



Joan of Arc

Mary Gordon

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One would expect nothing less from Gordon (Spending) than a splendid, spare account of Joan's life -- and she delivers in this slender but satisfying account, a new entry in the Penguin Lives series. The facts of Joan of Arc's life are straightforward: she was born in 1412, in Domremy, France, to a peasant family; she participated in the Hundred Years' War but was in active military service for only a year; and she was burned at the stake at 19. Novelist Gordon, who has always been fascinated by the young heroine, emphasizes Joan the girl. She acknowledges that the 17-year-old could have been a wife and mother, a fully adult member of her community. But Gordon's Joan "has a young girl's heedlessness, sureness, readiness for utter self-surrender". This biography rehearses the well-known highlights in Joan's short life: the voices she heard who charged her with the mission to save France; her participation in the Battle of Orleans and the coronation of King Charles VII; her trial by an ecclesiastical court, where she was charged with witchcraft, heresy and idolatry. The judges, Gordon tells us in a deft and clever interpretation, connected "Joan's cross-dressing to the sin of idolatry. (They) were accusing Joan of making an idol of herself". Gordon recounts Joan's excommunication and execution in spare and arresting detail. The strength of this "biographical meditation" lies in the penultimate chapter, in which Gordon investigates the numerous re-creations of Joan on stage and screen, from Carl Dreyer's 1928 film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* to Verdi's opera *Giovanna d'Arco* -- a chapter that comes like an unexpected dessert at the end of a rich feast.

Joan of Arc Details

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From Reader Review Joan of Arc for online ebook

Anna says

I enjoyed this book, but feel like it only skimmed the surface about Joan of Arc. She's still as enigmatic to me now as she was before I read the book. I wish the author had gone a little deeper and actually proposed some explanation as to what was motivating Joan. Or, some would say, what was wrong with Joan. There were theories, but they seemed very disorganized to me. Just a lot of "maybes." But, still, a good read for someone who is just being introduced to Joan of Arc.

Lennie says

Close your eyes and try to think back to when you were nineteen years-old. What did you accomplish in your life up until that point? Whatever it was, it probably doesn't compare to Joan of Arc, the young French girl who left home, became a soldier, led French troops to victory, and then eventually crowned the King of France. And if that wasn't enough, the Catholic Church made her a saint (but that was long after she had died). If your looking for a biography on a historical figure who inspires, then you'll have to read Joan of Arc.

E. says

Joan of Arc

This was a quick, easy read. I found the text to be easily accessible to those not familiar with Joan, however, it is a very broad overview. It's a good starting text with some interesting analysis for those who don't want to jump into a heavier text. There were some points where I found myself disagreeing with the author, however, specifically:

"In our age, when the consequences of loss of virginity are slight ..."

This is simply not true. People with vaginas are still being ostracized and stoned to death for not being virgins. Despite this blatant lie, I did find the author brought up some interesting points:

"Charles and Joan illustrate a phenomenon that occurs when young women want to move from the realm of the symbolic, where male imagination has placed them, to the realm of the actual, where they want to be. A girl can be an ornament, but if she wants to act rather than be looked at, if she wants scope and autonomy rather than the static fate of the regarded, even the well-regarded, object, she becomes dangerous."

It's amazing how the author could recognize the latter, but fail to connect that thinking to views on virginity. I gave this book four stars.

Jill says

Quite interesting to read about a young woman, in her teens, who willingly sacrifices her life to defend her

Lord. Joan of Arc's desire to fight for her country and for her faith is an early story of a determined young woman who would not be turned back by any man.

Also, quite interesting to learn how entertainment paints very different perspectives of historical figures depending upon their own approach to life.

Edward says

What did she look like, anyway? Best guess is that she was a short stocky peasant-type, not the willowy pretty figure that any number of movies have made her out to be. Interesting fact: over 20,000 books about her in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris - people read themselves into her, mainly that the most unlike people have tremendous potential in themselves, and so she never goes out of date.

Arlene Allen says

with over twenty thousand works about Joan of Arc it was hard for Gordon to narrow down her focus, especially for such a small volume. I felt I only got a tip of the ice berg into who she really was.

Carol Storm says

MARY GORDON IS A BIG FAT PHONY

Nothing is more depressing than reading **the New York Times Book Review**. It's just so smug, so orthodox. And at the same time so phony. Take Mary Gordon, for example. Just the other day Mary Gordon wrote a front page review praising the new novel by Louise Erdrich, the famous Native American author. Now I've got nothing against Louise Erdrich, but I've been reading the novels and essays of Mary Gordon for over thirty years. And by the time I finished reading the review, I just wanted to throw up.

