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From Reader Review The Duchess for online ebook

Christina says

The title of the biography and the jacket blurb would lead one to believe that Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire is about Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire. But I think the biography was less about Georgiana and more about the politics in Georgiana's time. I realize that Georgiana was very involved in the Whig party, but the book as a whole droned on and on about England's political scene.

And while I personally find politics fascinating, in this book the Duchess of Devonshire, the most popular person of her day {think Princess Di, who is actually Georgiana's great-great-great-great-aunt}, who lived during the American revolution, the French revolution and George III, was almost a second thought.

Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire is a very dense, detailed book and as a whole reads like an incredibly boring textbook you're forced to read for school. Chapter after chapter after chapter goes into great detail about her addiction to gambling and her attempts to cover her debts, but only gives ten or so pages to Georgiana's relationship with Charles Grey and the birth of their illegitimate child.

Georgiana is a fascinating person, but this book is just too long and too chalked full of facts. Besides the error of the ages when Bess' children were returned to her, the fact Bess had two children by the Duke, and a slight disregard for how often Georgiana stood up to her husband, "The Duchess" does a much better job of portraying Georgiana's life than this book ever will.

Sherwood Smith says

The separate spheres view of life in the 18th century in particular was probably necessary in order to shift perceptions of what was important to dig out of attics and archives and study. The focus has usually been the eternal rehashings of king/prime minister/ Parliamentary carousels, or economic development (Marxist scholars). Until Braudel and his French quantifiers started looking at cemetery stones and baptismal records and counting up demographics, no one paid much attention to what the female half of the population was doing. Then feminist scholars got into the act, making 'women's work' a separate-but-equal sphere, a little like a Le Guin novel.

But, while I've enjoyed much of the endeavors of more recent female scholars (what I get hold of, which I know is a minuscule portion of What's Out There), the separate spheres concept made me increasingly impatient. The implication is that what women did was as important as men, it just wasn't leading governments, or considered important. Okay, sure, I'm with you. But the concept itself sort of hangs there, forcing an artificial view on readers just as the old style of history did, in which women weren't mentioned much at all, unless they were queens or famous courtesans. The idea being that women carried on separate lives largely invisible to men. When one reads letters of both men and women of the 1700s, just for example, one discovers just how much influences was going both ways, despite the forms.

Sidestep. One of the things that I've been wondering about for years was the shift in Whig politics during the 1770s and 80s; these wealthy landowners who favored the Revolution to the extent of adopting the Colonists' colors of buff and blue. Something changed there, and it eluded me when I read contemporary accounts—and later histories. Though I think some of the answer lies in Horry Walpole's letters.

Well, another side quest has been my effort to find a good account of the inmates of Devonshire House. I hate those peeking-through-the window salacious bios that just go on and on about who was sleeping with whom. So I regarded Amanda Foreman's bio of Georgiana Spencer with a skeptical eye, even after it won some award or other. But I finally thought what the heck, and was I glad I did. Bingo. Not only did she do a decent job with their lives (it connects up with other good stuff about Fox and Pitt and the Lennoxes, etc, that I've read over the years) but she stepped out of the 'spheres' thing to *finally* connect the Whig changes.

I don't think male scholars have seen how the hostesses changed politics at the times. There'd always been something missing, and this book seems to make the connection at last. The dinners, the Whig 'uniform'—all that was *her* idea. She made the Whigs popular by combining their political ideas with fashion. Nobody I've read has seen that! And what a lethal combo!

Esme says

This book really took me by surprise. It's not candycoated historical fiction, it is a really exacting portrayal of Georgiana. The author has tons of (interesting) quotes and footnotes, and relies solely on facts to paint a RICH portrait of the French revolution, the Whig party etc. REALLY GOOD!

fun fact I learned from this book: apparently, while giving toasts during the men-only portions of fancy dinners, English politicians would relieve themselves into chamber pots in the corners of rooms, while still speechifying! WHAAA???

Adriana says

This is proving to be a very fascinating read! Very political, very sexual (not in a broad sense but with underlying tones.) It appears that Princess Diana's great aunt, seven times removed, set precedent for her niece on eccentricities. Although I loved Diana, she was a bit of an oddball. However, I do find that I am falling in love with Georgiana, as well. A free spirit, a romantic and a brave lady. Can't wait to finish it! Stay tuned!

Okay, so I have about fifty pages to go and cannot seem to put this book down. Truly an amazing historical figure and in however she may have shamed her relatives and counterparts in the 1700's, she would be a woman of great importance and admiration in today's society when dealing with politics and fashion. However, I will say that she did have some less desirable qualities that manage to make me angry. I feel as though she could be a close friend. Someone I want to protect on one hand, and someone I want to slap upside the head on the other! Still reading!!

Finished! Whew, what a turbulent and tumultuous read! And it's all true!! I have to say that Georgiana was indeed one of the most mentally confused individuals of her time. Her sister was no better. Both beautiful and extremely intelligent, they had no common sense when it came to money or relationships.

It is amazing to me that the deeds done by those who lived hundreds of years before us still outshine the deeds of today...I speak politically, financially and sexually...and of nothing else. There was no shame in anything. If you were bankrupt, you borrowed from friends and strangers alike until you were even more bankrupt. If you were sexually promiscuous...you were talked about and ridiculed but still allowed within

polite society as though nothing ever occurred. Loved this book! It's heavy politically with so much information, but I didn't skip a single sentence!

Madeline says

A good, very thorough biography of a fascinating woman - Foreman is lucky to have had access to hundreds of letters written by Georgiana and her colleagues, so we get to see the historical figures telling their stories in their own words (something I'm not used to, being more fond of Tudor-era history). Also interesting was how many of Georgiana's letters *don't* survive, and why. She had some Victorian descendants who, due to being Victorian, took it upon themselves to clean up their ancestor's image by censoring or even destroying any letters that openly discussed Georgiana's numerous affairs. Thanks a lot, prudes.

