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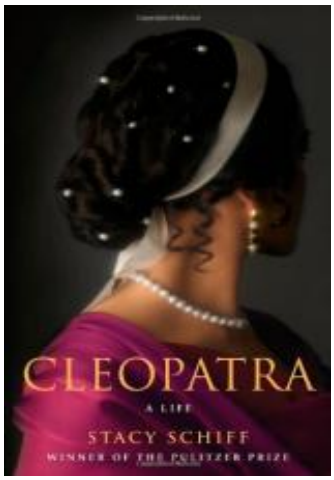
# Cleopatra: A Life

by Stacy Schiff




## About the Book

The Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer brings to life the most intriguing woman in the history of the world: Cleopatra, the last queen of Egypt.

Her palace shimmered with onyx, garnets, and gold, but was richer still in political and sexual intrigue. Above all else, Cleopatra was a shrewd strategist and an ingenious negotiator.

Though her life spanned fewer than forty years, it reshaped the contours of the ancient world. She was married twice, each time to a brother. She waged a brutal civil war against the first when both were teenagers. She poisoned the second. Ultimately she dispensed with an ambitious sister as well; incest and assassination were family specialties. Cleopatra appears to have had sex with only two men. They happen, however, to have been Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, among the most prominent Romans of the day. Both were married to other women. Cleopatra had a child with Caesar and --- after his murder --- three more with his protégé. Already she was the wealthiest ruler in the Mediterranean; the relationship with Antony confirmed her status as the most influential woman of the age. The two would together attempt to forge a new empire, in an alliance that spelled their ends. Cleopatra has lodged herself in our imaginations ever since.

Famous long before she was notorious, Cleopatra has gone down in history for all the wrong reasons. Shakespeare and Shaw put words in her mouth. Michelangelo, Tiepolo, and Elizabeth Taylor put a face to her name. Along the way, Cleopatra's supple personality and the drama of her circumstances have been lost. In a masterly return to the classical sources, Stacy Schiff here boldly separates fact from fiction to rescue the magnetic queen whose death ushered in a new world order. Rich in detail, epic in scope, Schiff 's is a luminous, deeply original reconstruction of a dazzling life.

## Discussion Guide

**1.** Stacy Schiff writes, ?It is not difficult to understand why Caesar became history, Cleopatra a legend? (page 5). What

are the differences between the two? How are these differences related to gender?

**2.** Discuss the role of subjectivity in historical records. How does Schiff factor that subjectivity into her account? Do you think it?s possible to document events that are close to us in time? Or do chroniclers? subjectivities necessarily bias their accounts?

**3.** How do you think Cleopatra felt as she traveled to meet Caesar for the first time? What are the differences between that meeting and her first encounter with Mark Antony? How did the circumstances of the initial encounters set the tone for the relationships?

**4.** Despite her political ambition, Cleopatra has been painted as a seductress and siren rather than as a powerful and adept ruler. Do you think it?s still the case that men are said to strategize where women manipulate?

**5.** Discuss women?s roles and rights in ancient Egyptian and Roman society. Did they surprise you? Why or why not? Women in Egypt enjoyed an equality close to what they enjoy today; it was then lost for some two thousand years. Could that happen again?

**6.** Although Cleopatra came from a long line of strong female rulers, do you think she felt out of place on a political stage dominated by men? Is there any indication that she doubted her abilities? Can you imagine her in a Roman military camp, for example?

**7.** Cleopatra lived in an era of rampant murder, covert political alliances, and fierce betrayal. Has human nature changed in two thousand years? In what ways is it different and in what ways is it the same?

**8.** Do you think that Cleopatra loved Caesar and Mark Antony, or were their relationships purely for political leverage? What makes you think so?

**9.** What do you think of Cleopatra as a woman, mother, lover, partner, and ruler? Was she admirable or detestable? Why or why not?

**10.** Can you retell Cleopatra?s story as one of her subjects might have written it? How does it diverge from the Roman account?

**11.** Why has Cleopatra?s story captivated artists and audiences for over two thousand years? Why does she interest you?

**12.** Are there any modern women who you would compare to Cleopatra? Who? What characteristics do they share with her? Discuss how these women are depicted in histories or in the media today.

## Author Bio

Stacy Schiff is the author of VÉRA (MRS. VLADIMIR NABOKOV), winner of the Pulitzer Prize; SAINT-EXUPÉRY, a Pulitzer Prize finalist; A GREAT IMPROVISATION: Franklin, France, and the Birth of America, winner of the

George Washington Book Prize and the Ambassador Book Award; CLEOPATRA: A Life, winner of the PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for biography; THE WITCHES: Salem, 1692; and THE REVOLUTIONARY: Samuel Adams. Schiff has received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters and named a Chevalier des Arts et Lettres by the French Government, she lives in New York City.

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