Right off the bat, Mary Gordon takes a tough-guy stance, bragging about how back in the day feminists stuck together, how they shook up the world, writing classic novels that totally changed the rules about who could and couldn't write American literature. Never before the Eighties and Nineties were there books by and about women of color. Never before were there stories written in American celebrating the courage and resilience of blacks, Native Americans, Latinos, Koreans, Croatians, Martians, whatever. And these days it's all over, thanks to the ubiquitous (but nameless) male pigs that put down "feminism" and "identity politics." But Louise Erdrich is still around, and she's the greatest.

It's all about the sisterhood, see. It's all about sticking together. Mary Gordon talks it up beautifully, just like William Holden in **The Wild Bunch**. "When you side with a man, you stay with him. And if you can't do that, you're like . . . some animal! You're finished! We're finished!"

It's all very noble and inspiring. Who can resist (and who would dare question) Mary Gordon's reverence for minority women, her touching loyalty to the ideals of sisterhood? Except that if you actually know who this

woman is, if you've ever read her novels and essays and absorbed the real ugliness of her world view, the whole thing is just one big crock, a con job of monumental proportions. Watch Mary Gordon on YouTube, holding forth at some tedious Barnard function in Manhattan. In old age she's decided to promote herself as a "Sixties Chick." Clearly that goes over well with the aging white female alums who cough up donations to keep the ultra-exclusive private school afloat.

But in reality, Mary Gordon never really was a Sixties chick, any more than George Wallace was ever a Freedom Rider or Donald Trump was ever a Marine rifleman in Vietnam. Read her first two novels, **Final Payments**

and **The Company of Women**

and you see where Mary Gordon is really coming from.

Funnily enough, the most evil woman in Final Payments is a romance reader. Yes, I took it personally.

This is a woman who grew up Irish Catholic in Queens, at a time when Jewish kids passing through were routinely beaten and roughed up, and when any blacks of any age who tried to enter the Forbidden Zone would probably have been shot on sight by the police. The innocent, secluded, Irish Catholic world that Mary Gordon celebrates in her early novels is a world that was only made possible by systematic racial violence on a massive scale going back nearly a hundred years to the Draft Riots of 1863. But who cares! What counts is sisterhood!

Only those early novels of Mary Gordon's don't really celebrate sisterhood. Or brotherhood. Or the Sixties. The prim, Irish Catholic heroine pays lip service to Civil Rights -- but she never has any black friends. She opposes the Vietnam War -- but only to hammer home how superior she is to the neighborhood boys who do the real fighting and dying.

Worst of all, in a Mary Gordon novel the Prim Irish Heroine is always recoiling in disgust from noisy black kids dribbling basketballs, or loudmouthed black women arguing about sex, or coarse campus radicals bragging about wanting to be born Third World. The great symbol of shabbiness in **The Company of Women** is the poster of Jimi Hendrix in the squalid hippy crash pad that keeps falling down, over and over, no matter how often the long suffering heroine tapes it up again.

Evidently to a prim Irish Catholic girl who reveres Jane Austen, Jimi Hendrix is not a visionary musician, nor an artist, nor even a human being, but merely an ape making monkey sounds in the jungle.

But this is the woman believes in sisterhood. This is the tough, old-school feminist who loves Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich. So it's okay!

Think I'm reading too much into this? Think I'm working myself into a snit for nothing? Check out Mary Gordon's truly astonishing biography of Joan of Arc.

Did you know that Joan of Arc never menstruated?

I don't know how Mary Gordon does her research, but she seems to think that's terribly important. She also volunteers the opinion (rendered in a delightfully dismissive way) that Joan was a truly worldwide figure of

transcendent importance while Abraham Lincoln (a real lowlife who could not stop menstruating) was merely a “local god.”

Stop and think about that for a minute.

Joan of Arc matters to the whole world because she saved something truly eternal and important, like French civilization. Abraham Lincoln doesn't really matter at all, because . . . well, presumably because the people he saved weren't truly civilized. Maybe they weren't truly human either. Maybe they would have been better off as slaves!

Oh, but Mary Gordon loves her colored sisters!

Mary Gordon reveres women who tell the stories of the forgotten, like Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich. But check out her new review and you see how much that's worth. Evidently in her newest novel Louise Erdrich tells the story of a Native American priest who falls for a female parishioner, but realizes their love can never be. Mary Gordon quotes the priest as saying something like, “you want her, but you can never have her. Suck it up and deal.” Seems authentic to me, but Gordon insists this moment is “beneath the author's talent.” Why? Presumably because if you're an Irish Catholic who grew up around real priests in a real Catholic neighborhood, you know (or must try to believe) that the priests never overcome desire . . . because they can't feel desire in the first place!

I won't even ask what the cost is when loyal Catholics cover for priests who aren't really above desire.

