

**Abundance**  
*A Novel of Marie Antoinette*  
by Sena Jeter Naslund

About the Book

Marie Antoinette was a child of fourteen when her mother, the Empress of Austria, arranged for her to leave her family and her country to become the wife of the fifteen-year-old Dauphin, the future King of France. Coming of age in the most public of arenas — eager to be a good wife and strong queen — she warmly embraces her adopted nation and its citizens. She shows her new husband nothing but love and encouragement, though he repeatedly fails to consummate their marriage and in so doing is unable to give what she and the people of France desire most: a child and an heir to the throne. Deeply disappointed and isolated in her own intimate circle, and apart from the social life of the court, she allows herself to remain ignorant of the country’s growing economic and political crises, even as poor harvests, bitter winters, war debts, and poverty precipitate rebellion and revenge. The young queen, once beloved by the common folk, becomes a target of scorn, cruelty, and hatred as she, the court’s nobles, and the rest of the royal family are caught up in the nightmarish violence of a murderous time called “the Terror.”

With penetrating insight and with wondrous narrative skill, Sena Jeter Naslund offers an intimate, fresh, heartbreaking, and dramatic reimagining of this truly compelling woman that goes far beyond popular myth — and she makes a bygone time of tumultuous change as real to us as the one we are living in now.

Praise for the Book

“Enchanting, . . . opulent, and fabulous. . . . A complete page-turner. Grade: A.”  
— *Entertainment Weekly*

“If you read one book about Marie Antoinette, let it be Sena Jeter Naslund’s gripping, gabby, and beautifully poignant novel.”  
— *USA Today*

“Exceptional. . . . A richly detailed portrait of an opulent, turbulent time. 4 stars.”  
— *People*

“*Abundance* is intelligent, beautifully written, and uncomfortably relevant, and Naslund makes her heroine convincing and even sympathetic.”  
— *Boston Globe*

*Courtesy of Harper Perennial*

## About the Author

### **Sena Jeter Naslund**

American Novelist

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**Personal Information:** Born in Birmingham, AL; married John C. Morrison (a physicist), 1995; children: (previous marriage) Flora.

**Education:** Attended Birmingham-Southern College; University of Iowa, Ph.D.

**Addresses:** Home: Louisville, KY.

**Career:** University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, writer-in-residence; Spalding University, Louisville, program director of the brief residency MFA in writing program.

**Awards:** Lawrence Fiction Prize; awards from National Endowment for the Arts, Kentucky Arts Council, and Kentucky Foundation for Women; Harper Lee Award, Southeastern Library Association Fiction Award; Kentucky Poet Laureate.

## WRITINGS

- *Ice Skating at the North Pole: Stories*, Ampersand Press (Bristol, RI), 1989.
- *The Animal Way to Love* (novel), Ampersand Press (Bristol, RI), 1993.
- *Sherlock in Love: A Novel*, David Godine (Boston, MA), 1993.
- *The Disobedience of Water: Stories and Novellas*, David Godine (Boston, MA), 1999.
- *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer: A Novel*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 1999.
- *Four Spirits: A Novel*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2003.
- (Editor, with Kathleen Driskell) *High Horse: Contemporary Writing by the MFA Faculty of Spalding University*, Fleur-de-Lis Press (Louisville, KY), 2005.
- *Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette*, William Morrow (New York, NY), 2006.

Contributor to literary journals. *Louisville Review*, founder and editor;  
*Fleur-de-lis*, founder and editor.

**Media Adaptations:** Books adapted for audio include *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer: A Novel; our Spirits: A Novel* (unabridged; fifteen CDs), Sound Library, BBC Audiobooks America; and *Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette*, read by Susanna Burney (abridged; ten CDs), Harper Audio.

## Sidelights

After her earliest short fiction appeared in literary journals, Sena Jeter Naslund published the collection *Ice Skating at the North Pole: Stories*. The individual stories share certain characteristics, according to *Library Journal* reviewer Marcia Tager, including “a

recurring motif” of music or musical instrument; a calamity that damages or threatens a woman’s life, and an exploration of “what it means to live, love, work, and make music in the world as it exists for us all.” *Publishers Weekly* reviewer Sybil Steinberg noted Naslund’s realistic portrayals of women and their lives, predicting that “her idiosyncratic characters might be advantageously transplanted to a longer work.”