This is a well-written history, but it failed to really capture my attention. First, because Georgiana herself was a really depressing person, constantly drowning in gambling debts and suffering from a serious lack of affection from everyone in her life - no wonder she devoted herself so whole-heartedly to politics, and latched on furiously to anyone who showed her even the smallest amount of affection.

The politics are the other issue - in a nutshell, they are *boring as fuck*. It's just "so and so was Prime Minister, but Georgiana supported so-and-so, and have I explained Whig politics yet? Well strap yourselves in, because it is a *thrill ride*!" Trust me, it isn't. Normally I'm okay with political backstory, but in this case it isn't backstory, it's the entire book. In my history books, I like the scandal/politics to be about 60/40. *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* is 75% politics and only 25% scandal, which I found disappointing. Also, the politics are described in a way that just puts me to sleep, as seen here:

"Then, in March 1803, Addington made a formal offer to Pitt to join a new government in which both men would become Secretaries of State under the nominal premiership of the Earl of Chatham. Pitt refused. Addington made him another offer in April, which included places for Lord Grenville and Georgiana's brother. This time it was the cabinet, unaware of the negotiations, which vetoed the idea."

That's about as exciting as the politics get here - so if that sounds like a good time to you, go right ahead.

Mauoijenn ~ *Mouthy Jenn* ~ says

A fantastic, in depth look at a classy lady. I enjoyed this a lot. A great book!

Leslie says

This is a Biography of the notorious Georgiana, The Duchess of Devonshire, chatelaine of Chatsworth and 5 other amazing properties. This book was used to inspire the movie, *The Duchess* <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0864761/>. Thanks to dear Marlene here is a fascinating blog post about the movie and the wedding of Lady Georgiana Spencer (yes those Spencers) to the Duke. <http://twonerdyhistorygirls.blogspot....> [This blog is Absolutely Fascinating and once you start reading you will be sucked in]

The author admits that biographers often become irrationally attached to their subjects "*Biographers are notorious for falling in love with their subjects. It is the literary equivalent of the Stockholm Syndrome*" and that is a detail that colors this book. It is also contagious, while reading I found myself worrying about 'poor' Georgiana's debts and pondering how much her dowry was? Georgiana has been dead for over 200 years, but the author brings her to life.

Much ado has been made about the comparison of Georgiana and her great-great-great-great-(etc) niece Lady Diana Spencer. Both married when they were young and innocent, both had difficult relationships with their fathers, both married older, established men who weren't prepared to make room in their lives for a wife. Both married men who had a mistress to provide love and were looking for a wife to finish their appearance, both men required a legitimate heir. "*The Duke was used to being flattered and cosseted by his mistress, Charlotte Spencer, and resented the emotional demands that Georgiana made upon him.*" "*The Duke was used to his bachelor life: love he received from his mistress, companionship from his friends; from his wife he expected loyalty, support, and commitment to the family's interests.*"

Georgiana married in 1774. Her trousseau included 65 pairs of shoes, 48 pairs of stockings and 26 1/2 pairs of gloves plus other clothes worth £1486 (£1,486.00 in 1774 is equivalent to £179,728.09 in 2016 or \$247,707.29) [where does she get these marvelous toys? <https://www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk/>] And like her famous descendant she took London and the press by storm. "*In less than a year Georgiana had become a celebrity. Newspaper editors noticed that any report on the Duchess of Devonshire increased their sales.*"

The Duke was a Whig, the Whigs are separately fascinating they rose to prominence by bringing William of Orange to rule and deposing James II. *The Whigs liked to portray themselves as political martyrs, popular in the country (which they were not), but barred from government because of the King's dislike.* The Whigs supported the American Revolution against the crown and felt that they were the spokesmen for the 'rights of man'. What I as a modern person found profoundly ironic was that these were the limousine liberals of their day. The Duke was insanely wealthy, as were his fellow Whigs. In 1770's the population of Great Britain was approx. 10 million but only 300,000 men were eligible to vote for members of the House of Commons. And some seats weren't really open to voting. The Duke controlled 11 seats as that the rich would buy up the houses of 'eligible voters' until they 'owned a seat' and essentially appointed the MP. "*There were very few electoral boroughs in Britain which the aristocracy did not own or at least have a controlling interest in.*"

Georgiana became an important hostess, advisor and campaigner for the Whigs. She was the queen of the haute ton, an eighteenth century IT girl and so much more. She was involved with the who's who of the late 1770s. Among her friends were the King and Queen of France. The political influence of women wouldn't be seen again until the 20th century "*The accession of Queen Victoria in 1837 had a further dampening effect on women's participation in public life*"

Alas dearest G had flaws a plenty. She was a degenerate gambler and was constantly in debt. Her charm and her husband's wealth were able to put off her creditors but up to her death she was never totally honest with anyone about her complete indebtedness. Her pin money was £3000 / annum [£346,400.00 in 2016] but she would lose that in one night playing faro [[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faro_\(c...\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faro_(c...))]. She spent much of her short life consumed with fear that her massive debts would be exposed, and borrowing from Peter to pay Paul. Multiple times she would go to the Duke and 'confess' her debts, but never in full, one of these admissions had her threatened with permanent separation.

Georgiana struggled to conceive; when her husband's mistress died his illegitimate daughter was brought into the household and passed off as a poor relation of the Spencers. Much like Mrs. Bennet in P&P Georgiana was desperate to produce an heir. *Once she had produced the future sixth Duke of Devonshire her husband*

would no longer be barred from borrowing money against the estate.

During a visit to Bath; to encourage the duchess' fertility, the Devonshires met a woman who would play a large part in the rest of their lives, Lady Elizabeth Foster (Bess). She would be the Duke's mistress and Georgiana's companion, an unusual set up. Not that this was an era of marital fidelity. Besides Prinny and his infamous debauchery it seems like everyone was having an affair. One thing that stood out to me was when her eldest was out one of her potential suitors was described as "*At thirty-five Bedford was certainly not too old for Little G, although he had several illegitimate children and currently enjoyed two mistresses*" Can anyone imagine thinking this guy was a 'catch' for your daughter or sister?

