

The Queen's Wardrobe

The enduring Marie Antoinette is portrayed in a new novel and in a study of her fashion taste.

QUEEN OF FASHION

What Marie Antoinette Wore to the Revolution.

By Caroline Weber.

Illustrated. 412 pp. Henry Holt & Company. \$27.50.

ABUNDANCE

A Novel of Marie Antoinette.

By Sena Jeter Naslund.

545 pp. William Morrow/

HarperCollins Publishers. \$26.95.

By LIESL SCHILLINGER

IT could be a tabloid cover story: A 14-year-old girl is wrenched from her mother's home and transported across state lines, stripped bare and paraded before a crowd of jaded adults. The girl's only comfort, a pug dog named Mops, is taken from her, and as strange eyes assess her nudity with frank stares, she breaks down in tears. It sounds like a situation that calls for an Amber Alert: what it actually is, though, is the factual record of what happened when Archduchess Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna of the Austrian Hapsburgs was handed over to the Bourbon court in 1770 to become the bride of the dauphin, Louis Auguste, the future King Louis XVI of France. Relinquishing her nationality with her clothes, she donned a "gleaming ceremonial gown made from cloth-of-gold" which transformed her into a human embodiment of the French monarchy. With that dress, she took on a new identity and a new name: Marie Antoinette, dauphine of France.

In "Queen of Fashion," her suspenseful, remarkably well-documented and surprisingly humanizing account of the role style played in Marie Antoinette's fate and legacy, Caroline Weber, who teaches at Barnard College and is an expert on the Terror, adds texture, shimmer and depth to an icon most of us thought we knew already. The traumatic wardrobe change was a diplomatic formality — a tradition known in royal circles as *la remise* — which the girl's redoubtable mother, Maria Theresa (the Empress of Austria, Queen of Hungary and an ancien régime role model for 20th-century stage mothers), had not just sanctioned, but hailed. "You must absolutely lend yourself to what the court is accustomed to doing," she wrote in a note to her daughter. "All eyes will be fixed on you." This event augured what was to come at the French court at Versailles. For the rest of Marie Antoinette's life, getting dressed would never be the private affair it had been before her extreme makeover — noblewomen would watch her put on her clothes in the morning and take them off at night, and squabble over the privilege of handing the queen her underthings. But in two decades, the ceremonial toilette would be remaindered, as the country stripped their adopted queen of her finery again, and led her to the guillotine in a white shift, to pay the ultimate price for her failure to correctly gauge What Not to Wear in revolutionary France.

Hundreds of books have been written

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about the doomed queen — from Stefan Zweig's famous biography of the early 1930's and Antonia Fraser's superb recent "Marie Antoinette: The Journey" to the new novel "Abundance" by Sena Jeter Naslund (the author of "Ahab's Wife"). In "Abundance," the *remise* affords the occasion for the child bride to indulge in Barbara-Cartland-issue reveries about the "pleasant rosebuds" on her young chest, and about the masculine allure of her groom-to-be. "There must be other words than 'tall' and 'strong' to think of," the heroine daydreams, recalling her mother's birds-and-bees lecture on the "engulfing transports of wifely love," at which she had "squirmed with delight." But she can't think of any. (As Weber shows, "nearsighted, maladroit and grossly overweight" would have been closer to the case — Louis XVI was an ineffectual 18th-century emo boy.) Fictionalizing a life that is already so surreal is usually a vain endeavor (Shakespeare is one of the few who regularly pulled it off); so it's best in reading Naslund's romance to think of it as a kind of "Forever Amber" punted across the channel from Restoration England to Versailles. But the tributes don't stop with books; there have been plays, operas, films and couture gowns devoted to the conehead-pouf-coiffed sovereign — from a Rochas frock in a "Let Them Eat Cake!" themed window at Barneys last Christmas to John Galliano's 2000 "Masquerade and Bondage" collection for Christian Dior, which included a hoop-skirted "Marie Antoinette" gown printed with an image of the queen frolicking in shepherdess garb. This month, 213 years after her execution, Marie Antoinette has been resurrected by Kirsten Dunst in a lavish Sofia Coppola movie that portrays the Austrian as a vapid valley girl with bonbons in her cheeks and nary a thought in her brain. Vogue put the star on its cover last month, with the headline: "Kirsten Dunst as the Teen Queen Who Rocked Versailles," and the director told the magazine that she sees her subject mostly as a confused young woman trying to make her place in the world. "I feel that Marie Antoinette is a very creative person," Coppola said. A dozen glossy pages were devoted to showcasing frothy 2006 couture confections that revived the "teen queen's" glamour. It goes to show: if you take the long view, no press is bad press. But Weber reminds us that it doesn't feel that way when it's your neck on the slab.

