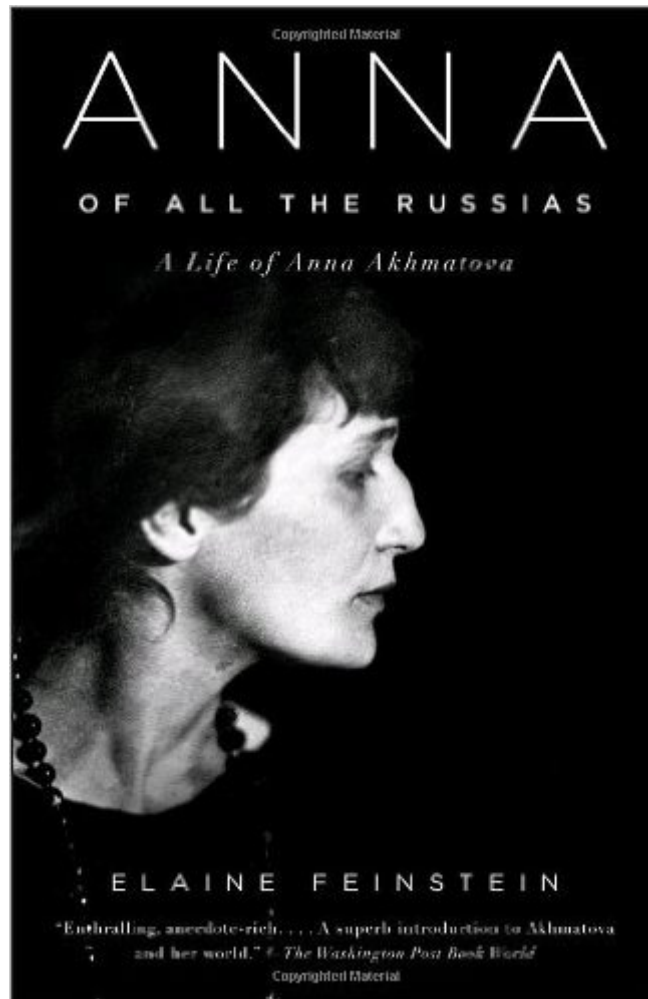


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Anna Of All The Russias: A Life Of Anna Akhmatova



Synopsis

In this definitive biography of the legendary Russian poet, Elaine Feinstein draws on a wealth of newly available material “including memoirs, letters, journals, and interviews with surviving friends and family” to produce a revelatory portrait of both the artist and the woman. Anna Akhmatova rose to fame in the years before World War I, but she would pay a heavy price for the political and personal passions that informed her brilliant poetry. In *Anna of All the Russias* we see Akhmatova’s work banned from 1925 until 1940 and again after World War II. We see her steadfast opposition to Stalin, even while her son was held in the Gulag. We see her abiding loyalty to such friends as Mandelstam, Shostakovich, and Pasternak as they faced Stalinist oppression. And we see how, through everything, Akhmatova continued to write, her poetry giving voice to the Russian people by whom she was, and still is, deeply loved.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Elaine Feinstein’s engrossing biography of Anna Akhmatova - one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century - makes the woman, her work and her world vividly alive. In chronicling this extraordinarily dramatic life, Feinstein makes use of a broad range of new material, including letters, journals and memoirs, and interviews Akhmatova’s surviving friends and relatives. Feinstein follows Akhmatova from her privileged Russian youth to her free-spirited early adulthood and her first, unhappy marriage to the poet Nikolay Gumilyov. The 1920s were years of starvation in Russia, but for Akhmatova they were also a period of great creativity and many love affairs, some painful, others

more fulfilling. In a key encounter, Akhmatova met and fell in love with a married art historian, Vladimir Punin, and lived with him in his apartment, where his unhappy wife and young daughter had to remain. During this time, Akhmatova's son, Lev, from her first marriage, suddenly re-entered her life. Feinstein gives a heartbreaking account of her relationship with Lev, who was exiled in Siberia for many years. (Despite Akhmatova's many pleas to the Soviet authorities on his behalf, Lev was not rehabilitated until 1956.) Akhmatova's works were banned in the Soviet Union from 1925 to 1940, but despite ill health and further turmoil, her inner toughness enabled her to continue to write poetry of genius. She remained in Leningrad when the Nazis invaded and then was airlifted out to Tashkent, where she spent the war years. This immensely readable and profoundly touching study shows how, despite her many hardships, Akhmatova was prepared to give her unstinting support to friends such as Mandelstam, Pasternak and Shostakovich who were victimised by the Stalin regime.

I thoroughly enjoyed this biography of Anna Akhmatova although I think it was more effective at conveying the dramatic decades and events of Russian history that she was swept up in than in revealing the character of the poet herself. Despite that, I learned more about Akhmatova than I had previously known, and her poems have greater resonance for me after reading about her grueling struggles against censorship, Stalinist terror, famine and war. I read Anna Akhmatova (Everyman's Library Pocket Poets), in which her poems are organized chronologically, alongside Feinstein's biography. Reading these two together really enhanced my appreciation of her poems. It also sent me on a lovely tangent looking up info about the challenges of translating poetry - an incredible art in itself! In many cases, I found Feinstein's translations of Akhmatova's poems more dazzling than those of D.M. Thomas's in the Everyman's edition. In the end though, Akhmatova remains rather mysterious as an individual. It's hard to understand her motivations toward her work and in her friendships and many love affairs. This may be due to the necessary caution about personal expression dictated by the repressive society she lived in, where a "politically incorrect" comment or letter could get you exiled or even executed. (Her first husband and her great colleague, Osip Mandelstam, were executed; her son spent years in the gulag.) In such a paranoid atmosphere, she didn't dare keep detailed diaries and she frequently burned things she had written or correspondence others had sent to her, leaving less of a record for us to study.

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