Instead I'll just wrap up with the point that Mary Gordon respects Louise Erdrich a whole lot . . . until Erdrich tells a truth she doesn't want to hear. Then big, bad Mary Gordon covers her ears with her hands and starts going “la la la la la!” Just like on the playground.

Because that's what sisters do.

Claire Baxter says

Good introduction however there was a lot of commentary about femininity and attitudes towards virginity rather than the story of her life. This was still interesting in itself however in such a brief book I thought it was a bit unbalanced

Donald Jodon says

This is a good book, but ultimately it is not something spectacular. Mary Gordon does a good job of trying to relate Joan of Arc to a modern audience. But the biography is just too short to be considered anything but a topical look at the life of one of the Catholic Churches oddest saints. She did hear voices from God telling

her what to do, but the book almost has you thinking "well, she was crazy, not religious". I don't think this is true, but the material presented is so brief that this image can't help but to be imparted. It does show Joan as a very human character who had strong convictions. Nevertheless, this is one of the first times I've seen Joan's too human side divulged as she is described as caving into the pressures of her court-room oppressors. I do feel I know more about Joan than before reading, but I wanted a little more...

Julia says

I would have given the book a higher rating if it hadn't been for the last chapter. I had no desire to read about all the things ever created using Joan of Arc as the protagonist. Boring. Gordon went a long way in establishing the context surrounding Joan; how Joan fit into society and how that society was created the myth, legend and icon that is Joan of Arc. It very intriguing how an uneducated, religious peasant girl is able to lead the army of France into battle to allow the dauphin Charles to be crowned King, establishing her place in the larger theatre that was 16th century French politics, religion and royalty is fascinating. Nowhere else could it have happened and had Joan not perished the way she did, she would not be the legend and icon she is. The books is not long, and it can be choppy in places, but it is a different *kind* of biography. Not one of names, dates and places but of the context and historical significance of an individual.

Reid says

More than a chronology of Joan's life, this is more in the form of essays commenting on different aspects of her life and legend. Gordon is an astute and absorbing writer, and this is very enjoyable to anyone who has an interest in the life of Joan of Arc.

Kiran Poet says

Short, bittersweet, to the point; Mary Gordon delivered. Joan of Arc received the honor she deserved. Nothing was lost and much insight was gained reading this gem of a book. If not for having loved Chapters 1-6 and 8, Chapter 7 would had been pointless.

Mary Gordon reviews *The Messenger* and *Joan of Arc* in Chapter 7. Milla Jovovich starred in *The Messenger* and Leelee Sobieski in *Joan of Arc*. Mary Gordon said of Sobieski, "...looks the part, although she delivers her lines with the flatness of a depressed teenager..."; of Jovovich, "...she may be further off the mark than Shakespeare or Schiller." Shakespeare had demonized Joan of Arc's character. "Like Shakespeare, Schiller finds Joan's virginity...a problem..." Gordon says in Chapter 7.

I have seen *The Messenger* and *Joan of Arc*, both had shortcomings. Jovovich and Sobieski honored Joan, yet in their own way. Meld Jovovich and Sobieski together, one hell of a movie would be born. I disagree with Gordon, Jovovich looked the part, not Sobieski.

My understanding of Joan of Arc? She was misunderstood and ahead of her time. An apostate at heart, she refused to bow down to the authority of the church. For this, she was burned at the stake. Joan's virginity was her namesake and she died to protect it. Accused of being a transvestite, she continued until her death in men's clothing. Dressing Joan in women's clothing was an insult. Burning her at the stake was unacceptable.

A great find this book was...at a local library. If you cannot find this book, I recommend buying it via Amazon. Joan of Arc by Mary Gordon

Five quotes honoring Joan's life:

When I was thirteen years old, I had a Voice from God to help me govern my conduct. And the first time I was very fearful. And came this Voice, about the hour of noon, in the summer-time, in my father's garden; I had not fasted on the eve preceding that day. (Joan of Arc)

Joan of Arc leading her troops in battle: "In God's name, forward boldly!"

Joan's response to soldiers wanting to apply a charm to her wound: "I would rather die than do a thing which I know to be a sin or against the will of God."

Joan of Arc's response to the threat of torture: "Truly, if you were to tear me limb from limb and separate my soul from my body, I would not say anything more. If I did say anything, afterwards I would always declare that you made me say it by force!"

Joan of Arc's last words: "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!"

Juliet says

This book was atypical of my reads, which might explain why I took a while to finish. It had some gems of insight into Joan's life - quotes about Joan that appealed to me. I appreciated the focus on her military experience rather than a drawn out narrative of her childhood.

Maren Johnson says

It was pretty nice and short, to the point. I liked that. There wasn't too much fluff. It was purely just the story of Joan of Arc. Who's like my hero, so that's cool

Jessica says

Good book over all. Could have benefited from having some more interesting facts directly connected to Joan and the events.