When you think of Marie Antoinette, chances are you picture a simpering, rosy-lipped Lladro figurine of a woman, wearing one of the outfits she favored: an opulently panniered, plunge-necked, stiffly corseted satin gown; or a frilly Bo Peep shepherdess costume; or (in her pared-down Rousseauian mode) a simple white muslin gown, loosely belted at the waist — a trend French society condemned but soon copied. Her hair you undoubtedly imagine swept up in her signature headdress, the powdered pouf. But Weber shows that the child bride who arrived at Versailles (years before the craze for her poufs



Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, N.Y.

caught on) was no coquettish sophisticate. Friendless, conspired against and viewed with suspicion by the xenophobic, malicious French court (including her husband's close relations), she had to think fast to secure her position as consort to the future king. The heir apparent, a shy, 15-year-old virgin, was unwilling to consummate the marriage (it took his wife seven years of pillow talk to win him over). Without an heir to shore up her claim to the throne, the dauphine had to invent a way to project power. She did it, the author suggests, by making herself a *trompe l'oeil* armature of fine clothes and accessories, as a posturing animal might do in the wild. "Through carefully selected, unconventional outfits and accessories, she cultivated what she later called an 'appearance of [political] credit,'" Weber argues. As the queen later said, "I allow the public to believe that I have more credit [with the King] than I do in reality." Lacking perspicacity, she failed to understand that, in France, kings' wives were supposed to be as peahens to the gaudy peacock husband; elegant, but drab and unshowy. Fine feathers were reserved for kings' mistresses — like Mme. Du Barry, and Mme. de Pompadour before her. But in her first months at Versailles, Marie Antoinette was protected by her youth, beauty and vivacity.

Championed by the debauched King
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Marie Antoinette paid the ultimate price for her failure to correctly gauge What Not To Wear in revolutionary France.

Queen's Wardrobe

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Louis XV, she felt (wrongly) free to chase butterflies in the palace gardens with young ladies from her entourage; to mock the dour old crones in the court; to snub Louis XV's scheming, well-connected ex-poule mistress, Du Barry; and to refuse to wear the torturously confining royal *grand corps* corset. She delighted Louis XV and thrilled the curious public by taking up riding, wearing men's breeches and a riding coat, and having a portrait of herself painted astride a rearing stallion — like her hero Louis XIV, the Sun King. Her mother fired off a Cassandran warning from Vienna to respect court protocol: "If you do not heed my advice, you will regret it, but it will be too late." By then, it already was. The baleful court watched over the dauphine like predacious spiders, awaiting the chance to lunge at a glittering bluebottle and sink in their fangs.

