



Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered

Dianne Hales

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Everybody knows her smile, but no one knows her story: Meet the flesh-and-blood woman who became one of the most famous artistic subjects of all time—Mona Lisa.

A genius immortalized her. A French king paid a fortune for her. An emperor coveted her. Every year more than 9 million visitors trek to view her portrait in the Louvre. Yet while everyone recognizes her smile, hardly anyone knows her story. *Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered*, a blend of biography, history, and memoir, truly is a book of discovery—about the world's most recognized face, most revered artist, and most praised and parodied painting. Who was she, this ordinary woman who rose to such extraordinary fame? Why did the most renowned painter of her time choose her as his model? What became of her? And why does her smile enchant us still?

Lisa Gherardini (1479-1542) was a quintessential woman of her times, caught in a whirl of political upheavals, family dramas, and public scandals. Her life spanned the most tumultuous chapters in the history of Florence—and of the greatest artistic outpouring the world has ever seen. Her story creates an extraordinary tapestry of Renaissance Florence, with larger-than-legend figures such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Machiavelli.

Dianne Hales, author of *La Bella Lingua*, became obsessed with finding the real Mona Lisa on repeated trips to Florence. In *Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered*, she takes readers with her to meet Lisa's descendants; uncover her family's long and colorful history; and explore the neighborhoods where she lived as a girl, a wife, and a mother. In the process, we can participate in Lisa's daily rituals; understand her personal relationships; and see, hear, smell, and taste "her" Florence. Hales brings to life a time poised between the medieval and the modern, a vibrant city bursting into fullest bloom, and a culture that redefined the possibilities of man—and of woman.

Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered Details

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Author : Dianne Hales

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From Reader Review Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered for online ebook

Grampus says

What the *#!?

Now that I have your attention. . .

How does one write a book about Mona Lisa, art history, and travels through beautiful Italy without a single picture? The only photo of the famous Mona Lisa is on the cover and that is a very transparent image.

The author goes in detail describing the places she visited in tracing the life of Lisa (which I truly appreciated) but would it have hurt to take a camera and show us actual images? Same goes for the works of art she describes throughout the book. I was completely annoyed that I had to go to the internet and search for images of the works she discussed. I also had to look up images of the de Medici family (and ooh, they are not lookers), Salai (Leonardo's pupil and maybe more), and others. Am I wrong? The book could have been 4 or 5 stars with those additions.

On the positive side, her writing style was very descriptive and helped me mentally "be there" with Lisa, Leonardo, and with all those she researched that led up to their fateful encounter. There was also a nice epilogue detailing what became of everyone and subsequent generations of Lisa's family.

I have been trying to teach myself Italian and valued her use of that language (with translations) throughout the book where appropriate. Without the images, all I can say is it was *un buon libro* (a good book) but *dove sono le foto* (where are the photos)?

Michelle says

This was interesting conjecture delivered in a florid journalistic style.

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:

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The author, Dianne Hales, is a prize-winning, widely published journalist and author. The President of Italy awarded her an honorary knighthood in recognition of her internationally bestselling book, La Bella Lingua.

Abridged by Eileen Horne

Reader: Nancy Crane

Producer: Clive Brill

Netta says

One of the most irksome non-fiction books I've read this year. There are pieces of information about Leonardo's Lisa scattered here and there, in between fascinating stories of how this book was written, where and when Dianne Hales went, how she felt about it, whom she met and endless "Imagine Lisa walking this street", "Imagine Lisa seeing this", "Imagine Lisa meeting him", "Imagine Lisa...". Sadly, as a reader, I'm more interested in actual Lisa, *una donna vera* (as Ms Hales calls her the first time she decides to show off with her knowledge of Italian), than in Dianne Hales's impression of streets of Florence, trips she took with her husband (even if they were for the purpose of writing this book) and her excitement. I don't want to imagine things. I want facts. Of course, I get the vibe. When you are that keen on something (or someone), you are beyond just excited to tell the story of your beloved object. Just keep it all in a preface or an afterword, please, because it does not make your book trustworthy. At all.

Les says

By using the lives of Mona Lisa and da Vinci to draw a transect across the last years of the renaissance in Florence, Hales has produced an excellent popular history. By being present in the story as a journalist she also tells the story of how she researched the work, and of the artifacts and memories of the time that reach into the 21st century.

I am a Renaissance history enthusiast; but I learned new things from this book. The details that professional historians assume a journalist discovers with fresh eyes, and she lays them out as new jewels for fellow amateurs.

Absolutely fascinating, especially for the student of women in the 16th century.

Christine says

BBC Book of the Week starts August 11

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A Brill production for BBC Radio 4.

(view spoiler)

Richard says

This book has some good aspects and some less good ones. About 50 pages in, I was ready to say, "Forget it," and move on to something else. But I stuck with it and am happy to report that the second half is better than the first.