While the emotional parts of the book impressed me I have to say I was completely distracted by the spending, excess and expense. It was utterly mind blowing. "*Westminster election personally cost the Devonshires over £30,000.*" [£3,368,000.00 2016]. When the eldest Cavendish daughter married in 1801 she received a £30000 dowry [£2,094,000.00] to put this in to some kind of perspective, albeit an odd one in 1794 "*Lord Egremont's superb mansion in Piccadilly. . .is sold to Mr. Mills, of Yorkshire for the sum as is said, of £16,000.*" [£1,647,000.00], During Little G's season "*Georgiana recorded in June after a supper ball for 1,000 people.*" And toward the end of her life Georgiana tried to come clean with her husband regarding her debts "*The Duke had been expecting a sum of £5,000 or £6,000, not the £50,000 Georgiana eventually presented to him.*" [£3,687,000.00 2016] following the Duchess' death more creditors both real and imagined drove her total indebtedness to close to £100000.

The book is meticulously researched and uses many letters to and from the Duchess to share innermost feelings and actions. This book will also put the idea that our ancestors were much more moral and proper right into the recycle bin. This was the era of Sensibility and there is much collapsing, weeping and gnashing of teeth by both sexes which I found dreadfully amusing.

The text ends at 67% on the kindle with the remainder of the book made up of footnotes. There are also a ton of fabulous illustrations and copies of paintings.

Vocab:

inchoate - just begun and so not fully formed or developed; rudimentary

apposite- apt in the circumstances or in relation to something: "an apposite quotation"

jeremiads - a long, mournful complaint or lamentation; a list of woes.

Mystery: *Wednesday feels* G uses this in a letter to her mother but I can't find any modern definition or reference.

belamiste

Petra X says

A pretty girl from a titled, extremely wealthy family is sold off to an older man with an even more aristocratic title and loads more money as a brood mare. She is told he loves her, what 17 year-old wouldn't believe that? It isn't true, he just wants a mother for his future son and heir.

As she grows a little more mature she discovers twin passions - fashion and politics, which being a woman, she can only comment on, not vote or act herself. Combining those into a glittering *salon* for the wealthy, well-connected and appreciative gives her a measure of fulfillment. Not just fulfillment but solace too as her cold husband adds disdain to his list of unlovely qualities when she produces two daughters and no sons. In time she does have a son, this gains her a monetary reward from the Duke, as if she needed it.

She befriends a woman whose adultery has caused her husband to throw her out and keep the children. The woman is destitute and has nowhere to live (aristocratic women do not consider working or living in anything less than a grand house with a domestic staff) and so Georgiana takes her in. And she takes Georgiana's husband in. Best friends going off with one's husband isn't that uncommon but living in a *menage a trois*, breakfast-for-three was the cruel way Georgiana was forced to live otherwise she too would have lost her children.

Her life, already a soapopera descends even further into low melodrama. There is a reconciliation with her sister-wife over her own affair which produces a child that has to be given up to the father's parents. This all drags on until death-by-consumption whereupon the snake in the grass best friend marries the Duke, takes over the role of duchess and since there is nowhere else for the story to go, it ends.

But - Georgiana's only son never married or had children, despite many mistresses. He was as unlike his father as a son could be - he fought slavery, rebuilt the houses and villages of the poor on his lands, and took a great interest in fruit production: the bananas you buy from the supermarket were named after him, Cavendish.

If melodrama is in the veins, then it is of no surprise that the late Princess Diana was Georgiana's great-great-grand niece.

Something strange to consider. The upper classes seek now, as always, to marry their daughters into an even 'higher' family, the closer to royalty the more socially successful the marriage. The merely wealthy have always sought to marry their daughters into the aristocracy gaining the social nous that money alone cannot buy. Catherine Middleton, our future queen, is the daughter of two flight attendants who now own a rather cheesy but mega-successful online party supply company.

What is ironic is that the Royal Family don't seem to be snobs in quite that way. Princess Diana, over 30 years ago, was the last aristocrat to marry into royalty, all the others were ordinary middle-class people. This applies to a lot of Europe and even Japan. Odd really when you think about it, that the most glittering prize of all, marriage to an heir to a throne is out of reach to all those marriage-broking marrying-up aristocrats, they have to settle for one rung down.

Meleece says

This was a very interesting book because I enjoyed reading it but I did not enjoy the subject matter. My expectations were that I was going to read an inspiring account of an amazing woman who made the best of the unfair situation of her marriage to a tyrant and the lack of rights as a woman in society. What I found instead was a really pathetic character. This woman basically gambled away her husband's estate, of millions and millions of dollars in today's standard of currency, not just once but a number of times! She was basically in shocking-amounts of debt her whole life; she appeased her current creditors only by gaining new ones, who in turn were alienated by her vicious and continuous cycle of deceit. And she was dependent upon

an even more deceitful woman who pushed her way into Georgiana's marriage and became the Duke's mistress and then the new Duchess of Devonshire just a few months after Georgiana died. I can't understand why history, or this Oxford author, would set this weak, delusional woman up on a pillar just because she threw great parties and was influential in politics. Maybe it's because as the author described it, "the eighteenth-century . . . was no less inclusive than its modern counterpart." In other words, "You think this century is unique in its lewdness? Yeah right, 'great' and powerful people have always been immoral." You can tell Ms. Foreman belongs to a breed of historians who attempt to re-write history to make our century's sins just inclusive on a pattern. What I learned from this book, if nothing else, is that popularity is Babylon's crown.

Bionic Jean says

Do you recognise this person?

A shy English teenager, she blossomed after she was catapulted to fame by marrying an older, wealthier man. Although she had been born into a rich and influential family, her husband came from an even more prestigious family. After her marriage, she became universally adored; a trendsetting fashion icon, who turned heads whenever she entered a room. Everything she did, said and wore became news.

Yet her confident public persona hid a multitude of personal troubles. Her self-esteem became so low that she endured periods of loneliness and depression, and was occasionally subject to cycles of starvation and binge eating. She was a vulnerable woman who lived the life of an icon.

