



Abundance, A Novel of Marie Antoinette

By Sena Jeter Naslund
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Questions for Discussion

1. Sena Jeter Naslund has divided her novel into five "acts," like a Shakespearean play. Does Marie Antoinette achieve the stature of a tragic protagonist at the end of the novel? If she is ennobled through suffering by the end of the novel, what has been her tragic flaw? What are her admirable qualities?
2. Recount the dramatic evolution of Marie Antoinette's character, from her arrival in France at the age of fourteen to her death just shy of thirty-eight. What prompts Marie Antoinette's transformation from callow moralist and pliant dauphine in early chapters to empathic mother and brave stoic in the novel's culmination at the Conciergerie?
3. The specter of imprisonment haunts the entirety of *Abundance*. From her arrival at Versailles as a girl, when she first perceives the vast chateau "hold[ing] out her arms" as if to embrace and/or seize her, Marie Antoinette exists in a perpetual state of enclosure. Discuss Naslund's extended treatment of this idea, which one could argue is among the novel's overriding themes. Is Marie Antoinette's life in France tantamount to that of the proverbial bird in a gilded cage? Consider, for example, Louis XVI's casual observation that "the whole estate of Versailles is enclosed. The walls are just too far away for you to take much notice of them."
4. Is Marie Antoinette, in fact, a victim—a virtual prisoner from the moment she surrenders her clothing and jewels (not to mention her dog) in the middle of the Rhine in the first chapter? Why or why not? What is it about the author's writing technique that discourages us from providing simple, pat answers to this kind of question? Explore, for instance, Marie Antoinette's nuanced and gradually maturing narrative voice, as well as Naslund's employment of such literary devices as foreshadowing, irony, symbolic imagery, and paradox.
5. Revisit the pivotal last chapter of "Act Four," which renders the eruption of revolution in stark counterpoint to the queen's blissful, penultimate encounter with Fersen. In particular, consider Marie Antoinette's poignant musings on the revolutionaries' freshly coined slogan, "liberté, égalité, fraternité." What do these words mean to Marie Antoinette? What is Naslund up to here? And what does Marie Antoinette's tidy, almost petulant dismissal of the Third Estate's grandly ideological, tri-colored rhetoric reveal about her own ideology?
6. Discuss the interconnectedness of female identity and performance in *Abundance*. What does it mean, for instance, that Marie Antoinette feels most engaged and alive when she is playing a role on the stage—Rosine in *The Barber of Seville*? Consider also the idea that Marie Antoinette's entire life is tantamount to a single, elaborately sustained performance, one sparked by her mother's exhortation to play the role of "an angel," blessing the people of France with peace.
7. How does the texture of this identity/performance theme shift once Marie Antoinette is faced with the prospect of fleeing? To flee, in Marie Antoinette's estimation, is to abandon her "role." Explore also the implications of Marie Antoinette's reaction to the disguises her friends wear in order to hide their wealth: "How can I play my role—that is to say—how can one maintain her identity, without the proper costume?"
8. Throughout *Abundance*, Naslund saturates Marie Antoinette's first-person narrative with a rich palette of bold colors, from the brilliant "blue silk of Austria" and the bountiful "red velvet" of France to the ominous black of the raven's wings and the ever-shifting, silver-and-gold gleamings of refracted light, both natural and artificial. Discuss the ways in which Naslund employs color to signify mood, underscore theme, and intimate character at different points in the novel.
9. In what specific ways has Naslund's rendering of late-eighteenth-century France come to inform, challenge, or even contradict altogether your previous understandings of the particular causes of the French Reign of Terror?
10. What did you know about Marie Antoinette before reading Naslund's novel? About the Reign of Terror? What surprised you most as you read?
11. How do Naslund's references to and subtle demonstrations of the prevailing philosophies of the day—including the outmoded optimism of Gottfried Leibniz ("This is the best of all possible worlds"); the measured, conservative skepticism of David Hume; the proto-civil libertarianism of the secular Voltaire; and the radical and prescient revolutionary ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau—color and shape the novel's inexorable march toward the Reign of Terror? To which philosopher would you align Marie Antoinette's world-view? What about her husband?
12. What kind of a man does Louis Auguste become? And what kind of king? Describe his politics and character, as far as they can be gleaned through Marie Antoinette's narration. Compare this portrait of Louis XVI's reign to other histories and accounts you've read about the period.
13. Imagine a companion volume to *Abundance*: this one recounts essentially the same events as the original, but it is told in Louis XVI's voice instead of Marie Antoinette's. How would this alternate novel be different in terms of perspective, language, and overall tone? How does he feel about himself? How does he experience the pleasures of hunting, working at his smithy or with locks, reading, eating? What situations are difficult for him? How does he understand his relationships to his parents, his grandfather, his brothers, his wife?

