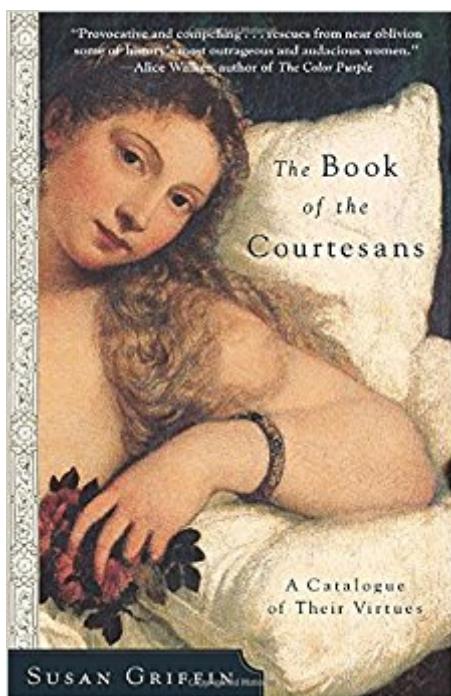


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# The Book Of The Courtesans: A Catalogue Of Their Virtues



## Synopsis

They charmed some of Europe's most illustrious men, honing their social skills as well as their sexual ones, and accumulating wealth, fame, and power along the way. Unlike their geisha counterparts, courtesans didn't live in brothels or bend their wills to suit their suitors. They were the muses who enflamed the hearts of our most celebrated artists--Raphael, Manet, Dumas, and Proust, to name just a few--as well as becoming artists in their own right. Offering the first comprehensive tour of their worlds, Susan Griffins celebrates these first feminists and hails their virtues: Timing, Beauty, Cheek, Brilliance, Gaiety, Grace, and Charm. From Veronica Franco, who graced the palazzos of sixteenth-century Venice, and Madame de Pompadour, the arbiter of all things fashionable at Versailles during the reign of Louis XV, to La Belle Otero of the grand boulevards of Paris in the Gay Nineties and Marion Davies, who took Hollywood by storm in the 1920's and 1930's, *The Book of the Courtesans* enticingly illustrates the intricacies of their lavish lifestyles and incredible life stories. Fascinating true tales and enlightening snippets from courtesans' memoirs further reveal how these cunning women seized their opportunity to become the West's first liberators, free to choose their own lovers and command remarkable respect. Delving into his scintillating world, *The Book of the Courtesans* is an impeccably researched, beautifully crafted portrait of some of the most intriguing figures in women's history.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Poet and writer Susan Griffin is famously provocative, though her provocation takes very different

forms, ranging from her classic feminist treatise, *Women and Nature*, which linked patriarchy with the oppression of women and nature, to her well-received *A Chorus of Stones*, which weighed in on the nature of war. But in *The Book of Courtesans*, Griffin is downright scintillating. Courtesans, she writes, were not prostitutes nor even kept women, though certainly they used their sexuality to financial gain. Rather, they were personages and celebrities, friends to royalty and the most famous writers and artists of their time, the subjects of gossip, the charismatic epicenter of the Second Empire, the Gay Nineties, the Belle Epoche, "Gay Paree." Their faces were immortalized in paintings by the Renaissance masters, by Degas, Renoir, and Toulouse-Lautrec, their lives by Proust, Balzac, Zola, Flaubert. They lived in splendor, set fashion standards, owned fabulous jewelry collections. And they were talented authors, poets, actresses, and singers. In a time of prescribed roles for women, they turned the tables, creating lives of remarkable intellectual and financial freedom. Griffin sings the praises of these women and enunciates their virtues, which, ironically, are the sort popularly thought to be made anachronistic by feminism. With her impeccable timing, the French dancer Mogador achieved legendary status the first time she danced on stage and later became a countess. Harriet Wilson seduced the Duke of Wellington with her cheek, and delivered him from boredom. Marion Davies' gaiety enlivened all those who saw her, Madame Pompadour was the embodiment of grace, and Sarah Bernhardt exuded so much charm she acted her way straight out of the role of courtesan. Griffin imagines herself into her subjects lives with sensitivity and sensuality--the rags to riches stories that characterized them and their creative responses to often dire circumstances. In the end, she not only immortalizes these feminist precursors, but reminds us that "the capacity to take pleasure in life is no less a virtue than any other." --Lesley Reed --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Hard on the heels of the film *Moulin Rouge* comes this idiosyncratic meditation on that 18th- and 19th-century curiosity, the courtesan, the woman who, though usually from limited means, parlayed her beauty, sexuality and talent into a position of luxury and celebrity as the mistress of one or several men of means. Readers looking for a sober social history of the world portrayed in the film will not find it here, for Griffin's approach is almost as kaleidoscopic as the movie's. In a series of brief chapters, each devoted to a particular "virtue," that is, a talent central to the courtesan's success (such as "Gaiety," "Charm," "Cheek"), feminist critic, playwright and poet Griffin (*What Her Body Thought; Women and Nature; etc.*) mines the memoirs of her subjects for stories illustrating their ability to vault beyond the constraints of their age and gender. Some of her courtesans have slipped into obscurity; some are remembered chiefly for their associations with artists and eminent

