in chapter twenty-five. A plan was outlined for the royal family to escape France by traveling on the passports of a noble Russian family. The plan called for the family to sneak out of the Tuileries individually, then meet and travel by large carriage to the border, picking up military escorts along the way. Antoinette undertook the first stages of the plan, secretly gathering the clothes and items the family would need in exile and having them sent out of the country to be used later. The plan was shelved when suspicions arose that the family may be planning to emigrate.

In the summers, the royal family was allowed to leave Paris during the week for their palace at St. Cloud, returning each Sunday to dine publicly. When they left by carriage for St. Cloud to celebrate Easter, their procession was mobbed by citizens hurling rocks and insults at Antoinette and the family. Even the soldiers in charge of guarding them joined in the insults.

Chapters 26 and 27

Chapters 26 and 27 Summary and Analysis

With the help of Axel Fersen, the royal family sneaked out one by one from the Tuileries one night, setting their escape plan in motion. Gathering together in a large carriage, they set out quietly for the border with Belgium. The plan was to travel with just a few escorts at first so as not to arouse suspicion. At a town near the border, a group of soldiers would be waiting to take over the escort for the last part of the journey to the border. The large overloaded carriage moved slowly, however, and the family was delayed. The officer waiting for them at the meeting point became concerned when they had not arrived by the time they were expected. Finally, he determined they must have been found out and sent back to Paris and left for the border without them.

The carriage had continued on, however, and reached the meeting point late at night. A suspicious official held them there, believing that he recognized the king. He called for a judge who lived in the town and who had once lived at Versailles. The judge immediately recognized the king, revealing his disguise. The escape plan was ruined. The carriage was escorted back to Paris.

Meanwhile, the Parisians were outraged at the attempt of the king to escape. In their absence, they had ransacked the Tuileries and arrested all of Antoinette's servants. A few months earlier, Mirabeau, the king's advocate in the National Assembly, had died and the constitution proposed by the Assembly stripped the king of much of his authority. The king accepted the constitution, having no other option. Axel Fersen continued to try to the help the royal family by offering to help the king escape by himself to Sweden. Louis would not leave Antoinette and his family behind, however. The king and queen held onto the slim hope that the other monarchies of Europe might mount forces to invade France and restore them to power.

Chapters 28 and 29

Chapters 28 and 29 Summary and Analysis

The chance that they might be saved by a foreign invasion that would suppress the revolutionaries sustained Louis and Antoinette in 1792, and they were heartened to learn that Austrian forces had started to gather on the French border. This was an outrage to the French people, of course, given Antoinette's Austrian heritage. The National Assembly vowed to go to war with Austria if they did not back down. Meanwhile, Austria forged an alliance with Prussia, which was even more eager to invade France.

In Paris, the revolutionary fervor was ever rising and peaked with an invasion of the Tuileries, when a mob reached the king and queen themselves, making threatening moves and hurling insults at them, but not harming them. After this incident, Antoinette took to wearing a specially-made thick undergarment meant to withstand the points of daggers or spears.

In chapter twenty-nine, the revolutionaries finally take decisive action. The National Guard had petitioned the Assembly to depose King Louis and elect a national convention, which the Assembly had refused to do. Their refusal set off the Jacobins, who were eager to take power themselves. The Tuileries were stormed by a murderous mob who killed every male servant, official and aristocrat they could find, sparing the king and his family and the women of the court.

The royal family was imprisoned in an old fortress called the Temple. By decree, the king was stripped of his title and referred to as Louis Capet, the family name of his ancestors. Antoinette was placed separately from Louis, with her children. The conditions were not uncomfortable, but the outlook was bleak. Antoinette still held out hope that the Austrians and Prussians would come to their rescue.

Meanwhile, a cache of letters of Louis' were found in the ruins of the Tuilerie that incriminated him in treason in the eyes of the assembly. The Jacobins, a minority in the assembly, called for his execution. Louis was taken from the Temple to appear before the Assembly and answer their accusations.

