



Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution

Simon Schama

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Instead of a dying Old Regime, Schama presents an ebullient country, vital & inventive, infatuated with novelty & technology. A fresh view of Louis XVI's France. A NY Times cloth bestseller. 200 illustrations.

Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution Details

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From Reader Review Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution for online ebook

Carol Dobson says

Schama's narrative account of the French Revolution allows events and people to guide the reader chronologically through the complicated maze of these turbulent years. Humor, and an eye for detail, lightens the tone of what is, at times, a very somber picture of humanity.

Schama's prose is always visually striking. He uses images to convey his meaning, as can be seen at the beginning of the Prologue, where he describes a decaying, plaster elephant, three stories high, which moldered on the site of the former Bastille, from 1814-1846. It was intended to represent Napoleon's imperial conquests and erase the memories of the Revolution, but it quickly lost one tusk and the other was reduced to a 'powdery stump', whilst its eyes sunk into 'the furrows and pockmarks of its large, eroded head.' In the end, a watchman, Levasseur, lived in one of its legs with rats, and neighbors complained that their houses 'were being colonized by raiding parties sent out from the elephant.' This interesting mixture of wit, information and description sets the tone for the rest of the book. The Revolution and its citizens parade through the pages; events and people fleshed out by observations which bring them alive.

Our first view of Malesherbes is of a 'rather shabbily dressed, stout gentleman, stood on the dockside at Rotterdam, puffing on a pipe, his tricorne hat planted carelessly over a perruque that had seen better days.' Talleyrand, the later Bishop of Autun, and one of the few Revolutionary survivors, as a seminary student had a penchant for collecting literature by very critical writers, as well as 'fruity pornography prominently featuring the libidos of priests and nuns'. And so on and so forth, through the famous characters frequenting this exceptionally busy time in history; Robespierre, Danton, Lafayette, Marat, Mirabeau and countless others.

They are mostly men, as one might expect, but women feature too. It is women who march from Paris to Versailles, demanding bread, carrying pikes and muskets, and dragging two cannon. Theroigne de Mericourt was also there, on a black horse, and 'sporting a plumed hat and a blood-red riding coat and carrying pistols and a saber, and it is Theroigne de Mericourt whom Schama writes about last in the book. She had been making a speech on behalf of Republican women and had been violently attacked by market women. She was 'stripped and beaten senseless' and rescued, according to some, by Marat. She spent the rest of her life in madness and finally ended in a cell, refusing to wear clothes and muttering incoherently about the Revolution.

The most notable female figure, is, of course, Marie Antoinette. She was taken to the guillotine, 'erect and gaunt', in an open cart, and was calmly brave until the last ghastly moments, when her legs failed her. Schama details individuals, yet sees the clarity of the whole picture. He does not shy away from the bloodshed of the Revolution, the darkest period of which might be said to be the massacres in the Vendee, now often thought of as a Crime against Humanity. He says in the Preface that his friend and teacher, Jack Plumb, 'taught him that to write history without the play of imagination is to dig in an intellectual graveyard'. The reader of this book can therefore be grateful to Jack Plumb for giving the impetus to the author to write this detailed, sensitive, amusing, but also very imaginative understanding of the momentous events and celebrated people of the French Revolution.

Robert says

Dear Mr Schama,

If you can't find the time to edit your own books then might I suggest hiring someone to edit them for you?

Bruce says

Simon Schama's history of the French Revolution examines the period from about 1780, nearly a decade before the Revolution "officially" began, to its apparent climax and quasi-resolution in the month of Thermidor of 1794. A history written about any event and any period has at least two aspects, the presenting of a chronology of events on the one hand, and, on the other, an interpretation that includes hypotheses about causes and implications of what occurred. Schama's monumental work – nearly 900 pages – presents chronology in a linear and comprehensive manner. His interpretation of the Revolution is, of course, his own, and his understanding has been questioned and criticized by some and affirmed and appreciated by others.

Schama has several convictions that run through his account of the Revolution. One among many is that the opinions that seem to have driven events were as much a resistance to existing modernizing movements in France as they were a drive to modernize. He also sees the issue of violence, often state-sponsored in the interest of ideological purity and the preservation of the Revolution, as being pervasive and an integral aspect of the period, the culmination of events in the Terror not being an aberration. This list of Schama's themes and convictions is not exhaustive.