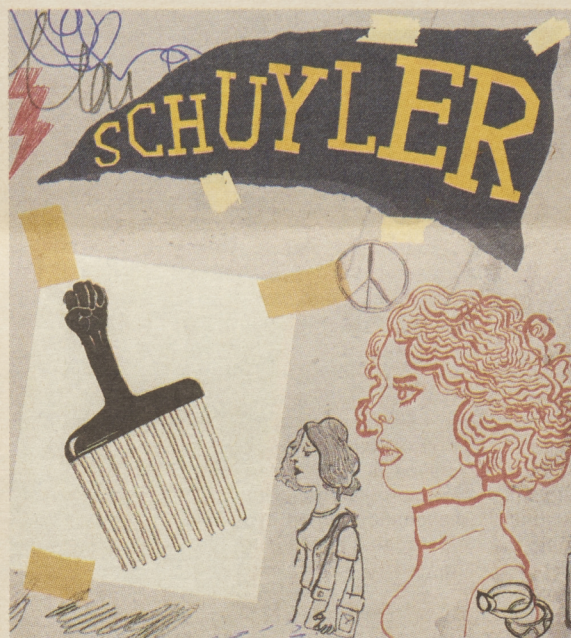
The men and women of Versailles pursued a relentless whisper campaign against the newcomer, and after the death of Louis XV in 1774 and the coronation of Louis XVI in 1775, as a mood of anti-Royalist rage spread across impoverished France, the queen's reputation was dragged through the gutter by cartoonists who accused her of profligacy, frivolity, nymphomania, lesbianism and incest, among other vices. France's financial woes were laid at her jeweled slippers, even though her extravagances were negligible compared with the huge deficits the country incurred during the American Revolution or what her brothers-in-law squandered on "gambling, courtesans and elegant clothing" in 1777. But according to Weber's theory, the image of influence and splendor Marie Antoinette had carefully crafted for herself, using fashion as her buttress, was too powerful to blot from the public's imagination. As her mother had forecast, she was "hurtling toward an abyss." In 1787, she rationed her pin money, scrambling to restore her image, but by then, she was out of touch, and out of time.

ON July 14, 1789, French citizens stormed the Bastille (Louis XVI, oblivious, spent the day hunting, and wrote in his journal, "Nothing"); three months later, an angry mob stampeded through Versailles and smashed the queen's mirrors and slashed her bed to shreds, not realizing she'd fled her boudoir. The royal family then moved to the Tuileries, in Paris, and tried to lie low; Marie Antoinette even tried to pander to popular feeling by sporting patriotic tricolor garb. But like a modern-day celebrity forced by reversal of fortune to live among crowds that had once both worshiped and reviled her, she was bound to stand out. When she tried to leave the country in 1791 with her family, there were no private planes, no helicopters, just a coach. She didn't stand a chance. Spotted in Varennes, captured, brought back to Paris and imprisoned, she continued to order subdued but still stylish outfits to wear in captivity. Even after her husband was executed, Marie Antoinette defied her captors by ordering mourning dress, seeking solace in the illusion that had set her on her unlucky course: the notion that by controlling her image, she could master her fate. Bound for the chopping block, deprived of her widow's weeds, she still contrived to have a clean-lined martyr's costume smuggled into her cell. She was the first woman of whom it truthfully could be said that she shopped until she dropped. □

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Roommates and Strangers

Joyce Carol Oates looks at race and liberal guilt in the years after Vietnam.



Ted McGrath

BLACK GIRL / WHITE GIRL

By Joyce Carol Oates.

272 pp. Ecco/HarperCollins Publishers. \$25.95.

By ELISSA SCHAPPELL

Joyce Carol Oates has never been shy about peering into the darkest corners of American culture. Her best books — "Blonde," "Zombie" and "Black Water" — showcase her fascination with violence, her almost vampiric ability to tap into the subconscious of her troubled characters and her taste for appropriating real-life tragedy.

Oates's latest offering, "Black Girl / White Girl," is no exception. Based, she explained in a recent interview, on "an actual sequence of events that took place in a college dormitory in the 1970's," the new novel looks at race relations through the lens of an uneasy relationship between two college roommates. Genna Hewett-Meade, the white girl of the title, is the daughter of a radical activist lawyer whose dealings with Vietnam protestors, the Black Panthers and various left-wing fugitives from justice have sentenced his family to a lifetime of F.B.I. surveillance and attendant paranoia. But if Genna's immediate family is rigorously left wing, her ancestry is decidedly Establishment: she's descended from the Quakers who founded exclusive Schuyler College, her alma mater.