Naslund’s *Sherlock in Love: A Novel* was commended by critics, including *Library Journal* contributor Barbara Hoffert, as the one among several recent Sherlock Holmes spinoffs that “comes closest to achieving the style of [Sir Arthur Conan] Doyle’s original work.” The novel represents an “attempt to close the one case in which Holmes failed to bring a miscreant to justice,” Tobin Harshaw reported in the *New York Times Book Review*. In Naslund’s version, Holmes has died and Dr. Watson is attempting to write a biography of his old friend. When he publishes a newspaper advertisement requesting background information from Holmes’s former contacts, he is assailed by all manner of anonymous threats to his safety and invasions of his security arrangements. When he follows clues to this unexpected mystery backward in time, Watson uncovers characters from Holmes’s past, including a woman who had masqueraded as a male violinist and a love affair that could surprise die-hard fans of Conan Doyle. In her *Booklist* review, Donna Seaman described *Sherlock in Love* as a “cleverly plotted, cheerfully risqué adventure,” replete with “entertaining . . . historical references.”

If *Sherlock in Love* was “elegant,” as Hoffert asserted, then so are the stories in *The Disobedience of Water: Stories and Novellas* — “a bit quirkier, a bit more modern, but just as satisfying in their own way.” In this collection, a *Publishers Weekly* contributor reported: “Plot matters less to Naslund than voice, sympathy, setting and tone.” Seaman wrote in *Booklist*: “Each tale begins as though the reader has just opened a door or turned a corner and walked into a conversation.”

After listening to audio versions of classics such as *Moby-Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn* with her daughter during a long drive, Naslund came up with the idea for her next book, *Ahab’s Wife; or, The Star-Gazer: A Novel*. In an interview with Leslie Haynesworth for *Publishers Weekly*, Naslund related: “It irked me a bit to be aware that these two candidates for the title ‘Great American Novel’ had almost no women in them. Half the human race ignored, yet their vision was considered among the most complete, the greatest.” Naslund decided to write the story of Moby Dick through the eyes of Una, a young woman who disguises herself as a cabin boy and sets sail on a whaling ship. Una endures a series of horrific adventures, including marriage to a madman, before eventually meeting, and marrying Captain Ahab. Linda Simon, in *World and I*, wrote: “*Ahab’s Wife* is nothing less than artful and satisfying fiction: a compelling history of a heroic woman.” A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer commented that “Una is a character who is destined to endure.”

*Four Spirits: A Novel* is a historical novel that focuses on the civil rights movement of the 1960s, a time when vicious dogs and fire hoses were used freely by authorities such as Bull Connor to control protestors in the South while Martin Luther King preached nonviolence to his followers. Among the factual events Naslund uses to portray the

turmoil of the time is the 1963 deaths of the “Four Spirits” of the title, four black girls who died when their Birmingham, Alabama, church was bombed. A number of vignettes feature characters who ultimately are brought together in their struggle against segregation. *Booklist* contributor Brad Hooper noted that this results in “a smoothly flowing composite narrative of how life was led at the time and how it was irreparably altered.” The main protagonist is Stella Silver, a white college student who is moved to act after witnessing the open celebration of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy by her Birmingham neighbors. Stella takes a position teaching at a black school, along with her friends Stella and wheelchair-bound Cat, thereby putting her own life at risk. “Told in beautifully crafted prose, this is a moving, historically accurate tale of a time of social transformation,” concluded *Library Journal* reviewer Starr E. Smith.

*Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette* is a fictional memoir in which Naslund reveals the life of the Austrian princess whose life was ended at the age of thirty-eight by the blade of the guillotine. A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer wrote: “With vivid detail and exquisite narrative technique, Naslund exemplifies the best of historical fiction.” A fourteen-year-old Mary Antoinette was sent from Austria to France by her mother, Archduchess Maria Teresa, to marry Louis Auguste, the Dauphin of France, just one year her senior. The marriage took place four years later and was intended to unite the two countries. As Naslund relates her story, she notes King Louis XVI’s impotence and preference to hunt rather than consummate the marriage for many years, their family life and children, and the fashions and culture of the time. Marie’s fear for her children and husband as the first rumblings of the French Revolution are felt reflect her love for them. “The author injects humanity into the two as, over the years, they become parents and grow into their authority,” commented Emily Chenoweth in *People*. The Affair of the Diamond Necklace, the false accusation that Marie committed adultery with a cardinal is also incorporated into the story. *Entertainment Weekly* reviewer Tina Jordan wrote: “Naslund’s writing is opulent and fabulous, as encrusted with detail as one of Marie’s shimmering dresses.” “Naslund has done her homework, and imagined her complex, bewitching protagonist in persuasive depth and detail,” wrote a *Kirkus Reviews* critic. “The result is an exemplary historical novel.”

## **FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

### **PERIODICALS**

- *Booklist*, October 1, 1993, Donna Seaman, review of *Sherlock in Love: A Novel*, p. 257; April 15, 1999, Donna Seaman, review of *The Disobedience of Water: Stories and Novellas*, p. 1516; August, 1999, Grace Fill, review of *Ahab’s Wife; or, The Star-Gazer: A Novel*, p. 1988; July, 2003, Brad Hooper, review of *Four Spirits: A Novel*, p. 1846; September 1, 2006, Mary Ellen Quinn, review of *Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette*, p. 57.
- *Entertainment Weekly*, October 8, 1999, review of *Ahab’s Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 66; October 6, 2006, Tina Jordan, review of *Abundance*, p. 74.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, August 1, 2003, review of *Four Spirits*, p. 984; July 1, 2006, review of *Abundance*, p. 652.

- *Library Journal*, October 15, 1989, Marcia Tager, review of *Ice Skating at the North Pole: Stories*, p. 104; September 15, 1993, Barbara Hoffert, review of *Sherlock in Love*, p. 105; September 1, 1999, Starr E. Smith, review of *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 234; August, 2003, Starr E. Smith, review of *Four Spirits*, p. 133; August 1, 2006, Anna M. Nelson, review of *Abundance*, p. 72.
- *Nation*, December 13, 1999, Tom LeClair, review of *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 44.
- *Newsweek*, September 27, 1999, Laura Shapiro, review of *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 67.
- *New York Times Book Review*, November 21, 1993, Tobin Harshaw, review of *Sherlock in Love*, p. 24; October 15, 2006, Liesl Schillinger, review of *Abundance*, p. 15.
- *People*, November 29, 1999, review of *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 63; November 17, 2003, Annette Gallagher Weisman, review of *Four Spirits*, p. 46; October 30, 2006, Emily Chenoweth, review of *Abundance*, p. 45.
- *Publishers Weekly*, August 25, 1989, Sybil Steinberg, review of *Ice Skating at the North Pole*, p. 58; September 13, 1993, p. 98; March 8, 1999, review of *The Disobedience of Water*, p. 48; August 9, 1999, review of *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 340; September 27, 1999, Leslie Haynesworth, interview with Sena Jeter Naslund, p. 65; July 14, 2003, review of *Four Spirits*, p. 53; May 29, 2006, review of *Abundance*, p. 32.
- *School Library Journal*, January, 2004, Robert Saunderson, review of *Four Spirits*, p. 164.
- *Time*, October 25, 1999, Pico Iyer, review of *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 128.
- *World and I*, January, 2000, Linda Simon, review of *Ahab's Wife; or, The Star-Gazer*, p. 260.

#### ONLINE

- *Blogcritics.org*, <http://blogcritics.org/archives/2006/02/01/003222.php> (February 1, 2006), G.L. Hauptfleisch, review of *Four Spirits*.
- *Mostly Fiction*, <http://www.mostlyfiction.com/> (February 21, 2007), interview with Sena Jeter Naslund.
- *Sena Jeter Naslund Home Page*, <http://www.senajeternaslund.com> (February 21, 2007).

**Source:** *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale, 2007

**Source Database:** Contemporary Authors Online

## Author Interview

### **Q: What inspired you to write a novel about Marie Antoinette?**

**Sena Jeter Naslund:** The story of Marie Antoinette has fascinated and frightened me since I was a child. To me, it was a reverse fairy-tale — not a story about a deserving poor girl who became a princess but one about a princess who lost her position and power. I knew that if such a reversal could occur in the life of a queen, then no person was safe. For me, this vulnerability represented the basic human condition. Then the question became for me “How can we face adversity, even death?” I thought I might learn something from imagining the Marie Antoinette story.