Factors leading to the outbreak of the Revolution included the impoverishment of France by the wars in which it had been continuously involved in the decades before 1789 and the inability of France's Louis XVI and his ministers to take constructive and effective action in dealing with perpetual and worsening national finances. These problems were exacerbated by two or three years of disastrous harvests that made the people desperate and open to radical change. Into the gap jumped people who were willing to advance their own agendas and other people eager to ride Enlightenment philosophies that rejected monarchy, although anti-monarchical sentiments were less prominent at the beginning of the Revolution than they gradually became. The Romantic philosophy of Rousseau was permeating the air of the time and also fostered an idealism often incompatible with realistic initiatives that may have been more efficacious. Schama presents events as being to a great extent driven by Paris and its population, and there were powerful counter-revolutionary movements elsewhere in the country, eg in the Vendee, that pulled and pushed the Revolution in different directions, a tension that was aggravated by the wars in which France concurrently found itself as other nations attacked it.

Today's popular perception that the Revolution was primarily about the common people vs the aristocracy is clearly a vast oversimplification, the nobility itself being a group that was already in profound transition from mainly a landed aristocracy to a wealthy nobility based on commerce and budding industry. There were supporters of and resisters to the Revolution in every social group, including the Catholic Church which was persecuted during the Revolution's attempt to eliminate all religion except the worship of the state.

Reading a book of this kind reminds the thoughtful reader that any large event can be interpreted in many different ways, those interpretations perhaps reflecting the underlying presuppositions of the evaluator as much as what "objectively" occurred (the whole concept of objectivity being suspect, at least in the writing of history). Oversimplification in understanding almost any historical movement is a constant danger, and perhaps the person trying to understand past events can do best to expose himself to a variety of perspectives that then provide a pointillistic impression which he can reflect upon. I found this book fascinating, providing one important perspective that needs to be considered in attempting to understand this Revolution which subsequently had such profound effects on the modern world.

Mikey B. says

A detailed book on the French Revolution. The best aspects of this book are when the author becomes personal – as when he is describing the lives of individuals – Talleyrand, Lafayette, the King and Queen, Mirabeau... The first portion of the book lacks chronology – there is a constant shifting to and fro between 1770 and 1789 and events become confusing. Starting with Part II there is a sequence and key aspects of the Revolution are well described, such as the seizure of the Bastille.

Myths are also destroyed. France prior to 1789 was a dynamic and changing society. Very few prisoners were “liberated” from the Bastille (less than 10); it was stormed to obtain gunpowder for weapons. The Revolution did redefine the meaning of the word “citizen” and given the time period, gave vast publicity for the term “political freedom”.

During 1789 – 1794 everything became open for questioning (and later you could be guillotined for these questions). I believe that Mr. Schama minimizes the attacks on the Roman Catholic Church during this era. The Revolution during 1792-93 rejected the Vatican and priests were forced to swear loyalty to the French state. Atheists flourished in Paris. Today France could be considered one of the more secular societies in the developed countries.

There is a lot of name-dropping – and I suspect many of these names are used only one or twice throughout the book. Perhaps the over 800 page length got to me after awhile. The illustrations (at least 200) are excellent and capture the spirit and dynamism of the era.

Audrey Babkirk Wellons says

Reading this book made me want to read more history -- or, at least, more history written by Mr. Schama.

You can get a taste of his style in his recent New Yorker article (link below), but he basically introduces the reader to a subject with colorful characters and the social climate that they lived in. I certainly didn't know that Ben Franklin was a fashionable superstar in France for a time, or that one of the causes of the Revolution was financial mismanagement.

I got a little weary after Louis and Marie Antoinette were executed, and there were times when I would've appreciated a brief glossary, or a chart illustrating the structure of the government. But Schama isn't writing a textbook -- he's writing a pretty engaging take on a well-worn subject.

<http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics....>

Jan-Maat says

From this place & this time forth commences a new era in world history & you can all say that you were present at its birth

Goethe, after the battle of Valmy

Prelude

This is my impression of this book: Schama and Edward Burke take a stroll through an apple orchard in the late spring,

-look at the beautiful trees

- how marvellous, and the busy little bees flying amongst the blossom

- the blossom on the trees, so charming and delicate and full of future promise!