Of course, you might say, this thumbnail sketch is instantly recognisable: it is of Diana, Princess of Wales. Yet this description not only fits the former Princess, but also Georgiana Cavendish, the subject of Amanda Foreman's 1998 biography, **Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire**, who died more than 200 years ago. Even more strangely, the two were related. Georgiana's maiden name was "Spencer", as was Diana's, and she was Diana's great-great-great-great aunt.

Both Diana and Georgiana Spencer were born at the family home at Althorp. Both sat for artists; Mario Testino painted Diana, just as Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds had both painted Georgiana, two centuries earlier.

Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire - Gainsborough

Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire - Reynolds

Both became popular, quickly achieving celebrity status. "*The Morning Herald*" and "*The Daily Advertiser*" each published at least one story a week about Georgiana from 1781. The public bestowed their affection and loyalty on her, when it became obvious that her marriage would never make her happy. It seemed as if everyone was in love with Georgiana, except her husband, who showed no concern even when she fainted at a ball during their engagement, preferring to carry on talking to his friends about dogs. Indeed the first chapter ends in a nearby rented villa on their wedding day, where another woman, a milliner called

Charlotte, was nursing the baby she had had by the Duke.

Georgiana suffered the humiliation of being trapped in a very public ménage à trois, with her husband and her best friend “Bess”, Lady Elizabeth Foster, finding herself at the centre of 18th-century England’s best-known love triangle. The Duke expected two things from her: an heir, and not to gamble his fortune away, but for a long time, it looked as if Georgiana could do neither. She continued as an outwardly poised, flamboyant leader of fashion and the Queen of the ton, but she developed eating disorders, became addicted to drink and drugs, and through constant gambling, became heavily in debt. This is where the two histories diverge.

Lady Georgiana Spencer was just 17 in 1774, when she married the 26 year old William Cavendish, the 5th Duke of Devonshire. She had been contracted by her mother, Lady Spencer, to marry England’s most powerful aristocrat, and her dowry was immense. Georgiana’s father was wealthy, and she grew up moving between a series of palaces. Her new husband’s family, though, had vast estates, including Chatsworth, Hardwick, Londesborough, Bolton Abbey, Lismore Castle, Chiswick House, Burlington House and Devonshire House. The family owned the electoral boroughs which effectively controlled 23 seats in the House of Commons.

There were 200 peers of whom 28 were the highest ranking, Dukes. All the peers were entitled by birth to sit in the House of Lords, and 558 members of parliament (often their friends and relatives) would sit in the House of Commons. Britain itself still had less than ten million people, of whom only about 3 per cent were entitled to vote. As the wife of a Duke, Georgiana therefore immediately became one of the most influential figures of her time.

The periods of English history which stand out as most familiar, are probably the Tudors, the Victorians and the two World Wars. Other than that, our knowledge is patchy, unless we have studied history. Our views about the freedoms of Georgian females are likely to be inaccurate assumptions, based on our knowledge of the straight-laced and outwardly respectable Victorians.

Georgiana’s acquaintances were very different. They included titled ladies who sold their bodies to pay off their gambling debts, or to promote their husbands’ political careers. Others quietly disappeared abroad to give birth to illegitimate children—or adopted those of their husbands. Georgiana was in fact herself to do both of these. In the 18th century, a noblewoman was free to do largely as she pleased, once she had produced an heir.

Since William usually looked elsewhere for his sexual pleasures, Georgiana had to do something about it. She duly consulted a celebrated fertility “doctor”, James Graham, who was popular with the childless nobility. In his *“Temple of Health and Hymen”*:

“Infertile couples paid an exorbitant £50 a night to make love on the ‘electro-magnetic bed’ in his ‘celestial chamber’ to the strains of an orchestra playing outside, while a pressure-cylinder pumped ‘magnetic fire’ into the room.”

Females in the 18th century could take the initiative in many areas. Both the Spencer and Cavendish families were reformist Whigs, but the Duke’s position made it impossible for him to become involved in politics. Georgiana therefore became the public face of the family’s political ambitions. Although women could not vote at the time, and were barred from the House of Commons, Georgiana was an intelligent, insightful woman. She was very interested in Enlightenment philosophy, and understanding the importance of public relations very well, she became:

“a passionate contestant in the political arena. She devoted herself to the Whig party: campaigning, scheming, fund-raising and recruiting for it until the day she died.”

Georgiana made Devonshire House, the couple's London home, the centre of activities for Britain's fashionable opposition party. The Whigs were great landowners who contested the power of the crown (which at that time sat rather uneasily on the head of the increasingly insane George III) and who supported the American War of Independence. George III and his prime minister William Pitt were furious that Georgiana had tempted the vain, idle Prince of Wales into her inner circle, thereby enabling her later to save the fragile Whig coalition government from collapsing:

“No one in England knew that the fate of the government rested on a woman's influence with a spoilt youth.”

Whig society was liberal and worldly. It was artistic, gossipy, and not what we would consider polite. After glittering, spectacular balls and lavish dinners with large quantities of alcohol, the women would withdraw, in order for the men to continue their postprandial boozing. The toasting went on for so long that chamber pots were provided, and one French visitor observed that:

“The man with occasion to use one, does not even interrupt his talk during the operation.”

Georgiana was intelligent, funny and charming. She was a patron of both the sciences and the arts; an amateur chemist and mineralogist, an accomplished musician, poet and novelist. A French diplomat wrote of her in his memoir: *“When she appeared, every eye was turned towards her; when absent, she was the topic of universal conversation”*. Georgiana enjoyed poking fun at everyone, including herself. When big hair started to become fashionable, she created a sensation by creating an elaborate three-foot tower, padded out with wads of horsehair and embellishments, such as a ship in full sail, or a still life with waxed fruit and stuffed birds. Other ladies, slaves to fashion, followed her lead, teetering beneath stacks of hair so tall that they had to ride seated on the floors of their carriages:

Georgiana went through the family money like water, spending huge amounts of money on clothes, partying, drinking, and gambling, sometimes all night. She turned her drawing room into a casino, with a commercial “bank” and professional croupiers:

“I do assure you it is innate,” she said, “for I remember playing from 7 in the morning till 8 at night at lansquenet with old Mrs. Newton when I was 9 years old and was sent to King's Road for the measles.”

