

Catherine de Medici
Renaissance Queen of France
By Leonie Frieda

Since the case of *History v. Catherine de Medici* opened more than 400 years ago, the prosecution has battered the French queen's reputation to the brink of damnation. She has been labeled as "the Black Queen" or "the evil Italian sorceress," and her role in the French monarchy has been cast as that of a manipulator, liar, and despot. In 2003 however, Catherine's defense team unleashed its star attorney, and her name is Leonie Frieda. Throughout her 392-page biography, Frieda protects and champions the queen's actions with power and precision. As a result, this book may posthumously do to Catherine what "the glove" did for O.J.

The queen's life is traced from the crib to the grave, and not much is left out in between. Intertwined with Catherine's life are the kings of the Valois dynasty. Catherine played a remarkable role in the lives of five kings, and Frieda spins the queen as the one true constant in a tumultuous Valois storm. The most emotional writing is saved for Catherine's relationship with her husband, Henri II. Married when they both were 14, Catherine and Henri were supposed to be the beacon of the French Renaissance. They did their best to play the part, but underneath the façade lurked a dark and tense state of affairs (in the literal sense). Henri may have married Catherine, but his heart belonged to Diane de Poitiers, a beautiful courtesan 19 years older than the king. Despite giving birth to 10 children (6 of whom survived childhood) and loving him with her whole heart, Catherine could never tear Henri's eyes (or the rest of his body) away from Diane. In the end, Henri's eyes were torn away, but not by Catherine. In a gruesome jousting accident, Henri's eyes and brain were lacerated by the shards of a broken lance. Frieda thrives in the retelling of these events, including Nostradamus' foreshadowing of the King's death.

After mourning Henri almost to the point of killing herself, Catherine is thrust into the Queen Dowager role and forced to protect her children from disease, religious wars, and each other. According to Frieda, she succeeds in all of these endeavors except for disease. Of her 10 children, only two live longer than their mother thanks to vile afflictions that will make all readers thankful for modern medicine. At the end of her days, Catherine is depicted by Frieda as a tired, overweight old woman ravaged by years of hard work protecting her family. Despite all of Catherine's efforts, the Valois are extinguished anyway, thanks to the incompetence of her sole remaining son, Henri III, and the religious zealot who stabbed him just a few short months after Catherine's death.

Frieda not only reports the episodes of Catherine's life, but she explains how the episodes shaped the queen's personality. Whether it was her abandonment after her parents' death, or the questionable decisions leading to the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, Catherine's life is retold with an architect's skill, so that every piece is connected to create one masterful work. By the last page, Catherine's portrait is so complete, it's more of a 3-D animation than an oil painting. Through Frieda's writing, Catherine comes alive as a compassionate woman who did everything possible to keep her family on the throne of France.

Now, was this a good thing or no? Did Catherine help or hurt the Valois, or more importantly, France? That is what the case of *History v. Catherine de Medici* will decide. With a writer as skilled as Leonie Frieda on her side, however, Catherine may start to like her chances.

-John Norris

Catherine de Medici (born Caterina Maria Romola di Lorenzo de Medici; April 13, 1519-January 5, 1589) was a member of the powerful Italian Medici family who became queen consort of France through her marriage to King Henry II. As queen consort and, later, queen mother, Catherine was highly influential during a period of intense religious and civil conflict. Fast Facts: Catherine de Medici. Known For: Queen of France, Queen Mother. Also Known As: Caterina Maria Romola di Lorenzo de Medici. Born: April 13, 1519, in Florence, Italy. Died: January 5, 1589, in Blois, France. Spouse: King Henry II.