Chapters 30 and 31

Chapters 30 and 31 Summary and Analysis

The king was not to return to his prison cell. Tried and convicted for treason, he was taken immediately to be publicly beheaded by the newly adopted device called the guillotine. Back at the Temple, Antoinette continued on, caring for her children with the help of her oldest daughter and monitoring the progress of the war with Austria and Prussia in hopes that she might be rescued. She was given the opportunity to escape by sympathetic helpers, but refused to leave her children behind. Eventually, her children were taken from her, to be raised under the new democratic principles of the nation. Antoinette was moved to another prison, where she was kept alone in near darkness, where her health deteriorated. She was not yet forty years old but appeared much older.

The day finally came when Antoinette was called before the Assembly to answer for all manner of accusations, including treason and incest. She stood proudly and answered the Assembly proudly and sometimes defiantly, Erickson writes. They soon reached their verdict, which was never really in doubt, and the former Queen of France was sentenced to be executed publicly. She was taken to the scaffold in a plain cart, such as those used for common criminals. She faced her fate with resigned dignity, Erickson writes, even apologizing to one of the soldiers holding her for having stepped on his foot. She was tied down and her neck placed in the guillotine. Afterward, a soldier held up her severed head to the crowd, to their cheers. This is where Erickson concludes her account.

Characters

Marie Antoinette

Marie Antoinette is the main subject of the biography and central figure in Erickson's account. She was born the second youngest child of Queen Maria Theresa of Austria and Francis, Holy Roman Emperor. A pretty child, Antoinette was singled out for marriage to the young heir to the French throne, Louis, the grandson of King Louis XV. At the age of fourteen, she was married to Louis and moved to France, where she would remain until her death.

Antoinette was ill-prepared for the intricate political and social web at the French court, and resistant to follow the established etiquette for a young woman in line to the throne of the queen. She soon ran afoul of King XV's mistress, Madame du Barry, and found herself the object of considerable scorn from among du Barry's supporters. As the king's health began to fail, however, the French courtiers began to flock to her as it became apparent she would soon be taking the throne with the ascension of her husband.

Antoinette was a fashion setter, and her high hairstyles and elaborate dresses set the standard for all well dressed ladies. She spent lavishly on entertaining her friends and on decorating her apartments and gardens at Versailles, the main palace of the French court. As the French economy worsened and food prices rose, Antoinette and the rest of the aristocracy came under increasing criticism by the public. Violent protests arose and threats to Antoinette's life became very real. She tried to escape France with her family at one point, but they were discovered and turned back. Eventually the French revolutionaries seized control of the government and had Louis and Antoinette imprisoned and stripped of their titles. Each was tried by the main legislative assembly and convicted of treason. Antoinette followed the fate of her husband and was publicly executed by decapitation.

King Louis XVI

King Louis XVI was the husband of Marie Antoinette and the King of France at the time of the French revolution. He was the grandson of the previous king, King Louis XV, having come into the line of ascension on the death of his father and older brother.'

Louis was just fifteen when he was married to Marie Antoinette, a young princess of Austria. He was an awkward youth, unsure of himself and socially inept. He preferred hunting to almost anything else and took little interest in preparing to be king. He paid little attention to his new wife at first.

Louis suffered from a physical condition that made sexual intercourse difficult and painful, a situation that was made worse by the heavy pressure he was under to produce an heir to the throne. After resisting the operation that would cure his condition, he finally consented and was able to father four children with Antoinette.

Louis was intelligent, Erickson writes, but without the required political savvy and decisiveness of character to rule effectively. He resisted the drastic economic reforms that he was repeatedly told were needed to help the French economy, and assumed wrongly that he had the love and support of the French public. A more decisive and adept ruler might have avoided Louis' fate, Erickson suggests.

Louis was eventually imprisoned after losing control of the French government and being convicted of treason in a quick trial by the National Assembly. He was publicly beheaded by guillotine.

Queen Maria Theresa of Austria

Antoinette's mother, the ruler of the Austrio-Hungarian empire. Maria Theresa was a strict mother who held definite views on morality and the proper role of the nobility in society, which she tried to pass on to her children.