In the autumn they return and walk through the same orchard and exclaim

-oh how vile and disgusting! Apples, apples everywhere and in an apple orchard too, how shameless and disgusting!

Or to put it anyway, imagine Schama saying: stupid French-people, life was getting better and better, things were good, there was nice culture in the wealthier cities, and lots to eat if you were rich, educated people got to read lots of sophisticated stuff, and life was so good that the King had decided to demolish the Bastille and have the site turned into a park.

At which one replies - well why then did Royal authority collapse so rapidly, why was there such a melt down of government? A problem with arguing that the ancien regime was basically fine and well intentioned and nice while the revolution wasn't is that the people are the same one has to believe in dramatic head injuries occurring to most of the population of France otherwise what one has is that the Revolution was a natural development from the ancien regime its actors and responses were shaped by it. Schama in the final pages comes close to discussing the role of the press and of journalists as responsible parties in stirring up hatred and blood lust but as I felt throughout this book, just as one of the basic problems of monarchy are monarchs, so too the basic problem with a Simon Schama book is Simon Schama (view spoiler).

To the sudden end of the ancien regime he tells us that pornographic tracts featuring the lesbian shepherdess adventures of Marie Antonette alienated the ruling class from the monarchy (view spoiler) and there was rampant Atheism, and an obsessive identification with the Roman republic and the American revolution, any how Rousseau was to blame (view spoiler).

Interruption

I interrupt this review to bring you a brief précis of the book by the author:

Long ago a student asked a Professor if the French Revolution was a good thing or not, famously the professor replied that it was too early to tell. This was the wrong answer, the French Revolution was bad, NAUGHTY FRENCH PEOPLE, GO TO YOUR BEDS, SHAME! I know this because I am a very great professor and if you don't understand the subtleties of my argument it is because you are not very clever, because all the clever people see how brilliant and fantastic I am, also please write to your local TV station and ask them to make a TV series of my book with me presenting it. I think it would be really good, particularly if we can find the right actor to do Talleyrand.

The problem with Simon Schama

The problem is that what he really wants to do is present a TV series, he wants warm direct intimacy (view spoiler) with the viewer, he wants to be arch and witty to the camera, to be cleverish and entertain, but he's a

bit lazy and doesn't want to work like you have to in a serious book, he wants to assert, but not to have to prove (view spoiler). He also comes out with some weird stuff, so he says of the adoption of the principle of expansion to France's 'natural' frontiers that this was a change, a new aggressive policy from the Republic (and so in line with his stress on the revolution as violence) but what about those Chambres de réunion of Louis XIV? The Revolution may have marked a change in how the policy was articulated, but there was nothing new about the policy as such.

as entertainment

it works after a fashion, there are interesting details and amusing asides, and it is very long, and appropriately gruesome but can't really get past that because Schama won't discuss his assertions and because these overlap at times I was left thinking, well if that is what you think, if that is the story you are telling then the previous one, two or three hundred pages was just redundant (view spoiler) verbiage.

What we are left with is implicit Whiggery (view spoiler), admittedly this isn't a view that will hamper book sales, but it does become a struggle to see from this perspective why the French Revolution is of significance in World History or indeed to see why it marks the beginning of Modern History and our current political age (view spoiler)

At his best I felt his book worked like a commentary on de Tocqueville's *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*. What the old Frenchman expressed in a pithy sentence, the Briton will tell a rambling story around. This is ok, narrative history is fun, there is a hunger for it, but seriously even this is an indictment of Schama's offering - if he picked up after de Tocqueville you could cut four or five hundred pages from the book!

I was interested to notice how flat an effect Schama achieves, I read Hilary Mantel's *A Place of Greater Safety* and page by page thought 'wow, how interesting, the Rolands, the physiocrats, Danton, Robespierre, bribery and corruption, idealism', by contrast Schama plainly doesn't have the same sense of passionate engagement in his subject matter though he tries hard to achieve as novelist an effect (view spoiler)

He indulges with one of my pet hates - dropping in his big ideas casually in the epilogue so they stand out like rocks in the sea at variance to the information he has presented up to that point. If I had been his teacher, I am not sure if I would have despaired or put my hands on his shoulders and given him a good shake to rattle his thinking before telling him to have a reworked version on my desk by Monday afternoon (view spoiler). Toward the very end he comes up with the idea of the revolution as process that creates the concept of being a citizen in France, I feel that's a great idea, I suspect somebody has in *Peasants into Frenchmen* written something along those lines (view spoiler), and that to make that concept congruent with the entire book one would need to rewrite the whole thing (view spoiler).

