JOAN
THE MYSTERIOUS LIFE OF THE HERETIC WHO BECAME A SAINT
DONALD SPOTO
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Book Discussion Questions

Joan: the Mysterious Life of the Heretic Who Became a Saint
By Donald Spoto
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1.) Joan of Arc, as noted by the author, has been memorialized in hundreds of plays, operas, and
other forms of literature. What makes Joan such a fascinating subject?

2.) The author comments on who Joan of Arc was not; she was “neither wife nor nun, neither
queen nor noblewoman, neither philosopher nor stateswoman” (xviii). Discuss who Joan of Arc
was. What roles did she play during her life, and what roles does she fill now after her death?

3.) The author stated that he saw a need for “an unbiased consideration of up-to-the-minute
textual evidence” (xv). Was this book an unbiased account of Joan of Arc’s life? What tone does
the author employ?

4.) In response to those who would say spiritual visions and voices such as Joan claimed do not
happen, the author questioned, “To whom do they not happen?” (24). Discuss why others may
not have received the guidance Joan claimed and why this guidance did come to Joan.

5.) Charles VII allowed Joan to become embroiled in the Hundred Years War, told the people to
honor her deeds after the battle at Orléans, and followed her advice to proceed to Reims for his
coronation and anointing as king. He then subsequently distanced himself from her and did
nothing to prevent her death, yet later worked to have the judgment against Joan reversed. What
were his motivations for these seemingly contradictory actions?

6.) Discuss the political setting during which Joan’s trial was conducted. How did the political
atmosphere affect the outcome of the trial?

7.) “Joan’s goal of saving France was, she claimed, God’s own will…If her spiritual experience
may be trusted as valid, then she was right in her assertion that France was a sacred nation that
had to be saved.” (96). Why would God want to save France from English control?

8.) Did the fact that Joan was a woman help or hinder her in her attempt to save France and in
her subsequent captivity and trial?

9.) The author mentions many illegalities committed during Joan’s trial. Why were so many
regulations broken in order to condemn her? Were any of these measures especially harsh?

10.) The author quotes Jean Riquier’s assessment of those involved in Joan’s trial: “Everyone
was either forced to please the English or did so voluntarily” (129). Besides those who coerced
into compliance, there were also those who did speak in favor of Joan or against the proceedings
and then fled to preserve their own lives. Could they have done something more to save Joan?
Could anyone have saved her?
Interview with: Donald Spoto - Biographer/Historian

By The Writers Store

Biographer and historian Donald Spoto believes the goal of the biographer is first and foremost to tell the truth.

'Our purpose,' he said, 'is to set the record straight, celebrate lives, and set forth certain aspects of history and human behavior that is good for people to read about.'

After 19 thoroughly researched books, he's earned the right to say, 'The biographer is obliged to tell the truth--even at the risk of saying something good about someone. I know it's not popular today, for we are part of a culture of gossip and innuendo, and professionalism in writing has taken a back seat.'

Professionalism has never been a stranger in Spoto's life. Following a 12-year stint as a university professor, Spoto decided to pour out his passion for the films of Alfred Hitchcock into a book, and came up with The Art of Alfred Hitchcock, now considered a classic in the genre of film analysis. Hitchcock supported Spoto's premier effort, and when Hitchcock died in 1980, it was logical for Spoto to undertake the biography, which is still in print in more than 20 languages after the passing of 17 years.

Since the late 1970s, it's been an interesting ride for the academician who brings his scholarship, tenacity, and dedication to each book project which, to date, have included such subjects as Marlene Dietrich, Tennessee Williams, Ingrid Bergman, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis and many other stellar personalities.

Spoto believes that the biographer's first writing tool is serious research, with a deep respect for the truth, a skill he learned pursuing his Ph.D. degree. And, the first stop for any dedicated researcher is a library, he said, where you can touch and feel the books. 'There is no substitution for the library,' he added. 'I have never found online research particularly helpful; it might be for students, but in my experience there is nothing more beneficial than having the full text in front of you, and you can only get that in a library. Online resources are often inaccurate.'

Talking with associates and friends of the subject and in-person interviews, if possible, are also critical to understand your subject. 'Good biographers understand the necessity to give a human context to the mere facts of a person's life. It's not enough to say 'she went there or made this movie or traveled here and there.' Rather, the biographer must ferret out the motifs, the themes of
a life. 'A good historian doesn't impose his own ideas from the beginning, certainly I never do. As I go along in my interviews, travel, archival studies, the life of my subject emerges. It is a constant series of astonishments and surprises. If there are no surprises, then you're not doing the research.'

'It is, therefore, almost impossible to be objective, and perhaps it may not even be desirable. What is important is to have an understanding of a human life, the patterns of meaning of the life lived according to a certain value system, theirs.'