Axel Fersen

A Swedish nobleman who became the friend and lover of Antoinette. Fersen obtained a post at Versailles to be near the queen, and helped her and the king attempt to escape from France.

King Louis XV

The King of France prior to Louis XVI, Antoinette's husband, and the grandfather of Louis XVI. Louis XV was an indifferent ruler who left most of the work to his ministers as he pursued his own pleasures.

Madame du Barry

A former prostitute who became the mistress of King Louis XV and for a time the most powerful woman at the French court.

Adelaide

One of Louis XV'x daughters and the aunt of Louis XVI. Adelaide was an enemy of Madame du Barry and enlisted the support of Antoinette soon after her arrival in France.

Artois

The handsome youngest brother of Louis XVI. Artois escaped France after the storming of the Bastille and attempted to raise a force to counter the revolutionaries from his

base in Turin. He was rumored to have had an affair with Antoinette, which Erickson says was not true.

Mirabeau

A powerful leader among the French deputies in the National Assembly. Mirabeau struck a deal with Louis XVI to support him in the Assembly in exchange for money.

Jacques Necker

A Swiss financier who handled economic matters under Louis XVI. Necker was forced out of office in a political maneuver, but was later brought back in hopes that he might help reform the French economy. He was very popular with the French people and Erickson suggests that his second departure from the government fanned the flames of revolution.

Yolande Polignac

A close personal friend of Antoinette whose extended family benefited from her friendship, causing resentment among many of the French courtiers.

Provence

One of Louis XVI's younger brothers.

Duc d'Orleans

An uncle of Louis XVI who had popular support among many Parisians to take over the throne.

Madame de Tourzel

A noble woman who was appointed governess of Antoinette and Louis' children.

Duc de Normandie

The younger son of Antoinette and Louis, who became dauphin on the death of his older brother. The boy was taken from Antoinette when she was imprisoned and awaiting her trial.

Objects/Places

Versailles

The location of the grand central palace of the French king, located near Paris. Versailles was enormous and surrounded by huge gardens and a village that supported the palace.

Paris

The largest city in France and the scene of the most violent of the revolutionary activities.

Vienna

The capital city of the Austrian empire and the birthplace of Marie Antoinette.

The Tuilieries

The dilapidated royal palace in Paris where the royal family was forced to take residence in a kind of house arrest.

St. Cloud

A palace near Paris where the royal family was allowed to spend the summers while they lived under house arrest.

The Bastille

A former fortress that was stormed by French revolutionaries in search of ammunition. The attackers were under the impression that the king was about to order troops to suppress the uprising in Paris. The storming of the Bastille became a symbol of the French Revolution.

The Temple

The former fortress where Louis, Antoinette and their family were imprisoned while Louis and Antoinette awaited trial by the National Assembly

The Parlements

Thirteen local legislative bodies that represented the thirteen provinces of France. The Paris parlement was the largest and most influential of these.

The Estates General

A national legislative body called to assembly by the king, made up of clergy, nobility and men of property.

The First Estate

The section of the Estates General made up of the clergy.

The Second Estate

The section of the Estates General made up of the nobility.

The Third Estate

The section of the Estates General made up of propertied gentlemen and other important figures not among the clergy or nobility. The Third Estate began to refer to itself as the "commons" after the similar house in the English Parliament and broke away from the Estates General, forming what it called the National Assembly.

The National Assembly

A French legislative body made up of deputies of the Estates General and formed independently of the king's authority to develop a democratic constitution. Louis and Antoinette were tried by the assembly.

The Guillotine

A device for beheading condemned criminals, named after its inventor. Louis and Antoinette were both executed by guillotine.

Themes

Unprepared to Rule

Marie Antoinette was only ten years old when the diplomats of Austria began to think seriously about marrying her to the dauphin of France. Royal marriages were of great importance in eighteenth century Europe and were used as diplomatic tools to cement alliances between nations. France and the Austria-Hungary Empire were two of the most powerful nations of the age, and the marriage of Antoinette and Louis was a strong symbol of their intended friendship.

