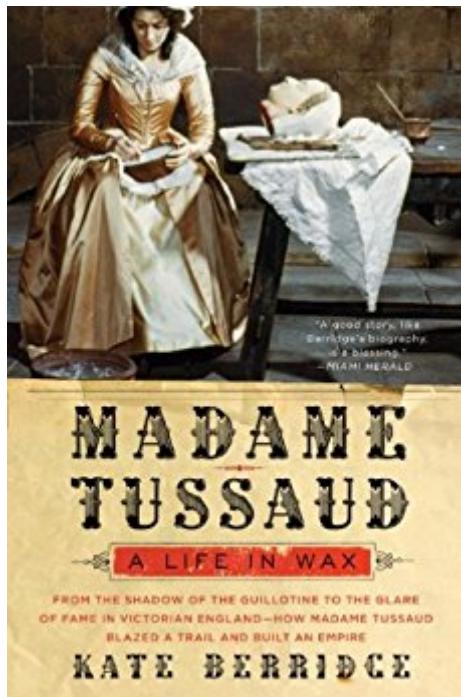


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Madame Tussaud: A Life In Wax



Synopsis

Millions have visited the museums that bear her name, yet few know much about Madame Tussaud. A celebrated artist, she had both a ringside seat at and a cameo role in the French Revolution. A victim and survivor of one of the most tumultuous times in history, this intelligent, pragmatic businesswoman has also had an indelible impact on contemporary culture, planting the seed of our obsession with celebrity. In Madame Tussaud, Kate Berridge tells this fascinating woman's complete story for the first time, drawing upon a wealth of sources, including Tussaud's memoirs and historical archives. It is a grand-scale success story, revealing how with sheer graft and grit a woman born in 1761 to an eighteen-year-old cook overcame extraordinary reversals of fortune to build the first and most enduring worldwide brand identified simply by reference to its founder's name: Madame Tussaud's.

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Customer Reviews

In the London Underground system, at different spots a helpful recording will tell riders that they have reached a stop for some particular tourist destination. There is only one commercial attraction

mentioned in this way. Whey you arrive at the Baker Street station, the speaker suggests: "Alight here for Madame Tussaud's". And people do, millions of them, and they have been visiting Madame's collection since it has been there in 1884, with plenty having seen her traveling exhibit in different British cities before that, and even that was only after she had been exhibiting in Paris. There are Tussaud branches now in Amsterdam, New York, Las Vegas, and Hong Kong, and Shanghai has just opened. Kate Berridge in the fine, comprehensive biography *Madame Tussaud: A Life in Wax* (William Morrow), introduces her work with a charming vision: "This is a story about a queue which started in Paris in around 1770 and still snakes around cities all over the world." Madame Tussaud would not be surprised at her continuing success; she was a supremely canny businesswoman, to say nothing of artist in wax. She was born Marie Grosholtz in 1761, and her mother became the housekeeper of Philippe Curtius, a Swiss medic who made wax anatomical models. He recognized that Marie had prodigious talents for wax modeling, and she became his apprentice, starting with modeling fruit and flowers and eventually including the secret formulas for the skin tones that were Curtius's signature skill. Curtius opened his waxworks exhibit in Paris, capitalizing on royal glamour and adding to this revolutionary gore, themes that are still prominent in the current halls. After Curtius died, leaving Marie all the waxworks, she married a failed and feckless engineer.

The record of Madame Tussaud's early years in France, other than the dubious one of her own hand, is scant to non-existent. In this absence, the author documents what is known with an analysis of popular "entertainments" of the time and the role of the Curtius waxworks in it. The theme of popular culture carries through to Madame Tussaud's time in England, although at this time there would have been more biographical record to draw upon. In short, while in part a biography, this book is more the story of Madame Tussaud's role in the development of popular culture. This book was enlightening for me. In the US we think of PT Barnum as THE pioneer in marketing popular entertainment. Berridge demonstrates, without making the direct analogy, that this marketing phenomenon was happening on both sides of the Atlantic. Both Barnum and Tussaud latched on to an idea who's time had come. Berridge contrasts how Madame Tussaud's "edu-tainment" provided accessibility in contrast to public institutions of the time such as the British Musuem. Interesting here are the stories of Barnum (who would like to buy her out but does not succeed) and Dickens (who has discovered his own niche in popular culture). Unlike these two men, Madame Tussaud bears extra burdens. Despite being, essentially, a single mother, she prevails against the sexism of the time, an exploitive partner and a ne'er do well husband. Madame

Tussaud learned her craft and entrepreneurship from her mother's employer, Curtius, who may have been her father. In the 8 years that she would have us believe she was living at Versailles as a tutor to a French princess, what was she actually doing? Is there a reason, besides her marketing needs, that she wants to refashion these years?

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