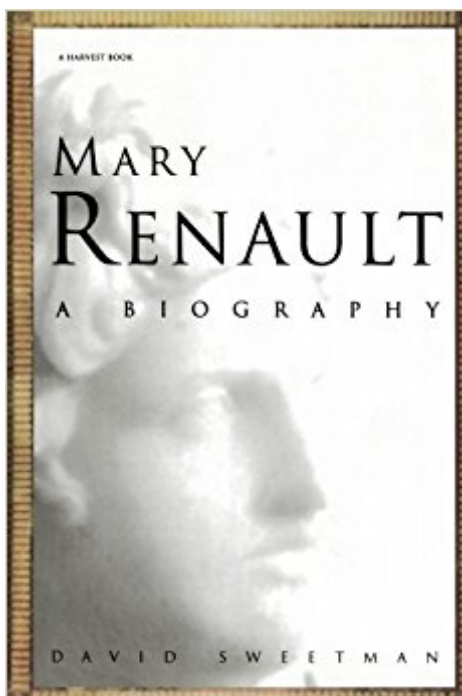


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Mary Renault: A Biography (Harvest Book)



Synopsis

The author of *The Charioteer* and *The King Must Die*, Renault studied at Oxford but eventually abandoned the academic world and England for South Africa, where she and her companion, Julie Mullard, remained. "A superb biography of an exceptional novelist" (New Yorker). Named a Notable Book of the Year by the New York Times. Index; photographs.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This outstanding biography of the celebrated historical novelist was a Lambda Literary Award nominee. Photos. Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This first nonacademic biography of Renault was developed by Sweetman (Van Gogh, 1990) from a rare interview granted him in 1981, two years before his subject's death. In that interview, Renault conveyed both her discomfort with being an "apostle of the sexual revolution" and her pride in the research behind her award-winning historical novels. Daughter of a provincial doctor, Renault attended St. Hugh's, an Oxford college for women. To escape an idle future as a maiden daughter living in her mother's sewing room, she trained to be a nurse. Along with the discipline and deprivation, she discovered her sexual nature and Julie Mullard, who was to become her life-long companion and the subject of her first novel, the subtly sexual *The Purposes of Love* (1939)--the first of Renault's series of contemporary novels that culminated in *The Charioteer* (1953), an open

and sympathetic depiction of homosexual love. By the time it was published, Renault--in order to escape high taxes, the cold, and social rejection--had moved to South Africa, where she began publishing the historical novels for which she's best remembered. Carefully researched, richly imagined, her dignified representations of homosexuality among the heroes and gods of ancient Greece and Rome won her a following of gay liberationists--whose position she rejected as "sexual tribalism." As honorary president of the Cape Town chapter of PEN, Renault was attacked by Nadine Gordimer for not including blacks in the chapter--which is about as controversial as Renault ever became: When she died at age 78, many still believed that her novels had been written by a man. Somewhere between this wary approach to an exceptional mind and the academic jargon that Renault seems to attract, there's still much to be explained. Renault continues to wear her own Mask of Apollo. -- Copyright ©1993, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I'm quite swept up in this very well written biography of Mary Renault --- author of "The Last of the Wine," and "The Persian Boy," two books which pervasively influenced my own life as a writer. I commend the author for his thoroughness, and his restrained and polite writing, for his research and for giving me so much basic information here about Renault --- about her early life, her crucial social decisions, her commitment to write, and her career experiences. ----- It positively broke my heart to read here that the editor/publisher made Mary Renault cut huge portions of "The Last of the Wine." Renault's pain over this is so understandable. What I wouldn't give for a restored version of the novel with all the edits put back. --- And thank heaven, Renault did not take the advice of anyone who urged her not to write anymore historical novels!!!! ----- I would have welcomed a lot more in depth discussion of her plots and characters but that is not really the responsibility of the biographer of a novelist and can be found elsewhere. I'm really enjoying this book. And I recommend it to others. --- The more I read, I wonder if Renault's life wouldn't make an excellent motion picture or TV film. She broke ground in an age when people were afraid to be gay, let alone publish "gay" books. She was principled and courageous --- and wrote beautiful prose always. Her achievements and her immense influence are worth remembering. --- And her ability to tell the story of Alexander the Great through the eyes of his gay lover is just remarkable. As to why her novels have not been made into films I do not know. Surely this is the time for "The Persian Boy." What a great quality cable series it would make, if not a big time motion picture. I recommend this book to all Renault fans ---- and to struggling writers who are inspired as I am by the lives and example of writers who went before us. Renault is a great writer, and at the moment is a bit neglected. But I trust that will

change in time. Her accomplishments are too beautiful, too profound, too entertaining, and too dazzling on all levels for her not to be rediscovered over and over again.

I have read and enjoyed Mary Renault's novels of ancient Greece since *The King Must Die: A Novel* came out in 1958. It got me, like many other of her fans, into reading Greek history. I kept JB Bury's *A HISTORY OF GREECE to the Death of Alexander the Great* on my bedside table for years as evening reading. Her other books as they came along, went into my library and have been reread over and over. I don't think anyone has touched her except Steven Pressfield and *Gates of Fire: An Epic Novel of the Battle of Thermopylae*. I have a few differences with the biographer. I started *Charioteer* but, perhaps because I am a flagrant heterosexual, I could not get interested. I began the novel assuming it was one of the Greek series. I do think that *The Mask of Apollo: A Novel* is a wonderful picture of homosexual love for heterosexuals. I can't think of another such sympathetic portrait for the general reader. The biographer also describes *The Praise Singer* as an unsuccessful novel, coming as her last effort. I disagree and it is my favorite after *The Mask of Apollo*. The picture of her life with Julie and their experiences as nurses in England in the 1930s are very well done. Only in the novels of AJ Cronin is one likely to find such a good description of pre-war English medicine and the rather grim picture of nurses' lives in that era. I agree with one reviewer who laments the severe cuts in *Last of the Wine*. It's too bad a restored version could not be published. I do take exception to one reviewer's criticism of her reaction to South African racial policies. She was a writer, not a political figure, and she did what she could to protest government policies. It is always easier to criticize from a distance. I also disagree with the review that said the biography was not very readable. I spent the weekend with it and did not put it down until it was finished. Her life was her own private affair but she did do as much as anyone could to reduce prejudice against homosexuals and to oppose Apartheid. Her fiction is another huge achievement. Hers was a very full life and the biography is a pleasure to read.

It is well-written, and easy to read. I especially appreciated the episodes and explanations of the circumstances, political movements, and her struggles which inspired Mary Renault to write each story. Now I understand how each story was created, and what was on her mind when she wrote them. When I first read her *Alibi*, which is a remarkable book, one of her best, I couldn't understand why she didn't take more pages to write about Alkibiades and the defeat of the Athenian fleet. This is the kind of scene she normally takes time and writes in great, vivid details. It seemed so odd and out of her character that she just skimmed through it (although it still came out all right). I had to read it

twice to understand what exactly happened, and even after I understood, I wasn't satisfied. Well, the mystery was solved now that I know that the publishing company had forced her to eliminate so many pages, she had to cut out one-third of the book. That particular scene was the one that suffered. I don't blame her if she never forgave the publishing company. We the readers have been deprived a great deal. I was also tickled to read that she had to let her secretary go because the secretary wanted to improve her grammar! Her relationships with her parents, friends and her agents, editors, correspondents, and especially with her companion Julie are heart-warming. This biography brought her person alive and vivid, and now I can look at her works from another dimension.

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