So my overall impression of this book is mild frustration, there are lots of interesting books in here that could have been written, but just not the one that Schama did write.

In any case because the French revolution is the birth of our contemporary era, it is a very resonant subject, the response to the death of Marat at the hands of Charlotte Corday put me in mind of *Lenin Lives* and how the ideology of martyrdom is so powerful to us. The efforts of the Revolutionary regime to turn France into an arms factory suggest Mao in China having everybody melt down their pots and pans to turn China into the world's leading steal producer. Revolutionary France as exemplar.

The narrative of the Revolution as arising out of a conflict between the spread of a Capitalist mode of working and a paternalistic mode, which it fails to resolve is incarnated on a human scale in Robespierre the

supporter of mass executions who began as an opponent of capital punishment. I received this book as a gift and it means a lot to me as it is a theme which puts an edge on the teeth, the Enlightenment dream merges into the sleep of reason and we see ourselves in the mirror, Heine, and his Ideen. Das Buch Le Grand is the one to turn to.

It is a mess, sometimes a fun mess, but it relies on length as a proxy for authoritativeness, he is also vague on dates, and I suspect deliberately so, so without reference to some other source the inter relationship between events in different places is lost. When he does make definite statements frequently they are not even congruent with the material he himself has presented in his own book which is a bit off a worry it is as though he had subcontracted out the writing to a dozen under graduates and then skim read it and added a few sentences of his own here and there, generally I felt his heart wasn't really in it, judging by the bibliography it seemed more a regurgitation of what he had learnt in a post graduate seminar than arising out of any personal passion or research, as a chatty ancien regime loving introduction to the French Revolution that aims to entertain it works well enough though.

(view spoiler)

Matt Smith says

Before 10th Grade The French Revolution was something I was only moderately aware of. I guess I knew it was violent and it was a big deal but it was French and I was American and really who needs that when you have this? And when I studied it in 10th Grade history class I found it interesting, not realizing it was a seed that would grow and grow and grow until now when it is, really, one of the pieces of history that I find impossibly captivating. And given that we spent... maybe two weeks on the French Revolution in 10th Grade and that I've been thinking about it so much for the past so long I wanted to read more about it.

Unfortunately, this was not the book I really wanted.

For starters, it's clear that Schama has done his research. The first quarter of this book is about nothing but the socio-political-economic underpinnings of the actual French Revolution and the next half of the book is about the lead up to the execution to King Louis XVI (SPOILERS HE DIES) with the rest of the book being the fallout of, well, upending a full 1300 years of European tradition. Publicly condemn and execute one of the key monarchies of the previous millennium and it's hard to say that it wasn't a categorical turning point for European history as we race towards the rise of democracies and the dwindling of executive monarchical

power in Europe. As though Robespierre was ever going to be safe.

And in that, the book does have a really nice structure and does, in so many places, get into the humanity and the faces of the French Revolution, making me think about the actual people who were around for this. Sure, Marie Antoinette wasn't perfect, but did she really deserve to be called a whore everywhere she went? Did she deserve to be killed as she was? The strength of this book is in making me think about this decade of French history as more than simply "the first domino in the end of European monarchies". The French Revolution wasn't a frolic. It was a horrible time to be around. Riots, mass executions, more-or-less anarchy... All of these things happened and to just about every single person.

Where this falls short is in the actual things Schama covers. I feel like I didn't really have anything to hold onto short of the nebulous "French Revolution" itself. Sure, he bookends the entire thing with Tallyrand and Lafayette, but they aren't really characters in this book. He jumps from incident to incident with little fanfare and very little focus. Rather than show the Storming of the Bastille as this nationalist, patriotic symbol that we all more or less know of, Schama makes sure to point out the tangible results of the storming of the Bastille (which, admittedly, are pretty great) while also reminding us that this was purely a propaganda move.