Also, the sheer splendor of her world fascinated me, both its beautiful artificiality and its earthy realism. Like Marie Antoinette, I too have loved flowers, music, theatre; like her, my family and friends mean more to me than I can say.

### **Q: *Ahab’s Wife* was celebrated by scholars and critics as a kind of “feminist corrective.” Is *Abundance*, with its intimate portrait of one of the most maligned and arguably misunderstood female figures in history, a similar act of revision or reassessment?**

**SJN:** Yes. I think the historical treatment of Marie Antoinette has been motivated, in part, by the tendency to demonize women. She’s been depicted as a sort of sinful Eve, responsible if not for the fall of humankind, then for the fall of the French monarchy. Most people associate her with heartless materialism, with the phrase “Let them eat cake” if they have no bread, but there’s no historical evidence that she ever said such a thing. She displayed many more acts of kindness and compassion throughout her life than I had space to include in the novel.

With *Ahab’s Wife*, I wanted to create a female fictive character of intelligence and courage, one capable of sustaining an epic quest for meaning that was both physical and metaphysical. When we look at the American literary landscape, we see far too few such creations. With *Abundance*, I wanted to explore the complexity of a woman who has been included in the historical picture but usually misrepresented.

### **Q: How does *Abundance*, set during the French Revolution, relate to your most recent novel *Four Spirits*, which is set during the Civil Rights movement? In some ways, they seem worlds apart.**

**SJN:** In *Four Spirits* I wanted to affirm the value of every individual life (including four unknown African-American school girls who were killed). I wanted to say that the same principle applies to the well-known and the privileged, even to a person who occupies a throne: all of us share a basic humanity; we’re born and we die. Every life is precious. Questions about justice and the nature of government arise in both books.

**Q: Which of the secondary characters in the novel particularly interested you? Would you consider writing about any of them?**

**SJN:** I wanted to know and understand Marie Antoinette's women friends more — the surprising Princess de Lamballe, the manipulative Duchess de Polignac, the self-made portrait painter Elisabeth Vigee-Le Brun. In all my novels the central women characters need and establish close friendships with other women who often differ widely from one another. We know of these historical women I've just named mainly because they were the queen's friends, but they each had lives of their own and I'd like to know more about them.

And of course Axel von Fersen is an endlessly intriguing character. He liked American woman a lot while he was helping Washington with the American Revolution, and I'd love to explore him more.

**Q: Is it fair to call your depiction of Marie Antoinette's relationship with Fersen deliberately ambiguous?**

**SJN:** Yes, it is. I read a great deal about this relationship in various biographies, all of which disagreed some or completely with one another. I don't think the historic record allows a conclusive reading at this point.

**Q: Do you believe they ever had a physical relationship?**

**SJN:** Actually, I'd rather not say. However, I would like to add this information (not in the novel because the book is limited to Marie Antoinette's point of view): historically, Fersen definitely did have many sexual relationships with a great many women, though his deepest love and total loyalty also remained with the Queen. How can I make this dual claim? I see his sensibility as basically that of an earlier age: he is a chivalric knight devoted to his lady; this devotion is like that of a medieval Christian who lives in the world yet profoundly venerates the Virgin Mary.

I would love to write a novel about the paradoxical Axel von Fersen.

**Q: What are your ideas about what fiction can capture or reveal that biography or history cannot?**

**SJN:** Every form has its own powers. Fiction takes us inside, through imagination, in the way that an objective reporting or picturing of external actions or behavior cannot. I have always seen the imagination as a great spiritual and moral force because it helps to take us beyond the bounds of ego. But all the ways of knowing are complementary to each other. Lately Marie Antoinette has been the object of films: while films picture appearances, novels augment those visual impressions by transporting us inside the character. We can look out through the eyes of another person and also know that person's secret thoughts and feelings, which are beyond the reach of the camera. Fiction can make history seem more alive and thus more kin to life as we know it.

