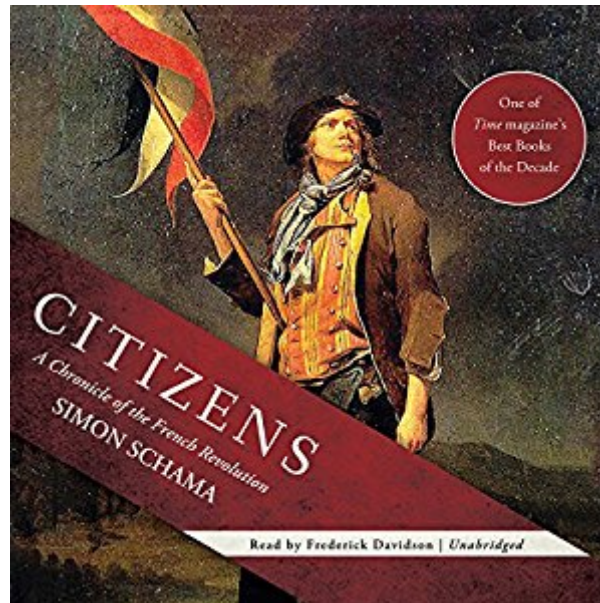


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Citizens: A Chronicle Of The French Revolution



Synopsis

From one of the truly preeminent historians of our time, this is a landmark book chronicling the French Revolution. Simon Schama deftly refutes the contemporary notion that the French Revolution represented an uprising of the oppressed poor against a decadent aristocracy and corrupt court. He argues instead that the revolution was born of a rift among the elite over the speed of progress toward modernity and science, social and economic change. Schama's approach, weaving in and out of private and public lives in the fashion of a novel, brings us closer than we have ever been to the harrowing and seductive French Revolution. Simon Schama is a professor of art history and history at Columbia University and is the author of numerous award-winning books; his history *Rough Crossings* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction. He has written and presented more than thirty documentaries for the BBC, PBS, and the History Channel.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This monumental book attempts to chronicle the French Revolution from its inception to the end of the Reign of Terror in 1794, using a slightly different style than most conventional histories. In the preface, Schama notes that studies of personalities have largely been replaced by studies of grain supplies, indicating a pattern to seek explanations for historical events and trends in obscure economic factors, rather than in the personalities of the leading figures involved. This Schama is determined to fight against, and he resurrects the nineteenth-century chronicle, with its emphasis on people, high and low. The first section is largely concerned with the Old Régime, which the author reveals a dynamic and rapidly changing society, where the pace of change was indeed too fast instead of too slow, as the popular perception goes. He meticulously shows the rise of revolutionary

and nationalist culture, as well as of a new economic order, and the incapacity of Louis XVI and his governments to deal with the new realities. The accounts of the demise of the Old Regime and the beginnings of Revolution are extremely detailed, but also move at a fast pace, with numerous stories of the participants interspersed in the narrative. Schama's use of primary sources is exhaustive, and sometimes even tends to be overwhelming, but the overall effect is an impressive display of historical writing at its finest. But it is in relating the power struggles within the National Assembly and the Convention that Schama truly shines. We hear the strident rhetoric of the Brissotins and later the Jacobins, calling for the bloody consummation of the Revolution. We are at the side of the major players as they are elbowed aside, which often means assassination or execution.

Citizens is a very well written history of the French Revolution covering a massive amount of events, details and personalities with a good deal of background to boot. I am no expert on the subject but I have read a few books on the French Revolution including "The Oxford history of the French Revolution" and "Twelve who Ruled". I found that Citizens at succeeded where the other two failed: it managed to remain interesting. This is of course is because of Simon Schama writing style. The history of the French revolutionary period of course really is fascinating but the problem with it is unless you are scholar of French history you will need to have a decent amount of background to put the events of 1789-95 in perspective. That being said it can also be said that if you are going to read a single book on the subject Citizens provides the background and explanation required to get a true sense of what happened during the revolutionary period. It is understandable that readers find that there is too much anecdote and detail in this book however I argue that it is all for a purpose. Simon Schama is one of those writers that doesn't simply want to provide readers with the chronology but he wants to enrich the events with information and details that not only shed light on what happened but provide a volume of supplemental knowledge that in pieces may do little but together solidify the reader's understanding of the subject. This is vastly important to getting a grasp on this book. I believe Schama uses anecdotes not as flourishes but as mnemonic devices for the readers understanding as well. It is not meant to be a quick read. Citizens is very deliberate. Schama's verbose style is also this works beauty.

This is a popular work of history, and it is easy to see why. 1) Schama has a wonderful eye for anecdote, starting with the tale of the plaster elephant at the site of the Bastille, to how Talleyrand could not conduct a proper mass to save his life, to how Lafayette tried to escape from the Austrians

and all too typically failed. 2) The book is lavishly illustrated with many compelling contemporary images. Not only do we see the passion for science in chandeliers resembling Montgolfier balloons, but we see the patriotic enthusiasm in revolutionary coffee cups and the revolutionary calendar. We are also blessed with Schama's skill as an art historian. Everyone recognizes David's The Oath of the Horatii, but how many now the bloodthirsty conclusion to the tale? Schama does, and this helps his point about the sanguinary and murderous side with the obsession with classical virtue. 3) Schama is a very effective writer, and few will be able to read his accounts of the September Massacres or the suppression of the Vendee or the execution of the Malesherbes family during the terror without a shudder of revulsion. Moreover he is capable of discussing a wide variety of topics, whether it is the nature of the fiscal crisis of the Bourbon monarchy or the cultural construction of the citizen. 4) In contrast to Richard Pipes' The Russian Revolution, Schama is able to consult the most recent literature to support his attack on the French revolution. He cites Chaussinand-Nogaret on the progressive, entrepreneurial and capitalist nature of the aristocracy. He builds on Darnton to emphasize the pornographic libels against Marie Antoinette.

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