But at 1,000 pages I'm still left wondering what's the point. I'm glad I read it. I'm glad it exists, but this is by no means a "definitive work" about The French Revolution that I really wanted it to be. It wasn't entertaining and it really did seem to go on forever while making next to no headway. Moments of it stuck out. The big moments. It definitely makes sure to criticize the romanticizing of the thing. But overall I can't really recommend this or say that everyone should read it. One day I'll find a book on The French Revolution that I'll hold up and tell everyone to read. I'll be sure to let Goodreads know when I do.

Erik Graff says

This is an excellent, enjoyable narrative about the period surrounding and including the French revolution, but it is not a great history. Schama does make his points, two of them being (1) that things weren't so bad and were getting better in 1789 and (2) the revolution was a bloody and unnecessary affair. He does not, however, prove much of everything by what amounts to a rather unsystematic collection of facts and anecdotes. Nor does he pay sufficient attention to what the events of the revolution, exemplified by, say, "The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen" meant to the world. Compared to Lefebvre's treatment, his is weak. Still, it is quite fun to read and the points he makes are worthy of pursuit.

A similar critique of the American Revolution could be made as well--and of the English, the Russian etc. As regards the USA one could point to Canada or Australia, comparing their peaceful transitions to independence to our bloody one--but then what of "Common Sense" or "The Declaration of Independence"? Schama goes on of course to discuss the Napoleonic Wars following the revolution, decrying them as well. Indeed, after the early wars of liberation so well outlined by R.R. Palmer in his Age of Democratic Revolution, Napoleon did institute sheer wars of imperialist aggression. Those certainly were what most moderns, excepting the recent Bush administration, would consider war crimes. Yet our own revolution was followed by genocides covering the continent. Further, the British abolished slavery decades before we did.

All of this raises questions about the role of the historian. On the one hand, one would want one's history straight--just the facts and no judgments beyond weighing facts and factors as more or less important. On the other hand, if history is to be relevant, then something like moral judgment would seem to come into play. The contrast is not actually this pronounced. Some of what must be dealt with is the record of decision-

making, a practice inevitably involving ethical considerations. Here I suppose good prefaces and introductions are in order. It should be the responsibility of the author to make clear his or her method and intentions in writing a history.

Michelle says

The real achievement in this book is that the author managed to make one of the most lively and interesting periods in history not only boring, but painfully, excruciatingly boring.

The French Revolution was bloody and funny and dark and incredible and really important to present day events. Yet trying to read this account of it is most like being slowly torn to bits by a mob while on heavy tranquilizers.

The writing is bad, the organization is schizophrenic, and it is several hundred pages too long. I wasted three months of my life (it normally takes me a week or two to read a nonfiction book) slogging through this nemesis of a tome and I wish I had that time back. I thought if I stuck it out long enough, I could learn something about the French Revolution, which I sincerely wanted to do. I have learned my lesson, and next time, I'll go for Wikipedia first.

The best use for this book is as a doorstop, or a way to get your kid to change their major from history to business.

Bettie? says

Elephant of the Bastille

Arrogant and bloated style and in such detail that after a while one just wants to scream. 948 pages of it! Skimming through the really snoozy parts but after twenty hours of listening I have still over half to go.

Seven months later: Loaded what was left of this into the mp3 so I could garden and walk and that worked better for me. Saying that though, I am glad to see the back of it!

•Karen• says

Schama takes 700 odd pages to cover the period from 1778 to the death of Robespierre in 1794, something that other no less respectable historians manage to do in a fraction of the space. So what is Schama doing

differently? For one thing he scrupulously avoids any kind of schematization, any form of large structural overview, instead concentrating on what indeed he declares it to be in the title, a chronicle, a careful catalogue of events, without giving them ideological interpretation. He also gives us plenty of anecdote and biographical background to the personalities involved, and does not ignore the provinces, a timely reminder that France is more than Paris alone, and that some of the resistance to the Revolution had more to do with resentment at centralization as opposed to federalism rather than any nostalgia for royalty. What he also manages to do, in contrast, he claims, to many of his learned colleagues, is to take a long, hard, impassive and yet critical look at the horrific violence. He takes other historians to task for either glossing over this aspect or dismissing it as a kind of necessary concomitant evil to the seismic shifts of change. His view is that violence was the heart and soul of the revolution, and indeed, the dilemma of those who were trying to run the country was always the question: should they appeal to the masses (incite violent insurrection) or should they strengthen the authority of the few (authority that could only be applied through military style or 'Terreur' violence)?