Haunted for 15 years by the brutal death of her enigmatic college roommate — a merit scholarship student named Minette Swift, the title's black girl — Genna embarks on what she calls a "text without a title in the service of justice," a personal "inquiry" in which she attempts to reconstruct the events of the fateful year when she and Minette were freshmen. Minette, she explains, didn't die a "natural" or

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an "easy" death, and "I was the one to have saved her, yet I did not."

On the surface, the girls couldn't seem more different. Genna is guiltily privileged, self-effacing and eager to please, while Minette swells with a sense of entitlement. As the daughter of a powerful and charismatic minister from Washington, D.C., she feels morally, spiritually and intellectually superior to her classmates. This makes her roundly unpopular with black and white alike, but inspires in Genna a fierce loyalty that increases as the harassment of Minette begins and then escalates. This loyalty is matched only by Genna's determination to protect the reputation of the college her family founded.

It turns out that these young women are, in profound ways, very much alike, and the struggles each endures with regard to her father's reputation and expectations are the basis of two compelling — though, in Minette's case, hazy — subplots. Both are also reckoning with violent events in their family's history, believing

they're responsible for righting the wrongs of the past.

How, Oates seems to be asking, can two roommates so intimately linked by proximity and a painful past be so divided by the color of their skin? Why can't they step beyond black and white? The answers, she suggests, are really just more questions — a tactic that fits with the shadow-puppet style Genna uses to tell her story.

Minette's frustration with a college life that fails to meet her expectations (and yet exceeds her academic capabilities) is interesting to observe from the outside, but only for a while. Like timid Genna, the reader is mainly peering through the keyhole, spying only hints of Minette's hidden self — a self increasingly twisted, poorly defended, broken down. Blinded by her fierce naïveté, Genna fails to see that Minette will never consider her a friend. And Minette, hardened into defensive self-righteousness, fails to see that Genna may be her only friend.

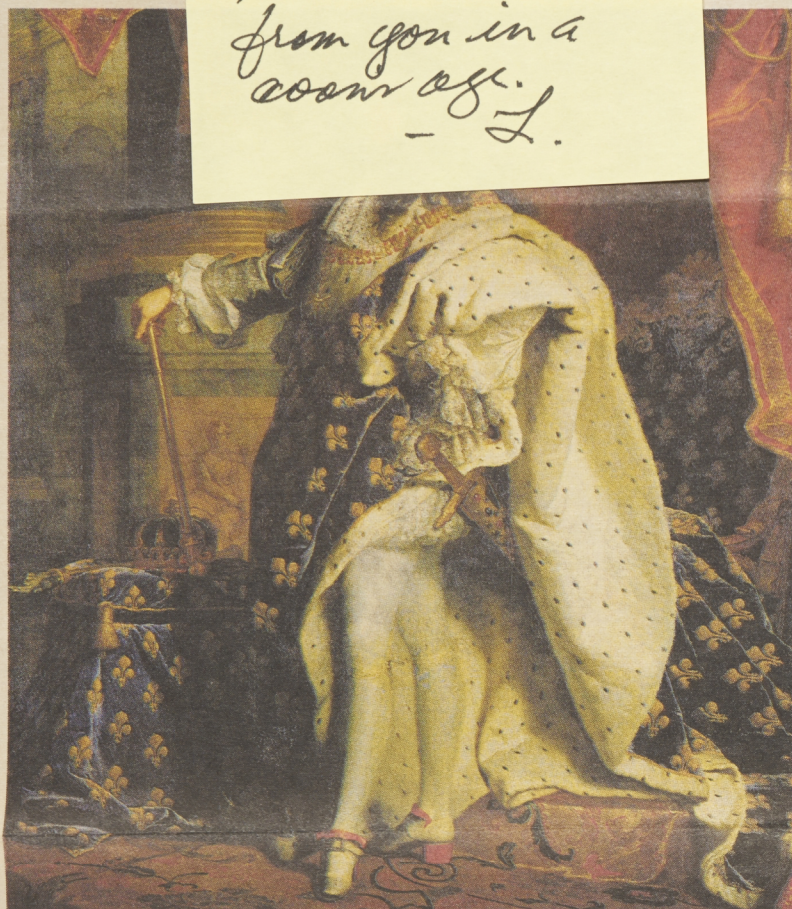
An intriguing plot turn in the last third of the novel seems to promise much, but it ends up making Oates's portraits of Genna and Minette less satisfying. The twist — not the characters — is what stays with you. By now, it's a cliché to comment on the rate at which Oates turns out books, making Trollope look as if he was writing in handcuffs. Still, this one feels rushed to a conclusion.

