



# THE GIRL WHO LOVED CAMELLIAS

THE LIFE AND LEGEND  
OF  
MARIE DUPLESSIS

18 July 2013

£19.99

Hardback

Knopf

9780307270795



The little known, riveting story of the most famous and adored courtesan of 1840s Paris: muse and mistress of Alexandre Dumas fils and Franz Liszt, the inspiration for Dumas's novel and play *The Lady of the Camellias*, Verdi's opera *la Traviata*, the film *Camille* and ballet *Marguerite and Armand*. Sarah Bernhardt, Greta Garbo, Maria Callas, Margot Fonteyn, Isabelle Huppert, Isabelle Adjani and Nicole Kidman are just a few of the celebrated actors, singers and dancers who have portrayed versions of her story.

Born in 1824 in Normandy, Marie Duplessis fled her brutal father, who had forced her to live with a seventy year old man and groomed her for a life of vice. Julie Kavanagh traces Marie's reinvention in Paris at fourteen: as shop girl, kept woman, and finally, as grand courtesan with the clothes, apartment, coach and horses of an aristocrat. Tall and slender with an air of modesty and grace, she fascinated men and women alike. Kavanagh brings her to life against a brilliantly evoked background of First Empire Paris: the theatres, boulevard restaurants and cafés, where she sat with the era's most famous writers, directors and dandies. Marie, only nineteen, wearing a corsage of her signature white camellias, was at the centre of it all. Four years later, she had died of consumption. Charles Dickens, who was in Paris at the time, could hardly believe the response. "For several days," he wrote to a friend, "All questions political, artistic, commercial have been abandoned by the papers. Everything is erased in the face of an incident which is far more important, the romantic death of one of the glories of the demi-monde, the beautiful, the famous Marie Duplessis."

**Julie Kavanagh** is the award-winning author of *Secret Muses: The Life of Frederck Ashton* and *Nureyev*, the definitive biography of the celebrated Russian dancer. She was trained as a dancer at the Royal Ballet School before taking up a career in journalism and has been arts editor of *Harpers & Queen*, dance critic for *The Spectator*, and London editor of both *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker*. She is currently a writer and contributing editor of *The Economist's* cultural, lifestyle, and travel magazine *Intelligent Life*.

Julie Kavanagh has written the introduction to a new translation (by Liesl Schillinger) of Dumas fils' *The Lady of the Camellias* (Penguin Classics, £9.99, out August 2013). Contact [etty.eastwood@uk.penguin.com](mailto:etty.eastwood@uk.penguin.com) for more information on this translation.

“ Thanks to a talented author, this tragedy is a pleasure to read...A thoroughly researched and fascinating account of Duplessis's short life and lengthy legacy. ”  
— *Publishers Weekly*

“ Now Duplessis is a muse once again, this time for an adept biographer who elegantly preserves her indelible true story. ”  
— *Donna Seaman, Booklist*

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