**Q: An especially affecting element in your novel is the recurring image of young Mozart in Marie Antoinette's memories and dreams. His haunting, pleading refrain, "Now do you love me?" seems to inspire in Marie Antoinette powerful feelings of identification and empathy. Talk a bit about this thematic linking of Marie Antoinette and Mozart.**

**SJN:** She did hear him play the harpsichord for her mother at court in Austria; the two were the same age. In her subconscious, Mozart did what she would have liked to have done — to occupy her mother's lap and to demand her mother's love and acceptance. Mozart had the audacity of genius, even as a very young child. Marie Antoinette had the gifts of great personal charm and grace, and she also truly loved music. It was only at the end of her life that she became her own parent — forgiving, accepting, and affirming her own nature.

**Q: *Abundance* seems to be an ideal choice for book clubs, as there are so many possible threads and directions to pursue. If you were somehow able to participate anonymously in a group discussion of *Abundance*, what subjects and themes would you most want to explore?**

**SJN:** I've already found that my readers vary widely in how sympathetic they are to Marie Antoinette. In some ways, she is a kind of mirror that reflects our attitudes toward ourselves. To what extent does she deserve praise or blame? The idea of "goodness" expands for her as she matures — how have I evolved morally, spiritually, as a friend, as a family member, in political awareness, she asks me. I'd like for readers to tell me, if they trusted me enough to be that honest with me, how the life of Marie Antoinette might illumine life as we live it.

I always like to learn which parts of my novels readers particularly enjoyed or found meaningful.

**Q: Where will you be taking your readers next?**

**SJN:** So many novels I'd like to write! The question of time and place is certainly a crucial one, more so than that of subject matter or thematic material, because my fiction always embodies ideas that are important to me. I've worked so hard in researching the 18th century that in some ways, I'd like to stay there, not necessarily to write about Fersen. There are many other wonderful characters of that era. I recently visited St. Petersburg and Moscow because Marie Antoinette's friend and portrait painter Elisabeth Vigee-Le Brun considered Russia to be her second home, after she fled the French revolution and traveled through Europe. But I'd also like to draw on my own life and times, as I did in *Four Spirits*, set in Birmingham, but this time about the street where I live now, literally, in Louisville, and about a woman of my own age and experience. And in just the last few weeks, I've had yet a third idea, one that would carry me very far back in time and yet partake of the present. It's a riddle. I'm enjoying puzzling about my next project. I love the act of imagining, the polishing, and the creating of an artifact in words.

*Courtesy of Harper Perennial*

## Author Essay

### Sena Jeter Naslund on *Abundance, A Novel of Marie Antoinette*

#### The Story Behind the Novel

In 1999, when I was on book tour with my novel *Ahab's Wife*, I stayed in an unusual bed-and-breakfast in the quaint and beautiful town of Darian, Georgia, beswagged with Spanish moss and Christmas decorations. My museum-like room was "The Woman's Room" and it featured a shelf of books about famous women, among them Stefan Zweig's biography titled *Marie Antoinette: The Portrait of an Average Woman*. After the community clambake (where I read from *Ahab's Wife*), I settled down with the musty biography, which had been a 1930's Book-of-the-Month-Club main selection, translated from the original German. When I couldn't finish my reading, the dear proprietress of the B&B allowed me to take the biography with me on my travels.

Given a contemporary, feminist sensibility, I soon found myself protesting Zweig's view of Marie Antoinette as a shallow, totally untalented, "ordinary" woman. When he quoted pieces of her letters to illustrate her limitations, I found in those same quotes evidence of a sensitive and insightful person, and a good writer. I began to suspect that history had not treated the unfortunate Queen of France very fairly.

Even as a child, I had found the Marie Antoinette story a fascinating one. No matter how much power and prestige one might have, one was never safe. Even a Queen could wind up with her head on the chopping block. To me, her story was a cautionary tale about the vulnerable human condition, and that inescapable vulnerability was a reason why we should all be kind to one another.

