



# Catherine the Great: Love, Sex, and Power

*Virginia Rounding*

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## **Catherine the Great: Love, Sex, and Power** Virginia Rounding

Dutiful daughter, frustrated wife, passionate lover, domineering mother, doting grandmother, devoted friend, tireless legislator, generous patron of artists and philosophers--the Empress Catherine II, the Great, was all these things, and more. Her reign, the longest in Russian Imperial history, lasted from 1762 until her death in 1796; during those years she built on the work begun by her most famous predecessor, Peter the Great, to establish Russia as a major European power and to transform its new capital, St Petersburg, into a city to rival Paris and London in the beauty of its architecture, the glittering splendor of its Court and the magnificence of its art collections. Yet the great Catherine was not even Russian by birth and had no legitimate claim to the Russian throne; she seized it and held on to it, through wars, rebellions and plagues, by the force of her personality, by her charm and determination, and by an unshakable belief in her own destiny.

This is the story of Catherine the woman, whom power alone could never satisfy, for she also wanted love, affection, friendship and humor. She found these in letter-writing, in grandchildren, in gardens, architecture and greyhounds--as well as in a succession of lovers which gave rise to salacious rumors throughout Europe. The real Catherine, however, was more interesting than any rumor.

Using many of Catherine's own words from her voluminous correspondence and other documents, as well as contemporary accounts by courtiers, ambassadors and foreign visitors, Virginia Rounding penetrates the character of this most powerful, fascinating and surprisingly sympathetic of eighteenth-century women.

## **Catherine the Great: Love, Sex, and Power Details**

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## **From Reader Review Catherine the Great: Love, Sex, and Power for online ebook**

### **Lady of the Lake says**

I read this last over a year ago and found all the actual personal letters etc just facinsting. I love when there are things direct from the person as it leaves no questions as to what the truth is. This is full with info and as some found this too much I can't get enough of it! No huge revalations of info fir those famailiar with CTG bug it's well written, & beautifully done. (also on a side note... I have an ancestor who knew CTG and what an INCREDIBLE woman to know!!)

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### **Fergie says**

Perhaps the greatest aspect of this well-rounded biography is the inclusion of Catherine the Great's own letters. It's clear from reading her words that Catherine was an intelligent woman, ahead of her time. Author Virginia Rounding's book may not be as good a read as Robert K. Massie's biography of the same subject, but she certainly does a more than admirable job in showing the reader why Catherine is a worthy biographical topic.

Rounding lays evidence to how Catherine, a former German princess, was able to claim the love and loyalty of her adopted country, winning over doubters as to the ability of a woman in the mid-eighteenth century of being not only able to rule an empire, but to rule it well. Like Peter the Great before her, Catherine was able to take Russia to the forefront of the world's stage; to introduce philosophy and reason to a country known for its superstition and backwardness. She believed in the views of enlightened thinkers like Diderot and Voltaire, allowing their reasoning to help mold her view of rule (in fact, she corresponded regularly with both). It's ironic that it was only later in her reign that Catherine began to pull away from the more enlightened beliefs about governance, fearful of what those views might produce as evident by the American and French Revolutions. Through it all and despite her weaknesses (for which men were one) Catherine was a strong ruler -- intelligent, determined, fair, magnanimous, and forgiving, yet decisive and firm when needed.

Like Elizabeth I of England, Catherine showed the world that the right woman could dominate the political and cultural stage. I recommend Rounding's Catherine the Great: Love, Sex, and Power for any student of history. The author covers all aspects of Catherine's life, from her need for love and affection from men to her insatiable need for cultural and intellectual stimulation. For all of her many accomplishments, Catherine was not a woman content to rest on her laurels. She was a woman who governed hands-on, with an innate ability to align herself with men who she knew could and would promote her initiatives. In many ways, Catherine the Great's rule was perhaps the golden apex of the Russian Romanov Empire. She goes down in history as one of the world's greatest rulers -- man or woman; a ruler for the ages.

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### **Snail in Danger (Sid) Nicolaides says**

I finished this a while ago. Very enjoyable reading. The author says at the outset that she wants to "present Catherine the woman, the multi-faceted, very eighteenth-century woman, principally through her own words

and those of her contemporaries[]." Also? Apparently the horse story is a complete fabrication. Not a big surprise. I can't remember if I knew that before or not. But since this is something of a personal biography with political aspects, it spends a lot of time on Catherine's relationships with her favorites. (They'd be called mistresses if the genders were reversed.) This is something that modern polyfolk might find to be interesting, because for much of her life she had two favorites and had to figure out how to deal with having both of them around. (This is even more complicated when you're being the Empress of Russia, apparently.)