Schama also concentrates on pointing out many of the continuities between pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary society. This is the trend in historiography: in order to make the endless march of time a bit more manageable it has always been divided into chunks, like 'The Renaissance' 'The Reformation'. This tends to give the impression that these events heralded a sudden sea change in every aspect of life, whereas scholarship now is more aware of how artificial and euro-centric these markings-off are. Certainly the French Revolution is often seen as the crucible of modernity, as if European society was feudalistic, its government absolutist monarchical, and its economy regulated and controlled before the revolution and suddenly became free, democratic, liberal and ruled by the market after 1789. Naturally the process is that, a process, and there was a patchwork of measures and changes in political life that didn't always translate through to much difference in social structures.

As other comments here have emphasised, this concentration on daily events and the mix of continuities and discontinuities makes this a demanding read, as the reader is not given any help in ordering these events into categories that might help in grasping their significance. But that is precisely its greatest asset: it avoids ideology.

Janitor-X says

Poor Louis XVI. He just wanted to make maps and hang out with sailors.

Joe says

Outstanding piece of narrative history that overturns many long held views on the origins and progress of the revolution. In particular it shows how widespread change was already underway whilst the monarchy was still in charge and strips away a lot of the Marxist ideology that had informed so much of the historiography. The result is a far less glamorous and heroic epoch. Schama is no reactionary and this book is an important corrective to a lot of previously unquestioned assumptions.

The book is outstandingly written with a wealth of anecdotal detail about politics, culture, society and the lives of those involved. The outcome is a period of history that is both darker and more fascinating.

Chris Gager says

I've had this for a while and have been avoiding it. Why? You know, it's that "history" thing. Pretty good so far... I'll be looking for some explanation for all the civilized bloodletting.

Long way to go and I'm having to contend with a wandering mind when I'm reading. SS is a capable and interesting writer but he's trying to cover EVERYTHING that he thinks made a significant contribution to the Revolution and it's aftermath. That's a lot of people and "things" and it can get a bit dry. Hey! It's history...

We're edging closer to calamity now - the mid 1780's. Economic problems are very vexing and the public mood is greatly affected by the proliferation of nasty, nasty anti-royalist propaganda, especially aimed at Marie Antoinette - poor, clueless victim-to-be. Today's political climate is somewhat similar - witness the ridiculous stories about Hilary Clinton and Vincent Foster or Obama's birth certificate. Very difficult to combat ignorance and the tendency to paranoia and resentment.

We're almost there - to where things fall apart. Even at this point in the narrative one can't predict the bloody future.

The bloody stuff is coming on. Some of it's already happening in fact. SS is doing his best to give us all the pertinent info as well as his takes without making things too dry. It's working so far though one G'reads critic correctly points out the back and forth(in time) narrative can get a bit confusing.

So... the great adventure begins with the great fear and the blood has already started to flow. What will be the "big" takeaway when I'm done? Perhaps that humans are into bloodletting and causing death and pain all living creatures: predators/ carnivores/warriors/killers/torturers. Like that waterboarding do ya????

One of the criticisms leveled at this book is that it focuses too much on individual stories and on the bloody and barbaric behavior of the revolutionaries and then somewhat underplays the overarching positive outcome of the revolution, which was CHANGE... Away from the latent feudalism, royalism, absolutism and aristocrat-ism. Because the changes sought were no less than a complete overthrow of ALL the old order - social, cultural, political etc. - it had of necessity to be traumatic and disastrous for France. The FR went much further than the revolution in England and the changes wrought in America were not so drastic and painful because that society had been around for only 150 years or so. Make sense?

Think individual lives aren't important in history? How much did the untimely demise of Mirabeau affect events in France from that point on. Did it cost Louis and Marie their lives? Looks like it!

I guess you could say I'm taking my time here. Slowly digesting all the info. Reminds me of reading "The Power Broker".. Now up to the first Revolutionary War(with Austria) and the September massacres in Paris - what a mess...

- Controversy! SS seems to anticipate criticism from the Left in his trashing of Pierre Caron's work. Accuse him of revolutionary bias - something like holocaust denial...