Which is a pity, because Oates is grappling with some big issues here. Genna's observations, 15 years after Minette's mysterious death, suggest that she's only beginning to understand the myriad ways in which black and white can yield so many shades of gray. When she wonders, thinking back, if a crucial act "hadn't been purely personal, aimed against Minette Swift as an individual, and not 'racist,'" she must also acknowledge "how swiftly and crudely the personal becomes the racial." In the end, she's still "riddled with guilt like rot or cancer, but like an afflicted person I seem not always to know where my affliction lies." □

Stuart - Heris
more in which
I thought you'd
be interested.
Haven't heard
from you in a
couple of weeks.
- L.

Bed

France are the subject of Antonia Fraser's new popular history.



Getty Images

LOVE AND LOUIS XIV

The Women in the Life of the Sun King.
By Antonia Fraser.

Illustrated. 388 pp. Nan A. Talese/Doubleday.
\$32.50.

By MEGAN MARSHALL

"LOVE and Louis XIV" is the perfect book to read in bed on a long summer day — or a short winter one. I tried reading it at my desk, but was inexorably drawn to the couch, no doubt by the power of suggestion. This is, after all, a book filled with incidents that take place in the grand bed-chambers and *appartements des bains* of royal palaces like Saint-Germain and Versailles: the offices, in effect, of the Sun King, his wives (one official, the other less so) and mistresses.

Seventeenth-century France was a country, Fraser instructs us at the outset, where a parliamentary executive session was termed a *lit de justice*, "taking its name from the cushioned bed from which medieval monarchs dispensed justice." At the same time, sexual intercourse was widely referred to as *commerce*. Royal bedrooms and bathing quarters were places to conduct business, both private and public, and the collisions and conjunctions of these two spheres form the basis of Fraser's tale of kingly exuberance.

The story begins in a "wondrous castle" over-

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looking the Seine at Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where Louis's mother, Anne of Austria, had repaired to the royal birthing bed, accompanied by her physician, the king and his courtiers. The 36-year-old queen, married at 14, had so far "endured 22 years of childless union." (Numerous miscarriages and lengthy cessations of marital relations had marked the marriage of the "voluptuous" Anne and the sexually "troubled" Louis XIII.) Royal births were, by tradition, public events, but this one required all the more assurance that the child was no last-minute substitute — of boy for girl, or live infant for stillborn. A male heir was imperative since France did not permit female descendants to serve as monarchs. Fate obliged in the person of Louis XIV, a child so physically precocious that he was born with two teeth (quite an inconvenience, Fraser speculates, for his wet-nurses).

In less than five years, Louis's father was dead, making his son a "child-king" and permitting his widow to serve as queen regent until the boy's majority, at 13. This period, during which Louis enjoyed the "undiluted love of his mother" and witnessed her mostly able leadership — at her death, he memorialized her as "among the great kings of France" — may have established in him a respect for and comfort with dynamic women that led to his "variegated philanderings." His wife (and first cousin), the guileless and "somnolent" Spanish infanta, Maria

Teresa, was quite different from the intelligent and forceful women to whom the comely king — with his "beautiful, long, curling hair" and a figure "described as tall, free, ample and robust" — was attracted. As king, Louis could freely womanize, and so he did, pursuing one beauty after another, whether married or single, lady's maid or lady of the court.