It was also a tremendous responsibility and burden on the young couple. Antoinette was only fourteen at the time of her marriage and Louis just a year older. Erickson describes Louis as a typically awkward teenager, uncomfortable with women and uncertain of himself, wanting only to spend time at his pastimes and to remain unbothered by expectations of proper regal behavior among his family and court. He is shown engaging in wrestling matches with his servants, childishly tormenting his younger siblings and making inappropriate jokes. Antoinette was often thought to be too forcefully jolly and seemed to maintain a willful ignorance of her expected behavior as dauphine and later as queen.

As king, Louis was expected to take a firm hand on the affairs of the nation, and at first he seemed willing to tackle the job, Erickson writes. He eventually turned more and more duties over to his ministers and resumed his boyhood hobbies of hunting and tinkering. As queen, Antoinette was expected to provide support and direction to her husband to ensure he performed his duties. Antoinette was simply not equipped to address the complex political and economic crises faced by France during her reign, Erickson suggests.

Perhaps Antoinette's most important function as queen as far as the people of France were concerned was to produce an heir. This, too, was an enormous pressure on the young couple. Louis medical condition and awkwardness strained their sexual relationship and the resulting rumors that grew as long as they remained childless made matters worse.

Ultimately, Louis' ineffectiveness as king contributed to his demise as the economic and political conditions raged beyond his control. Antoinette's once enormous popularity fell rapidly, aided by France's deteriorating relations with her home country of Austria. Often

accused of indifference toward their subjects, the picture that Erickson paints of the royal couple is of two people often youthfully indifferent to their very adult responsibilities who were thrust into their roles while still very much children.

Antoinette's True Character

Erickson presents a realistic but sympathetic portrayal of Antoinette that aims to counter what she considers misapprehensions about the young woman's life that have been widely accepted. Erickson traces the root of many of these false rumors to Antoinette's own time, when political enemies and anti-monarchist members of the public regularly invented stories about the queen, attributing to her the most incredible vices.

One of the most commonly circulated rumors, Erickson explains, was that Antoinette carried on many love affairs with both men and women, hosting all night debaucheries in her apartments and even committing incest with her own children. None of this was true, the author insists. The rumor of the all night parties Erickson traces to a single episode when Antionette and some friends stayed up to watch the sunrise one night. The accusations of incest were purely invented and Antoinette defended herself against them personally at her final trial.

As for the many love affairs, Erickson writes that this was also probably completely invented. It was not unusual at this time for courtiers to carry on affairs semi openly, she explains. Even King Louis XV openly kept a mistress who lived at Versailles and was accepted as a very influential person at the court. Antoinette did not generally approve of such behavior, however, Erickson writes, probably greatly influenced by her mother's opinions on the matter which were formed out of her own experience with an unfaithful husband.

There is evidence that Antoinette did have one affair, however, the long relationship with the Swedish nobleman Axel Fersen. While Erickson writes that there is no direct evidence that the affair was sexual, it seems likely that it was, and Fersen was given rooms at Versailles near the queen's. This was not a tawdry affair, however, as Erickson describes it, but one based on mutual deep love and friendship.

By closely examining the actual evidence and tracing the rumors about Antoinette to their likely source, Erickson aims throughout the book to debunk the image of Antoinette as an uncaring and profligate aristocrat.

Motherhood

Erickson opens her biography of Antoinette with a chapter about Antoinette's mother, Queen Maria Theresa of Austria. Maria Theresa was a dedicated ruler and worked hard at administering the empire she had inherited from her father. She was also the mother of fifteen children, Antoinette being the second youngest. So dedicated to her position as queen was Maria Theresa that her numerous pregnancies hardly slowed her down.

She worked right up until the last moment, and returned to work as shortly after giving birth as she could.

Maria was not personally attentive to each child, as she was often separated from them. Their day-to-day upbringing was put in the hands of governesses chosen from the nobility to raise them children in the expected manner of a royal household. Maria Theresa provided written instructions to the governesses and received regular reports on her children, seeking to shape their characters through instruction.