- It becomes increasingly apparent what the author thinks of revolutionary democracy - inhumane and

murderous/violent...

- Now Louis Capet has been removed. I didn't realize that the vote had been that close, or even that there was a vote. The author makes big deal of and fair enough I suppose. But... MANY decent and overwhelmed people lost their lives during the FR. Monarchies are BAD as far as I'm concerned. The concept is outdated. Too bad for Louis that they were overwhelmed by the trauma of France's getting rid of it's monarchy.

- Seems like the author has a soft spot for the rebels of the Vendee. Gotta stay objective!

All done after last night. The book ends with the fall of the Jacobins and Robespierre but of course history continues... Napoleon is a-coming!

- more and more the "story " reminded me of Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia... the dark side of cultural change!

Melissa Berninger says

I read this years ago but have been thinking about it a lot lately. It's a good corrective to the received wisdom that the French Revolution was a smashing success and one that should be used as a model for the present. He argues that the "terror" wasn't an anomaly--violence fueled the Revolution from the outset. From the New York Times review: "Mr. Schama is at his most powerful when denouncing the central truth of the Revolution: its dependence on organized (and disorganized) killing to attain political ends. However virtuous were the principles of the revolutionaries, he reminds us that their power depended on intimidation: the spectacle of death. Violence was no aberration, no unexpected skid off the highway of revolution: it was the Revolution - its motor and, for a while, its end." I hope the folks at the protests with the "liberty, equality, fraternity" signs understand that what they're saying isn't just a cool slogan. But I doubt it.

Sebastien says

This is not necessarily bad. I just got lost in the maddening warrens of information/various characters. I may try and come back to this at some future date but I probably need to find a more straight forward history to give me better fundamental schooling on the French Revolution. It's quite complex and Schama doesn't really ground things with solid timelines and exposition imo. Probably a better read for those who already have some knowledge on the subject.

Bap says

This book is so undisciplined and dissatisfying. Cluttered. A chore to read.

Matt says

I wanted to read about the French Revolution. So I searched on Amazon for the biggest, cheapest book that I

could find, to give me an overview. Now, the French Revolution is complicated. It makes the start of World War I seem simple and inevitable. This book will not help clear that up. Which is not to say that this is a bad book. Rather, it's not a starter book. You should probably know a little bit about what's going on before you crack the covers. I am ashamed to say I had to use Wikipedia to get the chronology straight.

This isn't a retelling of the French Revolution from start to finish. Indeed, historians still argue about when it started, and when it finished. Rather, this is more of an impression of the Revolution, as told through participants, through literature, and through art. Schama does not take the normal historian's route of moving from one Historical Event to the next Historical Event. Instead, he works to give the impression of how these things must have *felt*, rather than focusing on a step-by-step retelling of what happened. As I said, this makes it hard for a newbie to the FR (that's what the kids are calling the French Revolution these days). The chapters are broken up chronologically, but Schama has a tendency to jump around a bit, so it's hard to keep things in order. He also will mention something, such as the Diamond Necklace Affair, but won't explain what that is until fifty pages down the road. Of course, this wouldn't be a problem if I knew anything about the FR beforehand, but still, Schama is a popular historian, not an academic, so it's not totally okay with me that he expects such a high level of pre-knowledge on the subject.

The best parts of the book are his mini-biographies on some of the leading characters, such as Necker, Robespierre, Malesherbes, Lafayette, Voltaire, Delacroix, David, Marat, etc. For whatever reason, he skimps on Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. In fact, he barely mentions how Marie came to France, even though her Austrian relations proved important to events in the Revolution. Schama does spend inordinate amounts of time on the libelous pornography devoted to portraying poor Marie as a whore, a lesbian, and an eager participant in orgies. Some of this is interesting, especially in the way that these contemporary portrayals still hurt her reputation (she NEVER said "Let them eat cake"), but I would've liked a bit more on her character, rather than its assassination.

All in all, my troubles with the book mostly stemmed from my own unfamiliarity with the subject (I got especially bored with Schama taking potshots at other FR scholars). His analysis and conclusions, that violence was the fulcrum of the Revolution, rather than an aspect of it, might not be readily accepted, especially since his account is so anecdotal, though I will reserve judgment until I read something else on the subject.

