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BOOK REVIEW

‘Joan of Arc’ by Kathryn Harrison

By Meredith Maran

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It takes a particular kind of confidence, and a passion akin to Joan of Arc’s, to undertake the writing of a new biography of the Maid of Orléans. Numerous bookshelves worth of narratives of her life already exist, some written by authors who might be considered tough acts to follow, including William Shakespeare, George Bernard Shaw, Berthold Brecht, and Mark Twain.

What inspired Kathryn Harrison to suit up and step into this intimidating ring? Harrison offered this clue in A 2012 New York Times op-ed, “Joan of Arc: Enduring Power.” The mythic heroine, who was burned at the stake, “was feverish in her determination to succeed at what was, by anyone’s measure, a preposterous mission,” Harrison writes. “[She] defied every limitation placed on a woman of the late Middle Ages.”



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A painting of Joan of Arc from the early 1400s.

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Therein lies the perfection of the connection. Like her latest subject, Harrison has made a life and a career of defying limitations. She has consistently colored outside the genre lines, publishing novels, memoirs, a travelogue, biographies, a true crime novel, essays, and book reviews. In her 1997 memoir “The Kiss,” which The New York Times called “appalling but beautifully written,” Harrison explores her incestuous relationship with her father, which was also the turning point of her first two novels, “Thicker Than Water” (1991) and “Exposure” (1993). In “The Mother Knot” (2004) Harrison fired another shot at convention, probing her tortured relationship with her mother with all the painstaking diligence of a dentist probing an abscessed tooth.

In the hands of a lesser writer, such outlandish choices might make a caricature of its author. But Harrison doesn’t stop — or start — at shocking her readers with genre jumps and transgressive subject matter. She awes us with her incisive intelligence, her fierce curiosity, her literary prowess.

These qualities, along with years of meticulous research, are on stunning display in Harrison’s latest work of nonfiction, which focuses, fittingly, on two aspects of the cross-dressing teenaged warrior: her sanity, and her sexuality. Harrison sets the scene, painting a layered portrait not only of Joan’s life, but of her times. “To equate female sexuality with disobedience and pollution and judge women exclusively on the basis of their sexual conduct is a cornerstone of Judeo-Christian tradition,” Harrison writes. “[I]t is an apologia for misogyny.”

JOAN OF ARC: A Life Transfigured

Author: Kathryn Harrison

Publisher: Doubleday

Number of pages: 382 pp.

Book price: \$28.95

Born in 1412 into a France that had endured famine, crop failures, bubonic plague, and 75 years of enemy occupation, “Joan, who showcased her virginity as both proof and symbol of her virtue, believed God had punished the French because ‘it was his will to suffer them to be beaten for their sins.’ ”

Perhaps most astounding about Harrison’s “Joan of Arc” is the seamlessness with which she pulls the camera way, way back to sweeping historic panoramas and thoughtful feminist commentary, then narrows the lens to give us detailed, lyrical close-ups that support her admiration for, and knowledge of, her subject.

“From Saturday, March 10, until Saturday, March 17,” she writes, “Joan was interrogated in her cell nine times. Among the disadvantages for her was that as she no longer hobbled back and forth between the keep and the castle’s great hall, she could no longer look forward to the respite of a few minutes outdoors, spring unfolding into the air, or of occupying a room other than her cell. The only sky Joan saw was through the grilled square of her one window.” And then, as Joan’s seventh and final trial concludes with condemnation: “Last days vanish quickly, even in a cell.”

“The Paris faculty judged Joan one who ‘believes lightly and affirms rashly,’ ” Harrison writes. “By dressing as a man, she committed blasphemy . . . She was a ‘traitress, deceitful, cruel, and thirsty for the shedding of human blood, seditious and an inciter of tyranny.’ ”

A compelling interpretive biography rendered with a novelist’s touch, Kathryn Harrison’s “Joan of Arc: A Life Transfigured” is that rare and wonderful occurrence: a match made in heaven between author and subject, both of them unafraid, in the name of their passions, to be summoned to the gates of hell.

Meredith Maran is the author of many books of nonfiction and the novel “A Theory of Small Earthquakes.” Her next book, “Why We Write About Ourselves,” will be out from Plume in 2015. Follow her on Twitter [@meredithmaran](#).

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