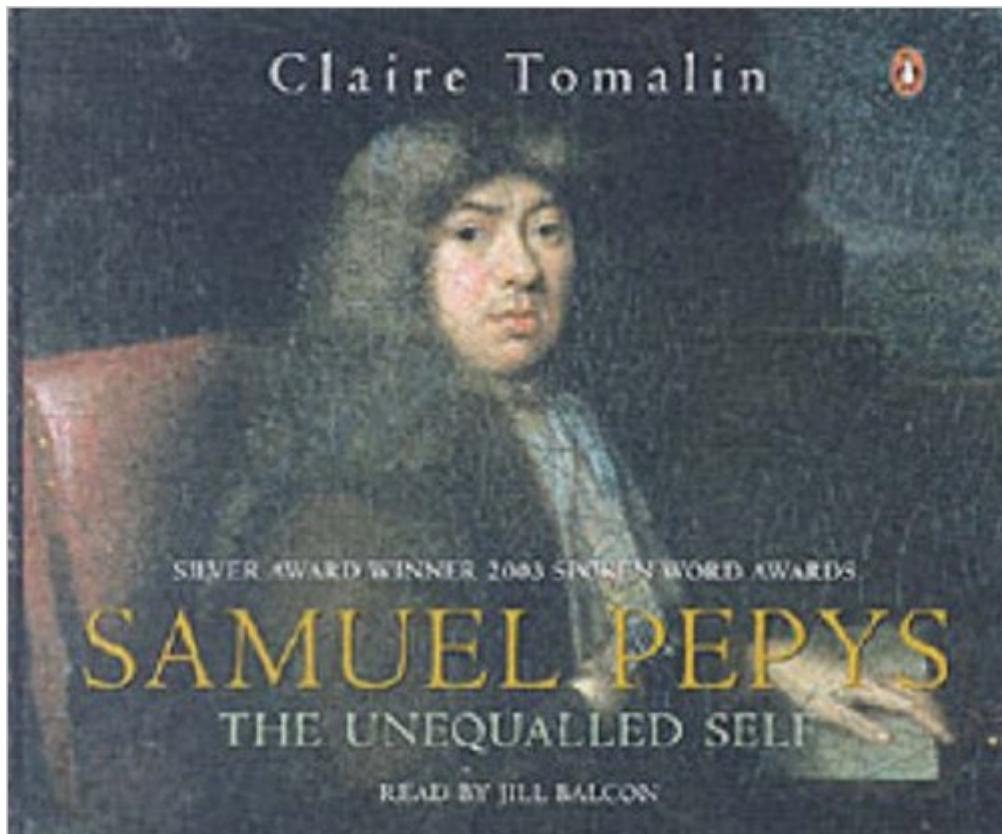


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Samuel Pepys (cd)



Synopsis

Samuel Pepys achieved fame as a naval administrator, a friend and colleague of the powerful and learned, a figure of substance. But for nearly ten years he kept a private diary in which he recorded, with unparalleled openness and sensitivity to the turbulent world around him, exactly what it was like to be a young man in Restoration London. This diary lies at the heart of Claire Tomalin's biography. Yet the use she makes of it - and of other hitherto unexamined material - is startlingly fresh and original. Within and beyond the narrative of Pepys's extraordinary career, she explores his inner life - his relations with women, his fears and ambitions, his political shifts, his agonies and his delights.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I buy a lot of books from [.com] and, because I am so busy reading them, I do not often review them. This biography of Samuel Pepys was just terrific, so I had to say something about it. I am a history buff and suppose anyone buying this book would have to be. Samuel Pepys, as it turns out, was a lot more than just a diarist. He was, in effect, what we would call Secretary of the Navy during the Restoration. Raised as a Puritan, he successfully made the switch to a Stuart supporter when The Restoration became inevitable after Oliver Cromwell died and his son just did not measure up to the job. We are taken into the world of an ambitious man clawing his way up to the top of the greasy pole. He knows how it is done--and how to make money from bribes (and convince yourself that you are not doing anything immoral at the same time). The way things were done in 17th century was a bit different than it is in the modern US--and perhaps a bit of the same. The most riveting bit about Pepys life was an operation he underwent in 1658 for the removal of a bladder

stone. It goes without saying that there was no anesthesia in those days. First they tied you down and then they cut and probed; there is an illustration of someone trussed up like a turkey with a probe inserted in--well, you have to see it. Great pain and death was a daily companion for those living before anesthesia--and I am not even going to talk about tooth pain. Death, moreover, was all around. Children died from all sorts of diseases that are easily curable now. Any sort of fever could end in death--and, of course, there was bubonic plague, which killed off about 1/6 of London's population in a single year. I found this book absolutely riveting.

I bought this book as a follow-up after listened to the audio recording of Pepys Diary narrated (performed!) by Kenneth Branagh to get a more in depth knowledge of the historical times, characters and political forces of the day. I am no avid historian but great history can approach great literature in stature (my bias). This very well researched and thoroughly documented account of the life of Samuel Pepys spans the years prior to, during and subsequent to the diary years. Although the most compelling period is the diary years, the times prior to that disclose his upbringing and particularly his health and it's lasting imprint on this amazing character - no doubt contributing to his life long ambitious drive and living for the moment. You will never consider a kidney stone in the same light after reading this account! As previous reviewers here have noted, the diary was written largely in code. That and heavy editing by nervous publishers over the years have kept the complete story from full disclosure for nearly 300 hundred years. Initially the bawdy stories kept my rapt attention, but this research reveals it is much more than that - a very multi-layered and multi-faceted story that for the history novice like me, puts a humanistic face on the 17th century. Significant points that Tomalin reveals include that this secret diary is one of the best historical accounts that covers London's Restoration period as the King had tight control over "the press". The diary documents firsthand accounts of the plague, the great fire, the return of the king to the thrown, the many wars at sea with the Dutch, the political struggling between the Royals and the Common Wealth, the intense distrust between protestants and catholics and religious persecution.

A good biographer must tread a fine line. She must enable us to get beneath the skin of her subject. We have to be made to feel that we really understand what makes the subject tick. On the other hand (if you don't mind me mixing my metaphors!) she must maintain a critical perspective. The biography should not degenerate into "hero worship". In "Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self" the biographer, Claire Tomalin, has managed to achieve this balance. Admittedly, as far as getting beneath her subject's skin, Ms. Tomalin has been helped by one of the most famous diaries of all

time- the one kept by Pepys from his late 20's until his late 30's. But I have seen other biographies of Pepys that relied too much on the diary- where the diary became a crutch that enabled the biographer merely to amuse us with its sometimes slapstick sexual content, rather than to thoughtfully present us with a well-rounded, flesh-and-blood human being. So, besides reporting on Pepys's crude and predatory amorous adventures, much of the book is devoted to Pepys's hard work over many years as a naval administrator. He devoted himself to modernizing the Navy by both the introduction of proper record keeping and by using the resultant statistical data to develop a more efficient procurement process. He also never stopped trying to get adequate funding so that more ships could be built. Pepys, who as a teenager witnessed the execution of Charles I and who was an admirer of Cromwell, was a great believer in meritocracy. However, Ms. Tomalin also shows us a Pepys who didn't fail to enrich himself by taking advantage of his position- he accepted numerous "gifts" from people who wanted government jobs or contracts. (The "gifts" weren't always in the form of money.

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