While the anecdotal nature of the book may detract from its scholarship, it certainly brings the period to life. Even if you don't know for sure why the Bastille is being stormed, you'll be caught up in the account of its fall.

I especially enjoyed the story of Talleyrand, the (in)famous diplomat with nine (or more) lives. Apparently, while Talleyrand was making his escape to America, he arrived at a foreign port where he had a conversation with none other than Benedict Arnold, America's most famous traitor, who was on his way to England. The two of them had a conversation then parted ways. One alleged traitor talking to another. Now *that* is a great historical moment. The stuff you can't make up, history has already provided.

Kelly says

I've always adored Simon Schama's storytelling. Is it melodramatic at times? Yes. Does he have his biases? Oh yes. Do I love it anyway? Absolutely.

CD says

Did the great French Revolution begin on a nasty rumor? Who really was imprisoned and when in the Bastille? Finally and the denouement to the whole nastiness of about ten years, why was there a lion locked up in the Bastille?

The story of the French Revolution is told in a series of interconnected personal histories, anecdotes, and from a historical viewpoint in this work by Simon Schama. Schama eschews the political science timeline and gets to the heart of the matter in a detailed account of the background and actual precipitating events of the beginning, middle and end of the Terror.

Schama does not rely on the tired old sources (as of the date of publication) for information regarding, among other events, the downfall of the reputation of Marie Antoinette. Yes she became known as the German whore but she and her husband Louis the XVI were a scant three years before their trials very popular. So how do you go from being the toast of your country to having your head removed by scientific (well for the time anyway) instrument? The conventional wisdom has long held that it was all about money, debt, taxes, and their undesirable end result.

Au contraire mon citoyen! Author Schama investigates the debt of France to comparable countries in Europe at the time and finds the monetary and tax situation no worse than other countries. The bottom up theory of revolution from the underclass is not supported by the evidence in the case of France, certainly initially. The violence that would erupt did come from factional turmoil and in-fighting. The beginning though is rooted elsewhere.

Modernity is the reason that Schama proposes from all most the very beginning of his work as the root cause of the French Revolution. A 'schism among the elite' concerning the future of France and how it was to be governed is Schama's prime reason for the events that would follow and lead to Napoleon. Coupled with what today we'd call bad press, poor PR management, and circumstances beyond anyone's control including the weather, a volatile and deadly situation arose. France would never be the same and the subjects would become citizens in what would be the greatest contribution of the Revolution.

So how about that gossip that did in Marie? Well, let's just say that in trying to get back in favor by doing a favor, Louis, Cardinal Rohan, did himself a disservice and wound up under the thumb of the commander of the Bastille prison. Not in the prison. His house arrest erroneously has been reported over the years as the torturous dank and gloomy condition that the confines of the old fort offered. It was a far cry from the terms of most of his confinement. Schama's research is incredible to the detail he pulls from the vast array of sources consulted. If Marie had only stuck to her guns and sold the diamond reverie and passed out food, she might have survived. O.K. probably not. The conditions of various prisoners and notables has long been reported based on assumptions and not letters, documents, and facts. Some were even more vilely treated than has been generally assumed.

The detail and information in the work are worth more than three stars but the book suffers from tangents that should have been simpler, shorter, and thus better illustrations. The author switches back and forth to French in places without translation or context that will be confusing to those not somewhat (or a great deal in two or three sections) familiar with the French language. The book does bring to life many details including some regarding the Terror that are surprising and a note for Europe today. Those who ignore the

history of that time are already repeating parts of it. Scapegoating and holding the purse strings against one's opponents doesn't work in the long run.

Simon Schama's ebullient and irrepressible personality come through in full force in this work. If you have seen one of his many made for BBC programs or have heard him speak/lecture, then you will hear Simon over and over in this book In a good way for the most part. The long winded explanations in places of all but unimportant details, to the Revolution as whole, are unneeded distractions. There are a few rather strange grammatical constructs in the book. The latter I put off to reading and researching in languages side by side with other than the one in which the book is written.

Schama strikes me as the kind of person I'd enjoy standing in Montmartre at the appointed hour on July 14 and singing La Marseillaise. The rest of the work and its discoveries I will leave to you!

PS

The Lion? Well he may have come out better than everyone else.
