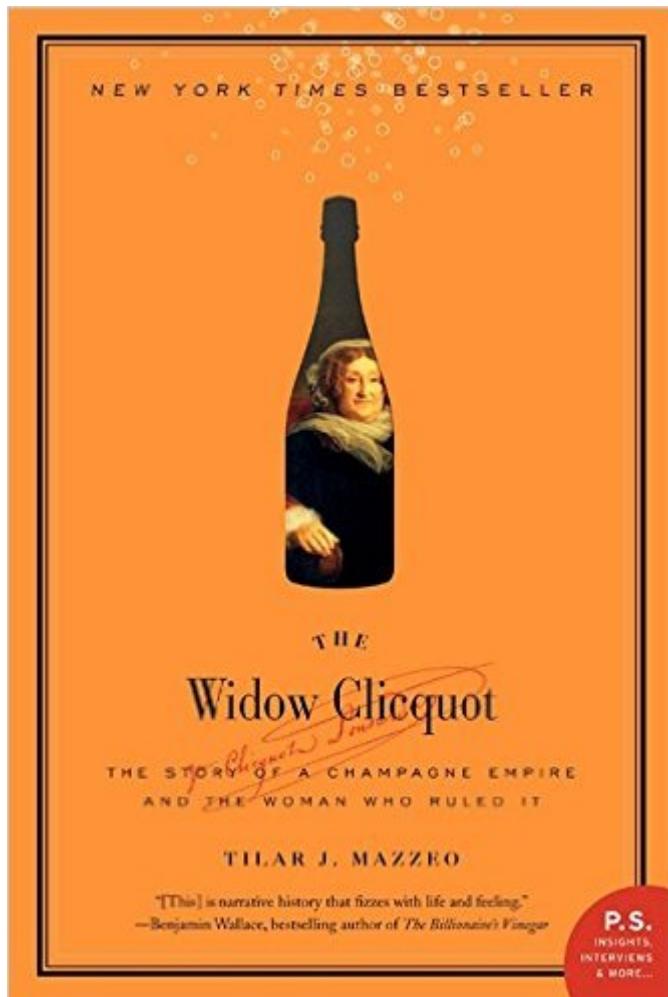


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The Widow Clicquot: The Story Of A Champagne Empire And The Woman Who Ruled It (P.S.)



Synopsis

The Widow Clicquot is the New York Times bestselling business biography of the visionary young widow who built a champagne empire, became a legend in her tumultuous times, and showed the world how to live with style. Tilar J. Mazzeo brings to life the woman behind the label, Barbe-Nicole Clicquot Ponsardin, in this utterly intoxicating book that is as much a fascinating journey through the process of making this temperamental wine as a biography of a uniquely tempered and fascinating woman.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Tilar Mazzeo's The Widow Clicquot tells the story of one of the most interesting of the early champagne tycoons: a woman who, in the turmoil of the Napoleonic Wars, founded a dynasty. Barbe-Nicole Ponsardin, the daughter of a prosperous Reims merchant, married into the Clicquot family, who sold both cloth and wine. After her husband's death, she chose to continue running the family's wine business, concentrating on the fizzy wine we now call champagne. The Widow Clicquot faced long odds-indeed, she was a true gambler-because travel was hazardous and much of the export market was closed. Still, she clung to her vision with a remarkable tenacity and was ultimately successful-Veuve Clicquot Ponsardin is still one of the best known champagne houses in the world. The book has a great deal of interesting information on the history and production of champagne-this gives the Widow's life some context. Mazzeo's finest moment is her taut telling of

the delivery of the 1811 vintage under the specter of war in 1813. Mazzeo clearly sets the scene and lets the reader know just how high the stakes are. We really get a sense of the menace-and triumph-of the Widow's life. Much of what happens after that drama, which falls about in the middle of the book, is unfortunately anti-climax. Mazzeo's problem is that there simply aren't any sources to guide her: since the Widow left scanty records of her personal life, we just don't know what was going on there. It's no coincidence that a well-documented episode from the Widow's business career is the best part of the book: clearly, there were solid sources to ground the story here. There also seems to be a great deal of telling, rather than showing in the narrative.

As a lover of history, a career woman who takes pride in other women's achievements in the business world, and an oenophile (whose favorite champagne is Clicquot), I could hardly wait to read this book. In fact, the summary of the book seemed to be written just for me! What I found when I read this book, however, was very different from what I expected. I feel as if I read a "docudrama" or some similar fictional account based loosely upon a few historical facts. The Widow Clicquot should have been a 50 page thesis for a history grad student (assuming the author was first able to unearth sufficient historical facts). Instead, the author stretched this book to 194 pages in the advance review copy - at least 100 pages past the book's historical-accuracy-breaking-point. The author did her readers a great disservice by attempting to write a biography about Madame Clicquot when the author herself repeatedly admits in the book that she could find almost no recorded history about the lady. Was this book pursued purely for commercial reasons, without regard to the lack of substantive content? Was the author too wrapped up in her intellectual love affair with the concept of Madame Clicquot to recognize that "The Story of a Champagne Empire and the Woman Who Ruled It" fails to tell us much of anything about how Madame created her Champagne Empire, or how she ruled it? My greatest complaint is that Ms. Mazzeo tries to create historical fact out of thin air throughout The Widow Clicquot. I could provide innumerable examples of the author leaping to conclusions about what Clicquot felt or saw, what Clicquot did and why she did it - all without any sort of reference material to back up her conclusions. For example, the way Ms.

I love champagne, especially The Widow; I love France and history and stories about brave women. I didn't love this book. Mazzeo couldn't decide what sort of book she was writing. It's not a scholarly study (for all that she splashes her degree across the title page) nor - as several other reviewers point out - is it quite a work of fiction. It's almost a personal memoir - too personal for my

taste - but it misses the mark there, too. Certainly Mazzeo wants to impress us. She tries very hard to make Barbe-Nicole Clicquot a metaphor for women in history, for the narrative of white space, for all those unvoiced shuttles, but she has this horridly Sarah Palin-esque tendency to get cute about it -- the thinner the facts, the more adorable the narration. There are two sorts of biographies: those which contain facts and analysis and those which speculate. This is the latter. The word "surely" appears on every page. OK, not much is known about Madame Clicquot (whom Mazzeo relentlessly and patronizingly refers to by her first name); but a great deal is known about the history of Reims and the champagne industry. Mazzeo has done admirable work on this and if she would just give it to the reader, all would be well. But she wants to be a biographer, and this leads her down a dubious path. The most important critical/theoretical work on women's biography is the late Carolyn Heilbrun's path-making *Writing a Woman's Life* (Ballantine Reader's Circle).

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