Catherine expresses herself well, and her excerpted letters are a lot of fun to read. I'm tempted to see if I can track the originals down, since presumably many of them would have been written in French. (Both because of Francophilia in Russian culture of the period, and because IIRC at this time French was (still) the dominant language of diplomacy.)

Here's an excerpt (p.331) from a letter from 11 November 1778, concerning American privateering:

Do you know what wrong those American ship owners have done me? They have seized some merchant ships which were setting off from Arkhangelsk; they carried out this delightful business in the months of July, but I sincerely promise you that the first to meddle in the commerce of Arkhangelsk during this coming year will pay me dearly for it, for I am not Brother G. [i.e. King George III]: one doesn't push me around with impunity; they can do what they like to Brother G., but not to me, without getting their fingers burnt; I am angry, very angry indeed.

Here's another interesting one - Catherine's reaction upon seeing drawings of some loggias decorated with paintings by Raphael. (Go here for pictures of the originals.)

"When Catherine received these drawings on 1 September [1778] she immediately went into an acquisitive ecstasy over them and determined that she must have replicas of the loggias for herself. ..."

I'll die, I'm sure I'll die: there's a strong wind blowing from the sea, the worst kind for the imagination; this morning I went to the baths, which made my blood rise to my head, and this afternoon the ceilings of the Raphael loggias fell into my hands. I am sustained by absolutely nothing but hope; I beg you to save me: write at once to Reiffenstein, I beg you, to tell him to get these vaults copied life-size, as well as the walls, and I make a vow to Saint Raphael that I will have loggias built whatever the cost and will place the copies in them, for I absolutely must see them as they are. I have such veneration for these loggias, these ceilings, that I am prepared to bear the expense of this building for their sake, and I will have neither peace nor repose until this project is under way. And if someone could make me a little model of the building, the dimensions taken with accuracy in Rome, the city of models, I would get nearer to my aim. Well, the divine Reiffenstein could have this lovely commission as well, if Monsieur the Baron Grimm so desires; I admit that I would rather charge you with this than Monsieur Shuvalov, because the latter is always raising doubts about everything, and doubts are what make people like me suffer more than anything else in the world.

One of the Empress's favorites was mentioned as having an apothecary set, which he used to mix and test drugs (!). But I wonder if this was a predecessor of modern chemistry sets.

1789 made the Empress unhappy. Not a big surprise.

"Do you still remember," she wrote to Grimm, "how the late King of Prussia claimed that Helvetius had confessed to him that the project of the philosophes was to overturn all thrones

and that the Encyclopédie had been made with no other aim than the destruction of all kings and all religions? Do you also remember that you never wanted to be counted among the philosophes? Well, you are right never to have wanted to be included among the **illuminati**, the enlightened ones, or the philosophes, for their only objective is destruction, as experience has shown."

Also the part about the illuminati made me smile.

Incidentally, I love Amazon's Search Inside This Book feature, because when I want to excerpt from a book whose publisher has provided the text, well, it saves me a lot of typing.

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### **Carol Vuchnich says**

Okay, I admit it. Some historic biographies are not my cup of tea. Challenged to read this for a book club, I managed to get about 1/4 of the way through and finally decided to let this book go home to its original owner.

If you are a history buff and love reading volumes of old letters, documents and love notes, mostly about court "goings on" this is the book for you. To her credit, Catherine was a person to be reckoned with. If anyone knows of a good raunchy fictional version I can read at the beach next summer, let me know.

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### **Steve says**

That is an unfortunate subtitle, because while she exercised power, and she fell in love often, and had plenty of sex, the empress of Russia between 1762 and 1796 was a far more interesting character than implied by those three words. Rounding writes a biography focusing on her personal life more than the specifics of political and military gains which her reign achieved. As Catherine offered voluminous correspondence both to and from others, Rounding has access to a very intimate account of her story. I actually enjoyed the first third of the book more, waiting for Catherine to grow up in Germany, get married to the heir to the Russian throne, prepare herself for attaining power, and then benefit from a coup d'etat she largely arranged herself. But, the rest of her life had plenty of interesting events, and her feelings about them as well as about the more hidden activities at court, are really interesting, as well. This was a nice addition to my recent reading in portions of Russian, European, and Ottoman histories.

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### **Kate says**

Not being very familiar with Catherine the Great's reign (most of my reading on the Romanovs has been focused on Nicholas II), but curious about her, I searched around for a while for a suitable biography to start with. Rounding's was recommended time and again, and after reading it, I can see why.

Her account is detailed, with some excellent analysis mixed in, while remaining easy to follow. (Not an easy task, considering the number of people involved in Catherine's court, many with identical or nearly identical names.)