14. Discuss the nature of Marie Antoinette's relationship with her mother. Revisit their correspondence through the first three acts of the novel. To what degree is the dauphine a mere pawn to her mother's political machinations (by way of the hemorrhoidal Count Mercy d'Argenteau)? At what point does Marie Antoinette begin to recognize her own agency and seize her own autonomy?

15. The Empress of Austria has been called one of the shrewdest, most influential politicians in the history of Europe. How does this political acumen manifest itself in *Abundance*?

16. What does it mean to have power in the world of this novel? How is power variously seized, employed, abused, and/or deflected at different points in *Abundance*—whether by Louis XV, his three sisters, Louis XVI, the Empress of Austria, the Third Estate, or Marie Antoinette herself? Who ultimately wields his or her power most successfully?

17. What is your interpretation of the precise nature of the love that blooms between Marie Antoinette and Axel von Fersen? "We are the perfect friends," Marie Antoinette tells us, though her rapturous description of Fersen as "the most handsome, the most kind and good and loving—ah, yes, above all, loving—man in the world" all but demands us to wonder whether there is more to their bond than an ideal, platonic bond sealed by a bittersweet "transcendence of separation"—or, conversely, whether it is the very chasteness of their relationship that allows it to maintain such perfection. What is the effect here of Naslund's enigmatic prose?

18. What role do pamphleteers play in the years of Louis XVI's reign? Consider the potency of rumor and hearsay in the world of Naslund's narrative, from the notorious "sunrise orgy" to the legendary affair of the necklace.

19. What role does religion play in the life of Marie Antoinette? How do the Roman Catholic Church and the idea of the "divine right" of kings to rule interface with the French Revolution?

20. How has the press—or the Fourth Estate, as dubbed by Thomas Carlyle in his 1837 account of the French Revolution—evolved over the last two centuries, from anonymous pamphleteers to 24-hour news channels and tabloid journalism? What parallels might be drawn? Is it useful and valuable to underscore such connections and portents—or simply reductive? If possible, fashion arguments for both sides of this question.

21. Consider other historical novels you've read recently (e.g.: E. L. Doctorow's *The March*). How does Naslund's work—as simultaneously sweeping and intimate as it is—complement, complicate, and/or depart from the standard trappings and concerns of the historical fiction genre? In recommending this book to a friend, how would you describe it? How would you compare this novel and its protagonist to the main characters in Naslund's *Ahab's Wife* and *Four Spirits*?

22. *Abundance* features an epigraph from Germaine de Staël's *Reflections on the Trial of the Queen* that exhorts "women of all countries, of all classes of society" to recognize the fundamental universality of "the Fate of Marie Antoinette." How does Naslund's choice of epigraph presage and/or belie the tone and texture of her portrait of the queen? And how does it speak to the social conditions endured by women of the age?

23. What is the significance of the title of this novel? Why do you suppose Naslund chose it? Discuss the various meanings of *abundance*—moral, material, biological, political, and otherwise.