But she accumulated huge debts, unbeknown to her husband. A friend, the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan advised: *“paying only encourages them”*. So she told endless lies, making light of her debts to both her friends and her bankers, and even borrowing money from the Prince of Wales.

When Georgiana was blackmailed in 1787, she confessed to the Duke that she was unable to repay her debts. Her self-esteem had become so low that she was totally dependent on her friend Bess, who lived with with the couple as the Duke's mistress. Bess was torn between helping Georgiana pay her debts, and convincing the Duke to separate from her.

Although by modern standards, this story may seem scandalous, there is no evidence that Georgiana, Bess and the Duke of Devonshire were not all perfectly happy with their arrangement. Historians say that at that

time, men accepted the fact that married women had romantic relationships with other women, as this allowed them to find comfort without harming the essential fabric of society. Georgiana's relationship with Bess, seems to have been a romantic, and possibly a physical or sexual one, too. This was nothing new for Georgiana.

In a visit to France in 1775, Georgiana had become intimately acquainted with Marie Antoinette and the Duchesse de Polignac. Rumours about their relationship had spread like wildfire around the Court at Versailles. On her return to England, Georgiana then established a passionate relationship with Mrs Mary Graham. One of her letters says: *"I want to say above all that I love you, my dear friend, and kiss you tenderly."*

Georgiana then met Bess in 1782, and they began a relationship which would last their entire lives. Their letters contained passionate language, which indicates the intensity of their relationship:

"God bless you my angel love, I adore and love you beyond description."

"I declare to God I am half mad ... Oh Bess, every sensation I feel but heightens my adoration for you."

Georgiana had several miscarriages, but eventually gave birth to three children: first two daughters and then Hart, a long-awaited male heir. Georgiana also had a child out of wedlock with Charles Grey, a Whig politician, who would later go on to become prime minister. His government passed the Reform Act in 1832, which finally saw the reform of the House of Commons, and the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833, following William Wilberforce's Slave Trade Act of 1807. (Now however we are more likely to remember him as giving his name to Earl Grey tea.)

In 1791, Georgiana was banished to the Continent for two years, where she gave birth to Charles Grey's daughter, Eliza. Bess accompanied her, and chose to stay with Georgiana for several months, rather than return to the Duke, who insisted that the child (interestingly, an ancestor of the Duchess of York) was handed over to Grey's parents, who brought her up.

The affairs of this privileged circle continue to sound like a modern day soap opera. Georgiana's sister Harriet, had two illegitimate children by Lord Granville Leveson-Gower, and also had an affair with Sheridan. Sheridan's wife was jealous, and had an affair with Georgiana's husband (the Duke). Lord Granville eventually married Georgiana's daughter: Harriet's niece, "Harryo". Thus she became stepmother to her own two cousins, while another legitimate cousin, Caroline, went on to become the notorious Lady Caroline Lamb, the mistress of Byron.

Georgiana's own many affairs nearly caused her husband to divorce her, despite his own profligacy, and that of their circle. Double standards for men and women were taken for granted. The social mores allowed him to produce a number of children out of wedlock, but not Georgiana. Eventually their household would include three children by Georgiana, two by Georgiana's close friend, Bess Foster, and one by a former mistress of the Duke. For more than 20 years, until Georgiana's early death, she, Bess and the duke lived together. Three years after Georgiana died, the Duke married Bess, who: *"felt it her severe duty to be the Duchess of Devonshire"*. It seems as though Georgiana might have foreseen this, as upon her death in 1806, Georgiana had made Bess the sole guardian of her papers, thus giving her security for at least a time.

In a way, this biography is a tale of decadence and excess, and this was the slant taken when rewriting it as a script, for the film *"The Duchess"*. The film hypes it up, creating scenes of great palladian houses, public celebrity and female flamboyance. The camera lovingly dwells on the rustling pastel silks, gorgeous gowns

with glittering flashes of diamonds, plate, carriages, and lavish dinners. There is a constant entourage of footmen and servants, wild parties, love and sexual intrigue—and just a nod to party politics.

Keira Knightley did her best with the script, but was forced to portray Georgiana as a doe-eyed victim; a misunderstood woman. Her passionate devotion to the Whig cause was presented as a trivial diversion. The film barely mentions Georgiana's part in the Westminster election of 1784. Yet in reality, this was the most notorious public episode of her life. Georgiana canvassed the streets for the Whig candidate, Charles James Fox, and was pilloried by the press for her efforts. He was not a relative, nor was his constituency a family borough, yet Georgiana was willing to bring a torrent of abuse on herself. She became the first woman to appear on political platforms, and famously traded kisses for votes on the hustings:

Many obscene cartoons show satirists, including the famous Thomas Rowlandson, shamelessly caricaturing her sexual reputation:

Nevertheless, Georgiana's family pressed her to continue the campaign, criticising her for breastfeeding her daughter, "*Little G*", not for street politics. In fact well-read society women of the time were influenced by Rousseau's view that breastfeeding was preferable to having a wet-nurse. Georgiana's action was part of her Enlightenment philosophy, but the film uses it to make a different point, from current feminist perspectives.

The film's focus is entirely on the bedroom, and not on politics, capitalising on Georgiana as "*the empress of fashion*", to mislead the audience. It travesties her very real political influence, making a simplistic point about the lack of political rights for females. When they are newly married, the Duke complains that women's clothes are too complicated. "*You have so many ways to express yourself,*" Georgiana pouts at her husband, "*but we have only hats.*" It is a cheap joke.

There are some credibly theatrical moments in "*The Duchess*". For instance on Georgiana's wedding night, her new husband demands the scissors, to cut her out of the bridal finery, into which she had been sewn. In another comic scene Georgiana, slightly the worse for drink, staggers into the candles in the ballroom, and her huge starched wig catches fire. This elicits the wonderful line: "*Please put out Her Grace's hair.*" True to 18th century erotica, Georgiana wears white stockings and pink garters in bed. We can also believe that the Duke does not care if a servant hears his noisy grunts as he indulges in sex with various women, or threatening his wife with exile.

