

## Sorrows of the French Revolution

*The Dark Tower*. Sharon Stewart. Scholastic Canada, 1998. 232 pp. \$4.99 paper. ISBN 0-590-12438-2.

According to the publisher's information sheet this book is aimed at readers aged from ten to fourteen. An older readership would also be appropriate.

For six years, beginning in June of 1789, the Princess Royal of France, Marie Thérèse Charlotte (familiarily called Mousseline) narrates what she is able to understand of the momentous events taking place around her. Stewart is convincing in putting the reader into the mind of a privileged, wilful girl who is eleven at the beginning of her story and seventeen at the end. For younger readers, however, difficulties might arise from the horrendous experiences detailed in the girl's first-person tale.

Taking as inspiration the sketchy diary left by the historic Marie Thérèse, Stewart has embroidered a series of intimate tableaux, dated as to month and year, whose dominant theme is tragedy. A little too persistently throughout the six years, the young heroine identifies each of her life's "Sorrows" (always pathetically capitalized). She describes her rebellion at the rigours of court etiquette, her wonder at the people's hunger and suffering, her bewilderment at widespread popular hatred, her self-righteous apology for the good intentions of her papa, King Louis XVI, her fear of revolutionary threats to absolute royal authority and prerogative, her repulsion at physical seizure and imprisonment. Finally, the reader will be able to evoke the gruesome images, as Mousseline does, of the final, successive, incomprehensible horrors as the guillotine beheads her father, her mother, her aunt, and as the appalling cruelty of the New Regime's jailers slowly and inhumanely kills her younger brother, heir to the throne. The five years take the maturing Mousseline through the frightful solitude of lonely captivity to the relative deliverance of exile and an arranged marriage. As the girl herself testifies, it's the stuff of a young girl's most terrifying nightmares.

The book is good history, though. The reader will get a good feel for the daily life and manners of the French royal court, its dress, its activities and its assumptions. Stewart cleverly imbues her characters with vital personalities, creating a high degree of human interest at the emotional level of her young heroine. And she gives her historical canvas some breadth by contriving a series of letters from anti-monarchists out in the provinces. Above all, the author expressly provides a poignant history lesson: that violent revolution is not a sensible or kindly way to reform governmental structures.

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