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## **Sera says**

Rounding's biography of Catherine the Great, former Empress of Russia, is a long, but compelling and objective read. Rounding used painstaking research, most of it first hand, to give a detailed view of Catherine's life as a young child through the day of her death. She also added an Epilogue, which provides a nice, brief summary of how the rest of the Romanov family of rulers hailed until their reign came to an end when Nicholas II's family was assassinated.

Catherine was an interesting woman who was learned, had political savvy, and a great appreciation for the arts. She took the enlightened approach to ruling, yet applied it in a maternalistic manner. She also had a thing for young men to whom she gave much power and money in return for love and sex. Yet once out of favor, she treated these men well and they continued to remain loyal to her.

There is so much interesting information in this book that describes what life was like at a royal court during the 1700s. It's amazing how much money was spent on entertainment, building great homes, gardens, art collections and even gems. Yet even with all of its splendor, life at court to me seemed to be absolutely exhausting.

I would recommend this book to people who are interested in Russian history or in monarchs who ruled during this era. Catherine's reign also sets Russia up for what was to come next, even though Catherine of course had no idea at the time how those that she left behind would leave their mark on Russian history and the world.

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## **Danielle Deutsch says**

It is entirely not what I thought it would be. I bought it in an airport preparing for an international flight. I thought it would be told historical fiction style ala *The Other Boleyn Girl*, which as an aside is a horrible movie (I watched it on the same flight). So, it wasn't how I expected, but I think I like it better than I would if it written with an eye to being turned into a movie starring Scarlett Johanssen as the aging empress.

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## **Jennifer (JC-S) says**

Ms Rounding has provided a biography of Catherine which, while it is based on the person, covers the history and politics as well. So, who was Catherine and how did a relatively minor princess who was not even Russian born become the longest reigning monarch in Russian imperial history?

This is a fascinating study in power and politics as well as a personal journey through the life of one of the most intriguing women documented in history. Catherine herself was a complex character: a tireless legislator; a generous patron of philosophers (including men such as Denis Diderot and Voltaire); and an art collector (her systematic acquisition formed the basis of the great 'Hermitage' collection). Catherine was a dutiful daughter, a domineering mother and an indulgent grandmother. Catherine was also a prodigious writer, and it is largely through her writings that Ms Rounding has compiled this biography.

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### **Tori Hoeschler says**

Admittedly this book took me a long time to finish (this is in large part due to the fact that I'm not the speediest reader and I tend to have more than one book going at a time), but as far as nonfiction goes, this is officially a favorite. In fact, it is one of the better books I've ever read; fiction, nonfiction, or otherwise. In "Love, Sex, Power", Rounding brings to life a fantastic minx of woman that put Russia on the map as a legitimate world player. The reader is thoroughly entertained and educated. So often with biographies, the storytelling becomes dry and muddled with incoherent facts. However, with this book, Rounding cleverly weaves history, people and legend into one enthralling story. From the infamous "horse rumors" to "Potemkin Villages", the life of Catherine is depicted whole-heartedly. In many ways, this biography read like a novel, and a thrilling one at that.

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### **Rebecca Huston says**

A very good, very readable biography of Catherine the Great.

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### **Sarah says**

Fascinating portrait of an incredible monarch. Rounding paints the picture of a real woman, along with Catherine's status as legendary empress. I really enjoyed reading about the policies she implemented and how she changed the face of Russia in Europe's eyes. The only negative is that Rounding dances around the subject of Catherine's children - avoiding how much the Grand Duke and Duchess resented her because of her iron grip on their lives. Although this would have been the same situation had Catherine been a man and an emperor. Overall, fantastic biography.

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### **Eva Stachniak says**

This is an excellent all-rounded biography of Catherine the Great. Virginia Rounding does a great job in showing the many-faceted life of the Russian monarch. She is a compassionate biographer, but she does not shy from discussing Catherine's less savory features: her troubled relationship with her son, her compulsive need to control the lives of her grandsons.

There is a wealth of information about Catherine, her court and Russia in this biography...a must read for anyone interested in the life in the Winter Palace.

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### **Laura says**

Great book by Virginia Rounding who made an extensive historical research work on Catherine's The Great life. The book is very well written, keeping our attention during the whole story. Looking forward for other

books by this author.

Sending as a passport-book to Bettie.

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### **Sara W says**

Excellent book about Catherine the Great. The author uses a lot of primary sources (letters, memoirs, etc.) which really add a lot to the book. It's wonderful to read about these people in their own words. This book took me a long time to read because of all the details and names and places I wasn't familiar with, but it was well worth it.

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