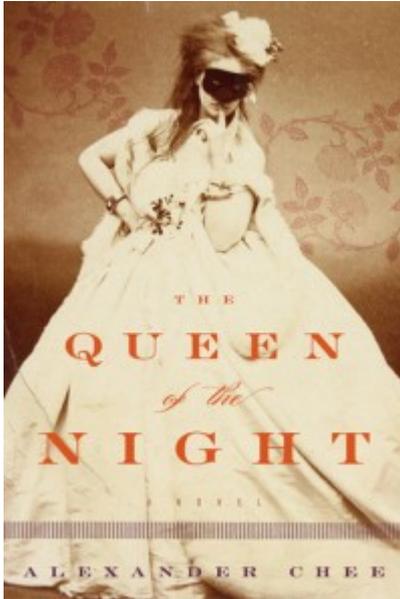


[The Queen of the Night by Alexander Chee](#)

written by Guest Contributor | February 17, 2016



The Queen of the Night by Alexander Chee

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576 pages – [HMH](#) / [Amazon](#)

Tragedy can crush, or tragedy can inspire – a simplistic duality, but one often proven painfully true. Ambition wears many faces, but ambition in the face of deep personal anguish takes on its own peculiar form. The artist channels her despair, her anger, her emptiness in the wake of disaster. Spurred on by the death of a parent, she doubles down in dedication to her art; in the wake of sexual trauma, she lets her silenced voice ring out in song, directing her fury and her suffering into something more. As if there were only two choices: Create, or rot.

For Lilliet Berne, heroine of Alexander Chee's sprawling magnificence of a novel *The Queen of the Night*, rot is not an option. All the better for readers, who are treated to a grand, impeccably researched rollercoaster of a picaresque stylistically harkening back to works from the century in which the book is set.

The year is 1882, and Lilliet Berne, La Générale, Paris's most beloved and desired performer, is attending a ball. There she is approached by Simonet, an author of some repute, and asked to originate a role in an operatic adaptation of his novel *Le Cirque du Monde Déchu* – roughly, "The Circus of a Fallen World." It follows the life of the Settler's Daughter, an anonymous performer "said to have been rescued from the savages and able to sing only a single song her mother taught her." The song had so moved Emperor Napoleon III during a circus performance that he gave her a small ruby brooch in the

shape of a rose, which Simonet had discovered in a hôtel he recently bought in the Marais. Certain that her life had thereafter shot off the rails, he invented a new life for her in his novel: "We follow her into a life of degradation as a *fille en carte*," or prostitute, "and her subsequent redemption through love."

For Lilliet, the coincidence is too much. She was the Settler's Daughter, who had indeed worked the Parisian streets as a prostitute for a period during a series of setbacks: the death of her family in a fever, the loss of her golden voice, multiple incarcerations in a foreign land, a stint as a mute servant in an abbey followed by one as a handmaiden of the Empress Eugénie, service as a courtesan owned first by a high-end brothel and then an abusive and infatuated tenor, acting as an agent of gentlewoman spy and Imperial paramour la Comtesse de Castiglione, surviving starvation and weathering war, the violent loss of her first love, and on, and on.

This parade of servitude and weighty circumstance might have ground Lilliet to powder fine enough to be used on the Comtesse's flawless cheeks. Instead, she channeled her ambition to become France's most famous falcon soprano since Cornélie Falcon originated the term, cloaked in the splendor of the Belle Époque and its finery – the importance of clothing in this novel is outweighed only by Chee's facility for describing it – whose favors men would risk anything to secure.

And only four people from her past knew how. One is dead, one loves her, one wants to own her at any cost, and one she hopes never thinks of her at all. The question is, who talked? Chee unfolds the answer slowly and carefully, in a looping sequence of thrilling episodes told with immense detail in the charming, whip-smart voice of Lilliet, a narrator whose self-effacement and vanity walk hand in hand in compelling hand.

Which is not to say the novel is perfect. The sheer number of coincidences and lucky breaks packed into these 550-plus pages of Lilliet's adventures – lucky breaks following, of course, a seemingly endless course of tragedies – is hard to ignore. (How, exactly, does one enjoy the favor of both Giuseppe Verdi *and* la Comtesse de Castiglione in a single lifetime?) Likewise, Lilliet herself occasionally seems something of a cipher. The roles she plays, both operatic and interpersonal, are clear, but the self buried beneath them can be hard to divine. And yet this latter choice rings true. What kind of person, in the face of such trauma, would reveal herself fully to the world that wounded her? What other response, but to perform? And where better to perform than Belle Époque Paris?

In writing a novel about opera, Chee has almost crafted an opera himself. As such, the string of dramatic chances also feels right. Much has been said about this book's inspirations, from the life of the Swedish soprano Jenny Lind to the plot of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. These inspirations are folded neatly within the plot and unfold as they should, as larger-than-life dramas floating on a sea of details.

The deep irony of the life of a performer seems rooted not only in its brevity, but in its reliance on the lives of fellow artists to create the

roles they fill. Opera buffs surely know of Jenny Lind, but few others are likely to. Yet who could forget Mozart's name, or Verdi's? Likewise Lilliet Berne, who took her name after a landowner took her virginity – her “honor,” as it was once called – from the inscription on a tombstone behind his property. Even when she was infamous throughout Paris, only one of her many masks was named and known, and her legitimacy was only acknowledged after the impositions and interventions of men, or royalty. The performer, the woman, and the poor, all shunted to the side.

Here, after more than a decade of the long and lonely work of writing, Chee does not allow this, and his audience is all the luckier for it. *The Queen of the Night* unleashes the kind of thrill found only when you hear the voiceless sing.



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