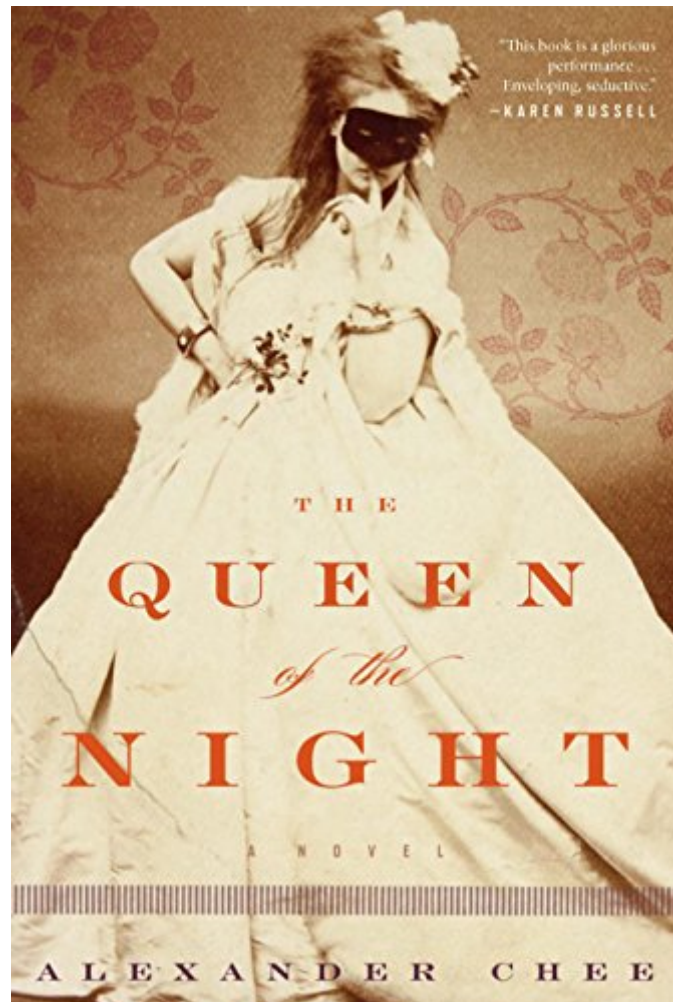


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The Queen Of The Night



Synopsis

National Bestseller • "This book is a glorious performance . . . Enveloping, seductive." Karen Russell
From a writer praised by Junot Díaz as "the fire, in my opinion, and the light," a mesmerizing novel that follows one woman's rise from circus rider to courtesan to world-renowned diva Lilliet Berne is a sensation of the Paris Opera, a legendary soprano with every accolade except an original role, every singer's chance at immortality. When one is finally offered to her, she realizes with alarm that the libretto is based on a hidden piece of her past. Only four could have betrayed her: one is dead, one loves her, one wants to own her. And one, she hopes, never thinks of her at all. As she mines her memories for clues, she recalls her life as an orphan who left the American frontier for Europe and was swept up into the glitzy, gritty world of Second Empire Paris. In order to survive, she transformed herself from hippodrome rider to courtesan, from empress's maid to debut singer, all the while weaving a complicated web of romance, obligation, and political intrigue. Featuring a cast of characters drawn from history, The Queen of the Night follows Lilliet as she moves ever closer to the truth behind the mysterious opera and the role that could secure her reputation -- or destroy her with the secrets it reveals.

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Customer Reviews

A Conversation with Alexander Chee Jami Attenberg talks to Alexander Chee about writing and researching *The Queen of the Night*.

Jami Attenberg is the author of a story collection, *Instant Love*, and four novels, *The Kept Man*, *The Melting Season*, *The Middlesteins*, and, most recently, *Saint Mazie*. She has contributed essays and criticism to the *New York Times*, *Real Simple*, *Elle*, the *Washington Post*, and many other publications. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

JA: I loved your narrator, the opera singer Lilliet Berne! She was so sexy and unstoppable and led such a dramatic and interesting life. Can you tell me a little bit about the path to originally discovering her and her voice? Was she inspired by anyone? AC: Thank you. The voice came early in the novel. I woke up one morning and she was in my head, saying “When the earth opens up under your feet, drop down, be like a seed.” The fortuneteller scene near the end. I got up, made coffee, wrote most of the pages that are now the novel’s end. She was inspired by two real singers and one real courtesan. The first was Jenny Lind, “The Swedish Nightingale,” who quit the stage in 1850 and went on a two-year farewell tour of the United States, promoted by P. T. Barnum. The second, Maria Malibran, a wildly talented and beautiful young soprano who died after a singing duel with a rival. The last, Celeste Varnard de Chabrilan, began as a courtesan and a hippodrome rider, before marrying her richest lover “who was then disinherited. She was ordered by the court to publish her memoirs to help pay off her debts, and then they were banned as obscene. She became a novelist and eventually lived in a house near Bizet’s in the countryside, and is said to be the inspiration for the character of Carmen. JA: I can’t help but wonder how deep you went with your research. Did you spend countless hours listening to opera? Everything is so ornate and picturesque in this book, the dresses, the rooms, the jewels. Tell us about uncovering those details. AC: I listened to operas while writing the novel and while researching it. Mostly, though, it all felt like one long strange trail through the woods. I started with a biography of Giuseppe Verdi, which led me to his wife Giuseppina’s beautiful letters, which led to their story, and so on. So it was a bit of “Find this opera, look at who wrote it, read about the composer, look at the original cast, discover any stories about the singers’ lives or the productions.” I needed the details

biographers and historians usually don't use except to refer to them in footnotes; and so I read into the footnotes, and used the bibliographies of the first texts I found, and then kept going. I also went to Paris several times and toured the novel's locations, sometimes taking video so as to refer to it later. Paris also has many amazing small museums devoted to all of these historical life details, almost as if they want people to come and write novels. One favorite trip was to Compiègne to see a show of the Empress Eugénie's clothes on mannequins throughout the palace. It felt like they did it just for me. JA: Your book is peppered with fictionalized versions of real-life people like the writers George Sand and Ivan Turgenev. When you write historical fiction, you have to figure out how to balance fiction and fact. Did you have any strategies for this? AC: I learned a lot just in trying to write about Sand and Turgenev. I tried initially to write them as characters in a way that was too careful. It went better once I began inventing first and fact-checking second. And so, after all that research, I finally understood the best way to get close to them was, while imagining them, to be a little disrespectful "to be too respectful to them would mean to miss portraying them believably. It wasn't just that you had to get the facts right" you had to bring them to life. This was also the best way for balancing the fact and fiction in the whole novel. JA: The Queen of the Night starts in small-town America and moves to New York City and then to various French locales. How important is setting in this book? AC: Very. The places of the novel, each of them essentially teaches her what she needs to be next, which I think is true for us all. She just takes it a lot further. I see the novel as one American woman's long adventure in Europe, reinventing herself on her way as she tries to find a place in this world that will feel more at home to her than the place she started out. JA: And finally, you wrote an utterly convincing novel from a female perspective. What did it take for you to get inside a woman's head? AC: That's a huge compliment coming from you. I don't know. I feel like she convinced me of who she was first. From the beginning, she felt so real and I was just learning who she was. I listened to her much the way I have with the women in my life. I was the son who listened to my mom's stories, the big brother my sister confided in, the gay best friend who listens to his girlfriends' woes. Lilliet was not so different from them. But with her I wrote it down and tried to figure it out.

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