As an adult contemplating the unjust and brutal execution of Marie Antoinette, I saw a story with the contours of classic tragedy. *Ahab's Wife*, unlike Melville's Shakespeare-like tragedy *Moby-Dick*, was intended to be a triumph. Now I wanted to explore what it would be like to write in the tragic mode. Of course in the Shakespearean sense, all tragic heroes triumph in a certain way: by being true to their natures, however flawed, and by transcending the depths of suffering. I wondered if by the end of her life, Marie Antoinette had learned enough about compassion, suffering, and courage to achieve the stature of a tragic figure, a certain nobility as a human being. Even Stefan Zweig found the way Marie Antoinette faced her death to be inspiring.

Before I embark on writing a novel, I usually ask if I myself have some things in common with the main character. Certainly I'm not facing a guillotine during the French Revolution, but we are all facing "the great guillotine in the sky" — our own mortality. I can only hope to have as much courage as Marie Antoinette. Like Marie Antoinette, I lost my father at an early age; her mother and my mother both were independent women of intelligence and courage. Like Marie Antoinette, I like to imagine and to pretend. She had a whole village built, like a set where she could pretend to be an ordinary peasant, not the queen. As a novelist, I, too, spend a lot of time imagining. And also like Marie

Antoinette, I have a passionate love of music and of flower gardening. But I needed to know a lot more about Marie Antoinette.

When Antonia Fraser's biography came out only a few years ago, I found scholarly confirmation for what I had suspected about how earlier historians had misrepresented Marie Antoinette. For example, she never said of starving people lacking even bread, "Let them eat cake." On the contrary, there are many instances of her immediate and direct compassion for people in distress. True, she was extravagant and ill educated, but she was a charming conversationalist and a person of great courage. Throughout her life, she was kind; and she was not untalented, being a fine harpist.

At this point, I felt I could legitimately create a tragic fictive character of depth, intelligence and sensitivity accurately based on the historical last queen of France. The world of Marie Antoinette has been a fascinating one — such refinement and elegance, such cruelty and violence, during the Reign of Terror. Marie Antoinette's story has repercussions for our own time. As in 18th century France, there is an ever-widening gap between the super rich and the poor, and between political ideologies. Terrorism and infringement of human rights are as much a menace to our world as they were during the French Reign of Terror. *Abundance: A Novel of Marie Antoinette* celebrates what is precious to us in our own lives while promoting compassion that transcends economic and class divisions.

### **A Brief Timeline of Events: Marie Antoinette and the Age of Revolution**

- 1755 The youngest daughter of Empress Regnant Maria Theresa and Holy Roman Emperor Francis I is born in Vienna on November 2. She is christened Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna von Habsburg-Lothringen.
- 1766 A French marriage alliance is proposed by Vienna to preserve the amity established by the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle (1748) and the Seven Years' War.
- 1769 Louis XV requests the hand of the Archduchess Maria Antonia for his grandson and heir, the Dauphin Louis-Auguste.
- 1770 Bridal journey commences from Vienna through southern Germany and Strasbourg and on to Versailles for the royal wedding of Louis-Auguste and Marie Antoinette on May 16 (see *Abundance*, Act One, Chapters 1-10). The marriage is not consummated for many years.
- 1774 Louis XV dies on the tenth of May; Louis XVI and nineteen-year-old Marie Antoinette ascend to the French throne (Act Two, "Catastrophe").
- 1778 Marie Antoinette gives birth to Marie Thérèse Charlotte on December 19 (Act Three, "The Générale Is Tardy!" and "Giving Birth").

- 1781 Louis Joseph is born October 22 (Act Four, “The Hope of France”).
- 1785 The Affair of the Diamond Necklace does much to accelerate popular dislike of the queen and burnish her reputation as “Madame D ficit” (Act Four, “A Hoax in Diamonds” through “Portrait in Red”). The beloved Louis-Charles is born March 27.
- 1787 Marie’s second daughter, Sophie B atrix dies shortly before her first birthday (Act Four, “Sophie”). This loss is followed by the death of seven-year-old Louis Joseph in June of 1789 (“Grief”).
- 1789 Mob destroys the Bastille Prison in Paris on July 14. Outbreak of the French Revolution. Royal court forcibly moved to Paris (Act Four, “The Revolution of 1789”; Act Five, “The Tuileries”). Market women of Paris march to Versailles and force the Royal Family to live under supervision in Paris.
- 1791 The Royal Family’s flight from Paris is foiled near the French border (“Escape from Paris”).
- 1792 Revolutionaries storm the Tuileries and imprison the family in the Temple Fortress. Louis XVI is tried for treason on December 11 and subsequently condemned to death (“The Tower, 1792,” “Terror, Fury, and Horror Seize the Earthly Powers”).
- 1793 January 20<sup>th</sup> King Louis XVI is executed.
- Marie Antoinette is separated from her children and incarcerated on the Ile de la Cit  in the Seine River.
- October 16<sup>th</sup> Queen Marie Antoinette is publicly executed by guillotine.