The good: If you want to know the details of everyday life in northern and central Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries, this book delivers. And of course, the reader will learn the particulars of the life of Lisa Gherardini, her forebears and offspring, her husband and his family, the Medici family, and Leonardo da Vinci. Unfortunately, very little actual information is available about Mona Lisa herself (more on that in a moment).

Sometimes the best is saved for last. That is the case here in the final two chapters where we are treated to the "adventures" of the painting itself, post-Leonardo, and its status as a cultural icon.

The bad: The author adopts an unfortunate style of melodrama as she incorporates her personal story of discovery into the historical narrative. She also uses Italian terms when it appears unnecessary to do so, thereby adding more detail to a book already full of daunting detail. An excerpt from pages 73-74 illustrates this:

"Don't waste your time looking through baptismal ledgers in Florence," an archivist advises.
"You can find it online when you get back home."

With some trepidation, on my return to California I take up the challenge, still daunting to me, of digging through Italian digital archives. As I position myself before my computer, my apprehension intensifies. With trembling fingers, I search for the Opera di Santa Maria del Fiore di Firenze. A few clicks bring me to the cathedral's "*risorse digitali*" (digital resources) and its "*registri battesimali*" (baptismal registries). Zeroing in on the ledger for June of 1479, I hit the key to *visualizzare* the list - and hold my breath.

[I am skipping past a paragraph where she finds the record she is looking for.]

Leaping out of my chair, I dance with excitement. More than 530 years later, at a distance of

some 6,100 miles, in a country yet to be discovered at the time of her birth, I have found the original record of Lisa Gherardini's entry into the world.

What's next? Her heaving bosom? Please! Just shoot me now! If you like this writing style, this book might be for you. It isn't for me. Fortunately, this "Gee Whiz" excess dwindles away by the second half of the book.

Another problem is hard to avoid in a book like this, and that is the blizzard of names, dates, and movements as she traces the da Vinci, del Giocondo, Gherardini, and Medici family histories. I thought these chapters were more detailed than they needed to be, but it's a tough call. After I finished the book, I discovered a reference on the principal characters tucked away at the end of the book. It would have been better to put this reference up front where linear readers like me would have seen it before wading through the entire family stories.

Because very little is known of Mona Lisa herself and the people surrounding her, the author can only surmise the particulars of the story. As a result, we often read that Lisa *may* have done this or she *could have* witnessed that. Those types of constructs are used so often that I was thinking it might have been better to have made this an historical novel and just asserted all the things that the author was qualifying. In the end I changed my mind about the possible novelization, but the qualifiers really got tiresome. I think this aspect could have been handled in a way that disrupted the narrative less.

Many books of this type have 12 or 16 pages of pictures, photographs, and reproductions. This book doesn't. It would have been nice to see reproductions of some of the artwork discussed (besides the obvious Mona Lisa itself and Michaelangelo's David), some of the individuals, some places mentioned, and a map or two. Yes, the reader can look all of this up online, but when I'm reading, I'm not sitting at my computer. The book isn't complete if the author expects the reader to put down the book to go see key images online.

Overall, I give the book 3 stars ("I liked it"). The factual content, research, and analysis deserves 4 stars. I knocked off a star for the writing style that, for me, really got in the way and made the book a more difficult read than it needed to be.

Michael Crawford says

I have a poster of Mona Lisa in our living room. We often draw on top of her glass with whiteboard markers. Mustaches, necklaces, and tattoos often appear on her. But I knew little of the Italian woman. After reading this story of how she may have come to life I feel more complete. The book leaves some doubt, but the story portrayed now lives within me.

The best part of the boom is how the writer threaded the lives of the artist, the model and the times into a enriching story.

If you've ever wondered about the mysterious smile, I recommend this book.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Kathleen says

The Mona Lisa Timeline pulled the whole book together in a neat package for me at the end. Dianne Hales was passionate about this family and the heritage of Gherardini, and absolutely about the person we know as Mona Lisa.

Lisa Gherardini was born in 1465 in Renaissance Florence Italy and lived in a time in between medieval and the modern. She was descended from ancient nobility of that city and lived her life in that fashion. She lived through some unsettled times in Italy and she entered a convent after her husband's death.

The city then seemed to "forget" her for hundreds of years, except for her iconic portrait. The author has brought "Una Donna Vera" or the real woman, Lisa to our attention, at long last. Her life and times were impeccably researched and I recommend it to scholars of this period of history and this culture.

Harvey Smith says

I enjoyed this book so very much. It was expertly written by a very intelligent woman who told the story of Lisa Gharardini in a way that you really felt like you came to know her. I will never look at the Mona Lisa by Leonardo DiVinci the same way again. Excellent book.