But these are details, and taken as a whole this film is flawed. It is only very loosely based on the book, and seems more intent on showing us a modern drama, skewed to modern tastes and preconceptions. Surely Georgiana, the film pleads, must have the heart of a modern girl who just needs a bit of love and understanding. The Georgians were really just like us, but dressier. The poster blares a blatant reference to Diana: "*there were three people in the marriage*".

The film remains narrow in its focus, with no wider perspective on the historical era. It begins with the moment when Georgiana receives the marriage proposal, and ends with her return to the Duke after the end of her affair with Charles Grey and the birth of their illegitimate daughter. Charles Grey is portrayed as the only other person with whom Georgiana has a sexual relationship, and the portrayal of her relationship with Bess is coy, making Bess merely her confidante, to whom she tells intimate secrets.

Historical biographies are not my chosen reading, and I would usually find them a bit of a slog. The attraction of this one was Chatsworth, the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire's estate. It is in Derbyshire (many miles from the county of Devon, which may be confusing to a non-English reader) and was the "local" stately home, which I used to visit as a child. The building itself is a lavish pile, with extravagantly ornate Baroque furnishings and heavy use of gilt on all the surfaces, and the grounds, landscaped by Capability Brown, are breathtaking, gentle grassy slopes, with a lake, mature trees, and cultivated areas. Herds of deer roam, and you can get a glimpse of one or two if you are lucky. For as long as I can remember, these aristocrats have allowed the public open access to their grounds. Picnic-makers and walkers alike are free to wander, walk or drive through, without charge. I was interested in the dynasty, and this biography proved to be a fascinating read, although a little dry in parts. It did begin as Amanda Foreman's doctoral thesis for Oxford University, after all, and has an strictly academic flavour.

Georgiana Duchess of Devonshire is a long book, nearly a thousand pages, in four sections:

- I - Debutante
- II - Politics
- III - Exile
- IV - Georgiana Redux

There is also an Introduction and an Epilogue, a "*Note on 18th Century Politics*" a Chronology, Notes, and a Select Biography, all of which are quite comprehensive. It is illustrated, with monochrome reproductions of contemporary portraits, etchings and cartoons from the time, often two to a page and quite small. They are grouped in the centre.

I am pleased to have read a reliable, well-researched biography of this remarkable woman. She was not just the "it" girl of her time, a fashion-plate and pioneer of big hair, friend of Marie Antoinette, and the real life inspiration for Sheridan's Lady Teazle, in "*A School for Scandal*". She was a force to be reckoned with in politics, as well as in society. I did not find the book "*mesmerizing*", as Antonia Fraser claimed in the "*Literary Review*", but it was an absorbing read, and certainly shed new light for me on the nobility of eighteenth-century England. I can happily recommend this as a great read for either a scholar or a general reader.

Jan-Maat says

This was a book, that I would like to have loved, but ultimately, it did not cut the mustard, pass the port, or lead in the quadrille.

The back story to Foreman's research is fantastic - she was studying 18th century British politics and was taught that the involvement of women like the Duchess of Devonshire was basically just eye candy for the voters, but she found out that Georgiana for the Whigs and later the Duchess of Gordon for Pitt the younger were important political figures because women were meant to be apolitical therefore they could invite people to dinner at which business could be agreed informally (so for example dinners at her table were important in the peace negotiations with the rebel colonies in north America, also since invitations to upper class parties at Devonshire house had social cachet, it functioned as an early form of party discipline - if you failed to vote with the party then you got no invite to Devonshire house to drink tea and play whist. Equally feminine blandishments might be employed to encourage some leading figure to cross the floor of the house of Commons, finally she might turn up on the campaign trail.

British aristocrats controlled large numbers of seats in the commons- but it was unacceptable for them to campaign personally, but it was apparently ok for their wives to kiss babies, promise to do all their shopping at certain merchants and basically win votes. Georgiana was a big fan of Charles James Fox and agreed, like the still rebellious 13 colonies, that George III had an evil plan to wield despotic power over the Empire- so much of the politics of this book is a simple inversion of the story in Macalpines' George III and the mad business, George falls ill, Whigs rejoice, he recovers and the prince regent pouts in Brighton with Mrs Fitzherbert.

Added to this is Foreman's account of the Duchess' personal life. Georgiana was a terrible gambler and was in debt for millions of pounds (she borrowed money widely to attempt to service her gambling debts, including from Richard Arkwright (view spoiler)), in fact everybody who was anybody seemed to be head over heels in gambling debts - the psychological state of the nation must have been frightful. Also as you would expect the aristocrats were terribly adulterous. In that the duke could have mistresses and bastards but it was a scandal when the duchess did (with earl grey, of earl grey tea fame)the pregnant duchess was shipped off to revolutionary France to have a baby in secret (fortunately the playwright Sheridan was a Whig and in Georgiana's pocket (figuratively speaking(view spoiler)

Marital relations could be very bad, with brutal and domineering husbands - this might have been shocking if I hadn't read Castle Rackrent but in short, wives were arbitrarily locked up, pressed for moneys subjected to violence, forceably separated from their children, and even banned from being in the same country and from seeing their own children. Georgiana had difficulties getting pregnant and had a number of miscarriages, the whole time there was pressure from her in-laws to give birth to a son, there were as you might expect, a rich array of quack cures to help women loose money, from taking the waters at Spa or Bath - which was fine fine so long as you didn't indulge in gambling. Having a son and heir is of course the whole point of everything for aristocrats.

Overall I found this book to be a bit of a damp flannel and no bucks fizz, although I was interested to read that it was the question of catholic emancipation that brought down Pitt's administration just as it would split the Tories a generation later.

On the subject of interlocking spheres I forgot to mention Georgiana's relationship with Mr Coutts. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of social status as Miss Austen had it. Mr Cottts founder of the eponymous bank (now part of RBS, it still provides banking services to the royal family0, had the money but no status - he and Georgiana were made for each other, she presented his daughters at court (a rough deal because she was persona non gratia with George III and his queen account of her support for the future George IV (and the Hanoverians had terrible inter-generational quarrels) and in return Coutts tried to manage her finances - an impossible task as Georgiana was no book keeper and had no record of what she owed to whom, plus she was occasionally blackmailed.