*Courtesy of Harper Perennial*

## Discussion Questions

1. Sena Jeter Naslund has divided her novel into five “acts,” like a Shakespearean play. Does Marie Antoinette achieve the stature of a tragic protagonist at the end of the novel? If she is ennobled through suffering by the end of the novel, what has been her tragic flaw? What are her admirable qualities?
2. Recount the dramatic evolution of Marie Antoinette’s character, from her arrival in France at the age of fourteen to her death just shy of thirty-eight. What prompts Marie Antoinette’s transformation from callow moralist and pliant dauphine in early chapters to empathic mother and brave stoic in the novel’s culmination at the Conciergerie?
3. The specter of imprisonment haunts the entirety of *Abundance*. From her arrival at Versailles as a girl, when she first perceives the vast chateau “hold[ing] out her arms” as if to embrace and/or seize her, Marie Antoinette exists in a perpetual state of enclosure. Discuss Naslund’s extended treatment of this idea, which one could argue is among the novel’s overriding themes. Is Marie Antoinette’s life in France tantamount to that of the proverbial bird in a gilded cage? Consider, for example, Louis XVI’s casual observation that “the whole estate of Versailles is enclosed. The walls are just too far away for you to take much notice of them.”
4. Is Marie Antoinette, in fact, a victim — a virtual prisoner from the moment she surrenders her clothing and jewels (not to mention her dog) in the middle of the Rhine in the first chapter? Why or why not? What is it about the author’s writing technique that discourages us from providing simple, pat answers to this kind of question? Explore, for instance, Marie Antoinette’s nuanced and gradually maturing narrative voice, as well as Naslund’s employment of such literary devices as foreshadowing, irony, symbolic imagery, and paradox.
5. Revisit the pivotal last chapter of “Act Four,” which renders the eruption of revolution in stark counterpoint to the queen’s blissful, penultimate encounter with Fersen. In particular, consider Marie Antoinette’s poignant musings on the revolutionaries’ freshly coined slogan, “liberté, égalité, fraternité.” What do these words mean to Marie Antoinette? What is Naslund up to here? And what does Marie Antoinette’s tidy, almost petulant dismissal of the Third Estate’s grandly ideological, tri-colored rhetoric reveal about her own ideology?
6. Discuss the interconnectedness of female identity and performance in *Abundance*. What does it mean, for instance, that Marie Antoinette feels most engaged and alive when she is playing a role on the stage — Rosine in *The Barber of Seville*? Consider also the idea that Marie Antoinette’s entire life is tantamount to a single, elaborately sustained performance, one sparked by her mother’s exhortation to play the role of “an angel,” blessing the people of France with peace.