Even after Antoinette was married and moved to France, Maria Theresa continued to offer her regular advice and to receive written reports on her health and behavior at court from the Austrian diplomat Mercy. Antoinette prized the letters she received from her mother and wrote back enthusiastically. When her mother died, Antoinette was devastated.

Erickson contrasts Maria Theresa's mothering style with that of Antoinette's. Where Maria Theresa was strict and distant, Antoinette kept her children close and indulged them. Where Maria Theresa rarely had time to spend with her children, Antoinette stayed close to her own, especially when her older son became very ill. Maria Theresa's first duty was to her position as ruler, where Antoinette sought solace from the trials of being queen by attending to her children. Erickson describes Antoinette's complete devastation when her children are taken from her when she is imprisoned and her spirited defense when they are brought up at her trial.

Antoinette was not the adept and devoted ruler that her mother was, Erickson is suggesting, but neither is she the cold and distant mother her own mother was at times.

Style

Perspective

To the Scaffold is a historical biography written in a creative and descriptive style. It is written in the past tense and in the third person, but maintains a perspective that is primarily aligned with the main subject, Marie Antoinette. Erickson interprets the known events of Antoinette's life as she might have experienced them given her background and apparent character, and frequently relies on Antoinette's own letters and journal entries to allow her to speak in her own voice.

Erickson also adopts the perspective of some of the main figures in Antoinette's life. She provides a good deal of information about Queen Maria Theresa of Austria, Antoinette's mother, in the opening chapters that examines her attitude toward her pretty daughter and her sense of duty as a ruling monarch. Louis XVI, Antoinette's husband, is a primary figure to whom Antoinette's fate is tied. Erickson tries to interpret the growing unrest in France from Louis' own perspective as an intelligent but out-of-touch ruler.

Erickson also adopts the perspective of the French public at large, looking at the lavish lifestyle of the French court compared to the meager existence of their own. The author tries to balance these often conflicting perspectives into an accurate account of Antoinette's life.

Tone

To the Scaffold is a factual historical biography about a sometimes controversial character, Marie Antoinette of France. The author maintains a scholarly historical tone throughout the book, providing endnotes and citations for the sources on which she relies.

Erickson strikes a tone that is sympathetic to Antoinette. She does not ignore the contemporary rumors that Antoinette had several sexual affairs, but provides counter evidence that much of what circulated about Antoinette was unfounded and unsupported. Her one probable affair with a Swedish nobleman Erickson depicts as a devoted relationship based on true love and friendship. Erickson actively attempts to debunk the popular characterization of Antoinette as an indifferent aristocrat, instead providing instances of Antoinette's charity and concern for people and her devotion as a mother.

Erickson' sympathetic depiction adds a sad tone to the final chapters as Antoinette learns of her husband's execution and is then forcefully taken from her surviving children to face her own trial and execution alone.

Structure

Erickson follows a chronological structure in recounting the life of Marie Antoinette in To the Scaffold. It is divided into thirty-one numbered chapters, with endnotes and an index.

Erickson begins with Antoinette's birth in Austria to Queen Maria Theresa, one of several royal children. Chapters one through three describe the birth and Antoinette's early childhood under her strict but often absent mother, as well as the arrangements made for her to marry Louis, the Dauphin of France. Chapters four and five describe her voyage to France to marry the Dauphin and the awkward early weeks of their marriage. Chapters six through fifteen recount Antoinette's sometimes troubled life at Versailles, the main palace of the French court, coping with the intrigues and infighting among the hundreds of courtiers who shared the enormous palace. In Chapters sixteen through twenty-one, Erickson begins to chart the increasingly serious upheaval in the French government and among the public that culminates in growing animosity toward Antoinette and the rest of the monarchy. Chapter twenty-two describes the relocation by force of the royal family to Paris, the seat of the most violent political protest.