Navidad Thelamour says

One of the 5 reads I managed to gobble down in my last semester of grad school (in between internships at Hachette and dissertation writing!!) Loved this read! Non-fiction isn't typically my go-to drug of choice, but when it's done well, I really latch onto it. This one definitely was "well done" and delved into aspects of her life before the fame and in her later life that the commercial movie (which I also loved) never touched on. A good choice of read for sure!

Jamie Collins says

An entertaining biography. Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, was charming, intelligent and creative; she was the leader of high society in late 18th-century London; she was an author and an amateur scientist. She was also a key figure in the Whig political party. She broke new ground for the participation of women in politics (much of which would be lost in the Victorian age) and also for the use of personal celebrity to advance a political cause. The author's doctoral thesis was on Georgiana's political life.

Georgiana had a crippling gambling addiction that did much to ruin her happiness. She was hounded by creditors all her life and driven to lie to her friends and family, often borrowing money under false pretenses. Excessive gambling was a common vice of the upper classes at the time (the author says gin served to ruin the lives of the lower classes) but it's hard to sympathize with people who gamble away the equivalent of millions of dollars.

I just watched the movie based on this book, starring Keira Knightly. The movie is pretty good, but it completely omits Georgiana's gambling problem, preferring to cast her as a nearly saintly creature betrayed and persecuted by a cold-hearted husband. The movie makes much of her love affair with future prime minister Charles Grey, which is rather understated in the book.

Kelly says

Beautiful, passionate, but lost. That story didn't have a happy ending in the 18th century, either. This story is rather depressing at times, but vastly amusing and interesting otherwise. To say this woman led a fascinating life is an understatement. She did ridiculous, stupid things, and the author is a little bit overly tolerant of these mistakes. (She said herself she's in love with Georgiana a little.) So you have to take the somewhat rosy picture of Georgiana's character being painted with a little bit of salt. But! She makes you so involved with her. You want to shake her and scream at her like any good book would make you do with a character you cared for. You cheer for her and in the end? I would argue that there is a high likelihood of the reader being a little in love with her too.

leslie hamod says

A biography written about Georgianna Spencer, who in 1774 was married by her parents to William Cavendish, 5th Duke of Devonshire. He was by far one of the richest and most influential aristocrats of the day. It was a perfect marriage on paper, albeit distasteful in reality. He was a cruel and selfish man who paid her no attention. A womanizer, who used her to his own ends, that of getting an heir and a spare. She used fashion as an escape spending outrageous sums on dresses, that and gloves, with all the women in London following suit. She has a propensity for gambling and in one night could lose more money than she had courage to admit to her husband. She owes money to all her friends yet she was generous, giving even when she had nothing to give. She would assign household positions requiring no work, but wealthy incomes. She gave out titles that came with stipends. Even her politics were well known. She assumed the opposing faction of her husband, to his chagrin. She began to bring in excess and take drugs. Embarrassing herself not only at home but also at social events. She took a lover and fell in love. She became pregnant. Since her husband had moved his mistress into the home, to her great humiliation,

they no longer loved as man and wife. He was aware the child was not his. It was given to the father. The book is well written and from a historical perspective directly correlates to the life of Princess Diana Spencer. She was given into such an arranged marriage. Tried to become the people's Princess and lost her husband to another woman. She had fought with anorexia nervosa and bulimia. This is a MUST READ for those history buffs who enjoy an easy read true life novel!

Lindsay says

For those of us who love to read, hearing about an exciting movie adaptation makes us want to read the book. We, the few and the proud, will sit on our literary high horses and wait to finish the book even if it means the movie is no longer in theaters. I am one such reader and this is one such book. I saw a preview and was immediately drawn in, but as soon as I realized it was based upon a prize-winning biography, I immediately ordered a copy. I had high expectations, which I am glad to report were not disappointed. Foreman admits to readers in her preface that during her research she became enraptured by Georgiana, which few could deny after a quick skim of her source material - how many letters, diaries, newspapers, and books she must have slogged through over the years to create this entertaining picture of the Duchess of Devonshire.

In many ways, Georgiana's life was rather tragic, or I suppose as tragic as a life can be when part of the late 18th century aristocracy. Though she was for much of her life the glamorous head of the ton (the social elite) and friends with the fashion-forward Marie Antoinette, she suffered from gambling addiction, marital problems, exile from her family, and ill health. Despite these constant anxieties in her life, Georgiana was well-educated and deeply involved in politics. This book details her active support of the Whig party, including election canvassing, and the extent to which she directed its strategy. A great patron of the arts and sciences, her influence was far-reaching and she was admired as often as she was jealously envied.

Her story seems to write itself, but that owes more to Foreman's skill as a biographer than to the amount of history left behind. Generations of Spencers (yes, the same family that also brought us Princess Diana) destroyed many of her correspondences or censored parts that could have been embarrassing to them later. While Foreman does take some liberties of omniscience, these are easily forgiven in the grand scheme of the work as a whole - her reliability as a biographer is never endangered. Georgiana truly jumps off the page and gives readers an appreciation of how active 18th century aristocratic women could be both socially and politically. This biography is truly worth your time, though of course I would recommend reading it before seeing the movie . . . which I can now view guilt free.

Jen Richer says

Having seen the movie before reading, I was expecting the same seedy love affair between the unhappily wed but wildly popular Georgiana Spencer, great aunt to the late Princess Diana and Whig Party up-and-comer Charles Gray. As in her real life, the affair was hardly a chapter's worth of material

What started as a dissertation for her graduate studies for the author, quickly developed into an 18-month, 450 page study on not only the life of Lady G, but an historical briefing on women, power, politics, economics, and society in late 18th century Europe. To be honest - this should be required reading for anyone studying the time period. What I loved was the overarching thesis of the biography - women may not

have had the vote, but given the status and opportunity, many had power – real power and in some cases political influence. For Georgiana – she affected public opinion and the vote.