men; a few, like Colette and Chanel, achieved fame in a different endeavor. At least one, Nijinsky, was not a woman at all. What they all share, however, and what Griffin admires in them, is the daring to transgress the boundaries of a rigid code of prudery and hypocrisy and so exchange the poverty and toil they were condemned to at birth for champagne, diamonds and extraordinary lingerie. Griffin's writing is lively, and her stories are engaging. Agent, Katinka Matson. (Sept. 11) Forecast: An acclaimed writer A Chorus of Stones was a Pulitzer Prize finalist Griffin should garner respectable review coverage for this subject of timeless interest. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I adore Susan Griffin - her book, Woman and Nature, is one of the most important books of the 20th century - but somehow I had never gotten around to reading this book before. What an eye-opener about women's history written in profoundly intelligent and deeply sensual prose! I'm sadly getting to the last chapter as I would happily keep reading more for months, and I've gotten at least 3 or 4 other people turned on to it.

I learned and did not realize how much these women influenced my independence. I have this independence in today's society such as a right to an education, right to own property, right to receive a decent wage, and to live independently because they dared to demand these rights for themselves. If they had not gone before us living their lifestyle with these rights we would have a much longer road to travel towards women rights as human beings.

Interesting read but not nearly as scholarly as I had hoped.

Excellent book!

The Book of the Courtesans is Susan Griffin's love letter to women of loose morals. For a book designated nonfiction, I found Griffin's writing to be more romance than history; she only peppers her daydreams of rags-to-riches courtesans and women of delightful freedom and tenacity with biographical information of the women themselves. The title suggests a structured look at the "virtues" of courtesans throughout history, so the author's bias is neither unexpected nor unappreciated (after all, I purchased her book because of my own personal interest in the subject). For the most part, the virtues she lists are what a reader would expect from the subject matter: beauty, wit, grace. However, the author takes numerous liberties with her own structure, and

includes "virtues" such as timing (which I wouldn't necessarily call a virtue), and even includes "Her Pink Rabbits" under the chapter on "Brilliance". Hmm. The Book of the Courtesans is an exercise in purple prose and presumption as opposed to reliable research and true biography. While the reader will be treated to some information about the women who inspire Griffin's work, what they will largely encounter is Griffin's own romanticized imaginings of the world that these women create.

Veeeery good! I've learnt A LOT with it! Recommend it to any post-modern woman!

I read it, dropped it, picked it up again and finally couldn't wait to finish it. I read it because I bought it. It was tedious reading.

When I read this book, shortly after its release, I immediately recommended it to every friend whose literary taste and intellectual curiosity I respect. This author is an award winning, Pulitzer Prize finalist! I've noticed that the public at large seems to enjoy throwing stones at great writers through posting bad reviews of their works in today's online forums "because they can." This book is an articulate, well researched, utterly fascinating read; from the pen of a feminist whose choice of this topic was for me, a pleasant surprise. Who hasn't wanted to know more about the virtues of these powerful women who owned *La Belle Afâ poque*? Who were they, how did they come to choose this role, what was required of them, and what were the benefits granted to courtesans? I've always wanted to know the answers to those questions and was extremely pleased with the wealth of information provided in this finely crafted work! Marcia Quinn Noren (author of "Joan of Arc: The Mystic Legacy")

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