Chapters twenty-two through twenty-five recount the life of Antoinette and the royal family living under house arrest in their palace in Paris. Chapters twenty-six through twenty-eight describe their failed attempt to escape France and their return to Paris, less popular than ever. In chapter twenty-nine, Erickson writes of the storming of the palace and the removal of the king and queen to a prison called the Temple. Chapter thirty describes the trial and execution of King Louis XVI and the further imprisonment of Antoinette. In chapter thirty-one, the final chapter, her own trial is recounted, and the book ends with her public execution.

Quotes

"Antonia - always called Antoinette at the French-speaking Austrian court - was a pretty enough baby, but only a girl, another Archduchess in a family that already had seven Archduchesses and only four Archdukes."
Chap. 1, p. 15

"From her earliest childhood Antoinette was aware that she and her siblings were destined to be, as her mother once wrote, 'sacrifices to politics.' Their lives were not their own; they belonged to the state."
Chap. 3, p. 33

"For her part, Antoinette gazed at the heavy and gawky youth whom she expected to marry and took pity on him. She saw at once how timid he was, and was not put off by his extreme detachment or by his brusque speech."
Chap. 5, p. 53

"It was no wonder Antoinette broke the tension by making fun of the sober, unsmiling people around her. Even when dining with the dauphin, in a room full of courtiers and spectators, she burst out laughing, disconcerting those who were watching her."
Chap. 7, p. 74

"The fantastic coiffures were, for Antoinette, an engaging distraction, and one she needed only too badly, for now that she was Queen she found herself caught in a steel web of etiquette and obligation."
Chap. 9, p. 99

"Obsessive spending was one symptom of this emerging identity. Day after day Antoinette spent lavishly, excessively, on the Petit Trianon, on gowns and coiffures and feathers, on her friends, who received costly court appointments and pensions, and on jewels."
Chap. 12, p. 127

"Louis could not wait for his son to be born. He watched over Antoinette tenderly, visiting her apartments many times a day, loaded down with gifts and eager to reassure himself that all was well with her."
Chap. 14, p. 150

"Antoinette worried over her children, just as she worried over her husband who, year by year, found it harder and harder to cope with all that was awry with his government and looked to her for solace and advice."
Chap. 16, p. 173

"It was not only that the government needed reform, the entire nation needed to be regenerated, preferably by a king with the will, the power and the perseverance to sweep away the old abuses and to provide moral leadership. But Louis was not such a

king."
Chap. 18, p. 196

"Antiquated and underused as it was, the Bastille was a powerful symbol, and the crowd that approached it on the morning of July 14 did not know there were plans to demolish it before long. They knew only that they needed ammunition, and that as members of the newly created garde bourgeosie they represented the city's only means of defense."
Chap. 20, p. 223

"In September, with the town of Versailles itself in the grip of a crime wave, Louis thought seriously of leaving Antoinette had been ready to go for months."
Chap. 22, p. 237

"Most of those who clamored to see the King, or to gape at the Queen, were harmless... But no one could be trusted completely, not when Paris was inundated with inflammatory pamphlets calling for the murder of the King and Queen."
Chap. 25, p. 269

"All the color had faded from Antoinette's once lovely face. Her pinched cheeks were pallid, her lips bloodless, her imperial blue eyes a grayish blue, and red-trimmed with frequent weeping. Her hair was as white and lusterless as that of an old woman, and her body, once buxom and erect, had become stoop-shouldered and thin. She was aging."
Chap. 27, p. 293

"They tied her down and snapped the wooden collar in place around her neck. The drums thundered, the blade fell. A soldier held up the dripping head by the lank white hair, and applause filled the square."
Chap. 31, p. 345

Topics for Discussion

What popular conceptions about Antoinette does Erickson try to dispel? Is she successful?

Could Louis and Antoinette have avoided their fate? How?

How does Erickson portray the French nobility and their lifestyle?

Adultery appears to have been common in Antoinette's social circle. In what light does Erickson cast Antoinette's own affair with Axel Ferson?

What were the political conditions that led up to the French Revolution according to Erickson? Did Antoinette play any role in them?

How does Erickson depict Antoinette as a mother? How does she compare to her own mother, Queen Maria Theresa?

How does Antoinette face her final fate in Erickson's account? Is Antoinette courageous?