7. How does the texture of this identity/performance theme shift once Marie Antoinette is faced with the prospect of fleeing? To flee, in Marie Antoinette's estimation, is to abandon her "role." Explore also the implications of Marie Antoinette's reaction to the disguises her friends wear in order to hide their wealth: "How can I play my role — that is to say — how can one maintain her identity, without the proper costume?"
8. Throughout *Abundance*, Naslund saturates Marie Antoinette's first-person narrative with a rich palette of bold colors, from the brilliant "blue silk of Austria" and the bountiful "red velvet" of France to the ominous black of the raven's wings and the ever-shifting, silver-and-gold gleamings of refracted light, both natural and artificial. Discuss the ways in which Naslund employs color to signify mood, underscore theme, and intimate character at different points in the novel.
9. In what specific ways has Naslund's rendering of late-eighteenth-century France come to inform, challenge, or even contradict altogether your previous understandings of the particular causes of the French Reign of Terror?
10. What did you know about Marie Antoinette before reading Naslund's novel? About the Reign of Terror? What surprised you most as you read?
11. How do Naslund's references to and subtle demonstrations of the prevailing philosophies of the day — including the outmoded optimism of Gottfried Leibniz ("This is the best of all possible worlds"); the measured, conservative skepticism of David Hume; the proto-civil libertarianism of the secular Voltaire; and the radical and prescient revolutionary ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau — color and shape the novel's inexorable march toward the Reign of Terror? To which philosopher would you align Marie Antoinette's world-view? What about her husband?
12. What kind of a man does Louis Auguste become? And what kind of king? Describe his politics and character, as far as they can be gleaned through Marie Antoinette's narration. Compare this portrait of Louis XVI's reign to other histories and accounts you've read about the period.
13. Imagine a companion volume to *Abundance*: this one recounts essentially the same events as the original, but it is told in Louis XVI's voice instead of Marie Antoinette's. How would this alternate novel be different in terms of perspective, language, and overall tone? How does he feel about himself? How does he experience the pleasures of hunting, working at his smithy or with locks, reading, eating? What situations are difficult for him? How does he understand his relationships to his parents, his grandfather, his brothers, his wife?

14. Discuss the nature of Marie Antoinette's relationship with her mother. Revisit their correspondence through the first three acts of the novel. To what degree is the dauphine a mere pawn to her mother's political machinations (by way of the hemorrhoidal Count Mercy d'Argenteau)? At what point does Marie Antoinette begin to recognize her own agency and seize her own autonomy?
15. The Empress of Austria has been called one of the shrewdest, most influential politicians in the history of Europe. How does this political acumen manifest itself in *Abundance*?
16. What does it mean to have power in the world of this novel? How is power variously seized, employed, abused, and/or deflected at different points in *Abundance* — whether by Louis XV, his three sisters, Louis XVI, the Empress of Austria, the Third Estate, or Marie Antoinette herself? Who ultimately wields his or her power most successfully?
17. What is your interpretation of the precise nature of the love that blooms between Marie Antoinette and Axel von Fersen? "We are the perfect friends," Marie Antoinette tells us, though her rapturous description of Fersen as "the most handsome, the most kind and good and loving — ah, yes, above all, loving — man in the world" all but demands us to wonder whether there is more to their bond than an ideal, platonic bond sealed by a bittersweet "transcendence of separation" — or, conversely, whether it is the very chasteness of their relationship that allows it to maintain such perfection. What is the effect here of Naslund's enigmatic prose?
18. What role do pamphleteers play in the years of Louis XVI's reign? Consider the potency of rumor and hearsay in the world of Naslund's narrative, from the notorious "sunrise orgy" to the legendary affair of the necklace.
19. What role does religion play in the life of Marie Antoinette? How do the Roman Catholic Church and the idea of the "divine right" of kings to rule interface with the French Revolution?
20. How has the press — or the Fourth Estate, as dubbed by Thomas Carlyle in his 1837 account of the French Revolution — evolved over the last two centuries, from anonymous pamphleteers to 24-hour news channels and tabloid journalism? What parallels might be drawn? Is it useful and valuable to underscore such connections and portents — or simply reductive? If possible, fashion arguments for both sides of this question.

21. Consider other historical novels you've read recently (e.g.: E. L. Doctorow's *The March*). How does Naslund's work — as simultaneously sweeping and intimate as it is — complement, complicate, and/or depart from the standard trappings and concerns of the historical fiction genre? In recommending this book to a friend, how would you describe it? How would you compare this novel and its protagonist to the main characters in Naslund's *Ahab's Wife* and *Four Spirits*?
22. *Abundance* features an epigraph from Germaine de Staël's *Reflections on the Trial of the Queen* that exhorts "women of all countries, of all classes of society" to recognize the fundamental universality of "the Fate of Marie Antoinette." How does Naslund's choice of epigraph presage and/or belie the tone and texture of her portrait of the queen? And how does it speak to the social conditions endured by women of the age?
23. What is the significance of the title of this novel? Why do you suppose Naslund chose it? Discuss the various meanings of *abundance* — moral, material, biological, political, and otherwise.

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