Reading like an historical novel, this was a refreshing account more about the women who changed the Whig party than the aforementioned English tabloid scandal. An account of an inspiring, head-strong woman, forced into an unloving marriage, and given everything, but in reality, had nothing.

For the discussion we had lunch at Dino in Cleveland Park. I was at an Italian restaurant – of course I ordered pasta. Even the spaghetti was delicious. And for us orphans transplants in DC – it was the next best thing to spending Father's day with our Dads.

Marina says

This biography is truly a gem. I enjoyed every word, from the first page, to the last.

Sa?Rah Muhammad says

Georgiana was a trendsetter extraordinaire of her day. She freely experimented with fashion, regularly made all the gossip columns and gambled away more than one fortune, sums of money staggering even by today's standards. What I found particularly impressive about her was her grasp of and influence upon political matters. She actively campaigned for candidates, something previously unheard of for a woman in the 18th century.

You'll need a baseball score card to keep track of the romantic entanglements. For example, Georgiana's best friend, with whom some believed she had a lesbian relationship, gave birth to Georgiana's husband's child. And those politicians she hobnobbed with? You've heard the old saying that politics makes strange bedfellows? When reading this book, you may take that saying literally.

The tidbits of rumor and innuendo thrown in by Forman helped to make this biography very readable. Well-researched, gossipy but scholarly, Amanda Forman did her homework before putting Georgiana to press.

What better material can you start with than the most well-known menage a trois in English history - involving one of the wealthiest men of his age, and Duke at that, his wife the most popular and influential woman of her age, Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire - and their best friend?

With a story like this Amanda Foreman would have been hard pressed to fail in a book on Georgiana, 5th Duchess of Devonshire. But Foreman doesn't falter in the tale though, and neither does she pore with salacious enjoyment over the detail. She does a great job in presenting the Duchess throughout her life and in all her colours and shades; as a young girl, rejected wife, desperate gambler, impetuous campaigner, caring mother and always- good friend.

Georgiana was born in 1757 and died in 1806 so this book is set against the excesses and massive changes of the latter half of the eighteenth century. The rise of the industrial revolution, the rise in England's population - and most especially the rise in the population of England's few cities. This was also the age of ennoblement with the King raising many men to new peerages in order to stack the Government in his favour. Change was rife, fashion extreme and politics were a game that many noble women could play - Georgiana led them all. I like the way Foreman is sparing in her conclusions but presents the detail for us to interpret. We get to see all sides of Georgiana and her life. This is truly a book about a woman and the influence she had on her era.

There have been a number of books on her over the years, the publication of her letters to Lady Elizabeth Foster. In the last 30 years Both Arthur Calder-Marshall and Brian Masters have written good biographies of the Duchess of Devonshire also. If you are looking for further reading on Georgiana, I think Brian Masters book is excellent and still in print.

Georgiana set English society on its ear during her years as Duchess. She was a political activist in an era when the opinion of women neither was sought nor welcomed--and her influence was not inconsiderable--she had such a severe gambling problem that her losses all but bankrupted the (very rich) Duchy of Devonshire.

I confess that I had no idea who Georgiana was before I picked up this biography, but I was so fascinated by this woman that I had a difficult time laying it aside.

When i saw Thomas Gainsborough's Portrait of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire !!
and when i realize the Great Similarities between me and her .. like Me at the 18th Century !
and anyone see her , said that too !

i confess that also , i cant get enough of here at WIKIPEDIA ,, and her Portraits as well !

but at last ,, if some one told me what really happen 18th century upper crust i would not believe them.money,sex,adultery,hidden pregnacy,lesbianism,royalty,gambling and drug addiction.fashion theater social scandals,politics,betrayal, blackmail and war.it's a soap opera that really happen.even a evil bestfriend who bears two children by georgina husband is through in.this book is addictive.i didn't put it down till last page.

Heidi The Hippie Reader says

Georgiana, the Duchess of Devonshire, was a complicated lady. She was politically active, a progressive thinker, had an atrocious gambling habit that kept her perpetually in debt and suffered from an unfortunate, sometimes unhappy, marriage.

Did I mention she lived in the late 1700 and early 1800s?

"There was enough popular participation to make politics as big a national obsession as sport, if not bigger. The emergence of national newspapers turned politicians into celebrities." pg 18 ebook.

And one of the brightest stars among them, was the Duchess of Devonshire.

"This was the age of oligarch politics, when the great landowning families enjoyed unchallenged pre-eminence in government. While the Lords sat in the chamber known as the Upper House, or the House of Lords, their younger brothers, sons, and nephews filled up most of the Lower House, known as the House of Commons." pgs 22-23.

It wasn't a particularly great age for democracy or for modern thought.

"Georgiana's methods were too modern for eighteenth-century society. She was never allowed to canvass

openly in London again, nor did other aristocratic women imitate her example. It would be another hundred years before women once more ventured boldly into street politics as Georgiana had not been afraid to do in 1784." pgs 178-179, ebook

1784!

"She felt that she had the same qualities as a man; it was simply her sex, not her capability, which barred her from taking part in politics." pg 346.

Imagine that. :)

The leaders of the Whig party, Georgiana's political friends, were brilliant but flawed.

Eighteenth-century England was full of wits, connoisseurs, orators, historians, drinkers, gamblers, rakes, and pranksters, but only (Charles James) Fox embodied all these things." pg 75, ebook.

I confess, though this book has extraordinary detail and research about Georgiana's political activities, I found her personal life far more fascinating.

Her marriage may have been doomed from the start: *"The Duke did not know how to be romantic; never having experienced tenderness himself he was incapable of showing it to Georgiana. He did not mean to hurt her, but there was a nine-year age difference between them and a gulf of misunderstanding and misplaced expectations."* pg 49, ebook.

There was another woman, who may or may not have been both Georgiana and the Duke of Devonshire's lover. There were multiple handsome men who entered and exited Georgiana's life.

She even had an illegitimate child with one of them.

A fascinating biography of an extraordinary lady - highly recommended.