It is to Fraser's credit that she allows readers to keep all these "variegated" alliances straight through her lively descriptions of the features, accomplishments and appetites of the king's lovers. We learn of Athénaïs de Rochechouart de Mortemart's "thick, corn-colored hair which curled artlessly about her shoulders"; her eyes, "huge, blue and very slightly exophthalmic"; her famously devastating wit; and her "Ceres-like" fecundity. (In the words of a contemporary, "her powder lights very quickly.") Louis made Athénaïs his primary mistress for most of a decade, providing her with fabulous apartments at Versailles on the same floor as the queen and a chateau of her own at Clagny, where she employed 1,200 gardeners and had 8,000 daffodils planted during a single season. And he used his royal authority to make titled nobles of the children they conceived on the wrong side of the sheets.

Through much of his reign, Louis managed to spend almost every night with his wife (with whom he dutifully conceived potential heirs to the throne), devote several hours to dalliances with his courtesan of the moment and still lead the nation, without the advice of a chief minister. Some impressive logistics were required,

Fraser explains that when the king, as intent on achieving military glory as sexual glow, went to war to exert his "territorial adrenaline," he brought along his entire household, which sometimes amounted to a royal harem. On one triumphal foray to Flanders in 1670, Louis's "vagabond court" included the queen and two mistresses. Twenty-two years later, gouty and in need of stimulants to light his own tinder, Louis still insisted on bringing "the ladies" along with him to the siege of Namur. Now, however, he preferred the company of the relatively staid Madame de Maintenon, spiritual adviser and one-time tutor to his children by Athénaïs, who became Louis's second wife through a secret morganatic marriage after the death of Maria Teresa in 1683.

Fraser's marital — or coital — history of the French court lends an interesting perspective to a century that suffered long and bloody wars on the Continent and changes of command in nearly every country but France, where Louis reigned for more than 60 years. Virtually all of Europe was ruled by a set of intermarried cousins, although family ties failed to prevent them from going to war. Perhaps, on the domestic front, some innate evolutionary imperative, an awareness of the incestuousness of it all, led many of them — not just Louis XIV but also Charles II of England and a number of "princes of the blood" — into compulsive adultery as a means of expanding the gene pool.

"Love and Louis XIV" is short on analysis, however, which may come as no surprise in a book with footnotes that offer teasing asides on Louis's astrological chart or the presumed size of his "scepter." (It was small, according to one spurned lover.) Fraser is having fun, and at 74, with a dozen substantial works of history on her shelf, she is certainly entitled. But I wanted to hear more about the women themselves — about the mistresses' feelings when whisked off to deliver their babies in secret and returned to court duties hours later; about the queens' reactions to unions forced on them by political expediency, and to their husbands' seemingly inevitable infidelities. Fraser touches on these, but provides no guiding perspective, as she did so compellingly in "The Weaker Vessel," "The Warrior Queens" and "The Wives of Henry VIII."

As a writer of history, Fraser has done it all — biographies, group studies, even a chronicle of England's infamous Gunpowder Plot — and done it superbly. While "Love and Louis XIV" doesn't quite measure up to the high standards of synthesis and narrative propulsion of her best work, the book is still entertaining and instructive. In our sex- and celebrity-obsessed era, the extramarital activities of the 17th-century French royals and the breathless attention paid to them by the populace seem all too familiar. How long will it be before TV cameras are invited into the birthing rooms of Angelina and Brad or Britney and K-Fed? If the chief virtues of "Love and Louis XIV" are its sparkling vignettes and sharp character sketches — no reader will forget Louis's grandson, the Duc de Bourgogne, a man who was, as Saint-Simon put it, "born furious" and whose "favorite method of relief was smashing clocks" — we must still be grateful to Antonia Fraser for devising so excellent a companion with which to lie back and think of France. □

Louis XIV
pursued one
beauty after
another, whether
married or single,
lady's maid or
lady of the court.

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