Jane says

3.5/5. A fascinating study of the real-life model for Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, arguably the most famous portrait in the world, parodied now as kitsch. The author found her existence in baptismal records and since has spent years researching her subject, Lisa Gherardini del Giocondo, wife of a wealthy silk merchant. Not only consulting books, the author interviewed many people knowledgeable about Italian Renaissance history, culture, customs and family relationships. We meet many famous people of that era, such as Leonardo da Vinci, the Medici, and others. We trace out what Lisa's life may have been, from marriage, childbearing, to death and burial in a monastery. We trace many of the famous families of those days through their intermarriage. There is an interesting section on recent study of the Mona Lisa, using modern forensic techniques and her history--how she passed from Italy to her home in France.

I applaud a substantial bibliography and complete index, but I regret the lack of color plates. The book could have used a section, especially of art works described extensively in the text.

The only illustration of the Mona Lisa appears as cover art and it is as though she is behind fog or a scrim. The author probably couldn't have described Lisa's life but for the heavy speculation taken from the author's description of Renaissance life. She used such words as "Perhaps", "maybe", "it could have been this way", etc. Very readable, for the educated layperson.

Recommended.

Katie/Doing Dewey says

Dianne Hales knows how to get on my good side, starting her book with a note stating that she will always make it clear whether she is sharing speculation or fact. She also began with a family tree and a map. Despite these favorable signs, the beginning of the narrative was not so well organized. The first chapter seems to be intended as an overview of Lisa's life, but it felt very disjointed. Abrupt transitions between scenes made it hard to get into the story, especially the transitions between the author's experiences and Lisa's. However, as I got into the story, the transitions felt smooth enough I hardly noticed them.

The author's ability to capture the details of daily life in Florence and the feelings inspired by different locations was the strongest point of the book. She collected an amazing assortment of interesting stories, all connected to Lisa. She cleverly used personal correspondence from people similar to the people she was discussing to speculate about how they were feeling. She shared the feelings particular locations inspired in her to speculate about what living at those locations was like for Lisa. She always made it clear where she was extrapolating, so even though it made the story less factual, I don't think it was misleading. In fact, I think it shared a different truth – not just about what Mona Lisa's life was like, but what life in general was like in Florence during Lisa's lifetime. The author's stories included many famous people and were incredibly entertaining. I suspect this is a credit both to her research ability, finding the best anecdotes, and her enthusiasm, giving her an impressive storytelling ability.

This review first published on Doing Dewey.

Alana White says

Who was the real Mona Lisa? Today, most scholars agree she was Lisa Gherardini, wife of the Renaissance Florentine merchant Francesco del Giocondo. But what of the woman herself—daughter, sister, wife and mother—whose image the divine Leonardo would immortalize in one of the world's most famous paintings? On her quest to satisfy her curiosity about the woman everyone recognizes but hardly anyone knows, Dianne Hales researched Florence in Lisa's day, exploring her neighborhood and the street where she lived, reading diaries, Journals and letters, interpreting family genealogies, talking with people, threading a path through scholarly skirmishes—and, of course, turning to Leonardo, himself. In *Mona Lisa: A Life Discovered*, Hales has created for the woman with the enigmatic smile a vivid life history set against the customs—"the clothing, the homes, the rituals, the routines"—of Florence in the 15th to 16th centuries. What a wonderful, rich book this is! I can't recommend it highly enough. (The book includes a map { "Mona Lisa's Florence" } and a family tree, along with pages of notes and a bibliography that will keep me returning to this excellent nonfiction book again and again.)

Ionia says

The sheer amount of research and man (well in this case woman) hours that went into this flawless book is deserving of five stars. Dianne Hales is a passionate researcher, this much is clear, but she is also a gifted writer. Where many non-fiction books tend to be dry and somewhat acerbic in their approach to delivering information, this author uses her talent as a story teller to make you see and feel what you are reading. The descriptions in this book are incredible.

Rather than sitting in the national archives of Italy for the entire duration of research needed to compile the factual backbone of this book, Dianne Hales went and lived the life (or as close to the life) of Lisa Gherardini as she could. She walked the same streets, saw similar sights and pieced together the missing parts of a life that has been so important to so many but never fully appreciated until now.

This book offers amazing insight into the life of a woman that we all recognise but most of us know little to nothing about. The author also carefully constructed the timeline of Da Vinci and offered a thorough historical background on the history of the Gherardini family tree. While there are still mysteries that remain, this book offers a rather comprehensive look at Florentine life many years ago.

The way this book is organised offers the reader a step-by-step journey into the past, progressively moving forward to the actual painting of the subject at the core of this writing. The author was careful to remain impartial and use the evidence she compiled to support her work, rather than letting this run wild with opinion.

I was greatly impressed with this book and think scholars of the age as well as anyone interested in art history will gain from reading this.

Excellent book, written with passion and intensity.

This review is based on a complimentary copy from Netgalley and the Publisher. All opinions are my own.