Spoto explained, 'We live our lives, you and I, by interaction of what happens to us and the inner workings of our reactions, stirrings, and motivations. These are so much more useful to understanding a character than just the bare facts. If you just want the facts you can get those in any almanac or encyclopedia.

'The biographer/historian tries to understand his subject and make that understanding interesting to the reader. Even knowing the subject in the flesh is no guarantee that we would really appreciate them. Although there are many other ways of knowing and understanding people, there is, after all, only one who fully understands us, and that is God himself.'

And, what about a biography of Spoto? 'Oh, no, I can't imagine anyone interested in the life of a writer. We sit in a room alone all day with little bits of paper and try to make sense of them.'

We think Spoto too modest. He has made marvelous sense of many lives, fascinated thousands of readers, and this fall, will enchant television viewers when one of his subjects comes to US households by way of a mini series.

These days Spoto is taking on even more responsibilities as executive producer for a CBS mini series on Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, starring Joanne Whalley, Tim Matheson, and Tom Skerritt due for the November schedule. The project is currently filming in Long Island, New York City, Washington, D.C. and Montreal and is expected to be completed by September.

'Being an executive producer is just another aspect of the creative process,' he commented. 'I'm still writing, helping to edit scenes, give input to the creative adaptations. Filmmaking is a wonderful collaborative process and I enjoy it very much.'

The filmmaking is a new surprise in a career that began as Fordham graduate, then as a professor, then evolved to writing biographies, and now, translating his stories for the screen.

Although he has not given up the biography genre, he believes that the general public is no longer interested in serious work. 'I view this as an extremely difficult and depressing time for the biographer/ historian. I think things will get worse before, or if, they get better.'

Fortunately, Spoto need not wait for the tide to change. He has several other film projects planned, one is a mini series about the ancient world, and the other a proposed mini series, again for CBS, on the life of Ingrid Bergman, a subject whom Spoto knew personally for the last seven years of her life and the topic of one of his best-selling books, 'Notorious.'
As for plans after the television series, Spoto revealed, 'I have no five-year plan, but am happy to go where the future takes me. It's been wonderfully serendipitous so far.'

Since 1987, Donald Spoto has been an enthusiastic customer of The Writers Store, and eager to embrace the computer technology, from software to modems to CD-ROMs. For his books, he works with Microsoft Word 97 for Windows 98. 'I can't say enough good things about Gabriele, Dan, and Jesse; they're a constant source of help and support, give terrific service. They truly understand the writer's job and his needs.'

Donald Spoto is the author of nineteen books, among them the recently published Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis: A Life, from which the television series is based. This year sees the paperback publication of Rebel: The Life of James Dean and Blue Angel: The Life of Marlene Dietrich (his second book on the actress, the first was Falling in Love Again.)


He has written of royalty with Decline and Fall of The House of Windsor and Diana: The Last Year, and of singer/actress Lotte Lenya, playwright Tennessee Williams and film stars Elizabeth Taylor, Lawrence Olivier, and Marilyn Monroe.


Spoto earned his Ph.D. degree in New Testament studies from Fordham University, and has written an innovative biography, The Hidden Jesus: A New Life, that reflects both his academic training and experience as a dedicated researcher, historian, and writer of lives of fascinating men and women.
Book Review

Joan: The Mysterious Life of the Heretic Who Became a Saint
by Donald Spoto

Donald Spoto is a theologian by training and a biographer of celebrities by profession. He gets to exercise both skills in this slim volume, and the result is a lucid and highly readable book that covers familiar ground. Early on, he cautions readers that "many have tried to romanticize or to politicize Joan of Arc". This is certainly true: she has been portrayed as a proto-feminist, a proto-Marxist, a proto-Protestant and more by various folks with an axe to grind.

Spoto himself is far from unbiased however, and this book is in no sense objective. Rejecting any psychological explanation of the voices Joan heard, he insists that they must in fact have come from God. Joan was a saint, pure and simple; any other explanation he takes as an insult to her memory.

It is of course impossible to know. Nobody can say that Joan's voices weren't real (or to use Spoto's preferred terminology, that they weren't "valid"). It is after all impossible to prove a negative. Why, though, is it preferable to reject a perfectly adequate and rational explanation for the actions of an historical personage in favor of a supernatural explanation? Spoto never really answers this. Instead, he takes offense at the mere suggestion. If Joan in fact had had the occasional auditory hallucination, he insists, it would mean she was deranged, incapacitated by mental illness, and therefore unable to do the things the historical record shows she did. No, it MUST have been the voice of God she heard. Anything other explanation "reduc[es] her marvelous experiences to meaninglessness."

Spoto labors mightily to fit Joan into the mold of the conventional saint. Astonishingly, he claims that she "utterly refus[ed] to seek the limelight". Quoi?! From the time of her first trip to Valcoulleurs, she did nothing in her short life BUT seek the limelight. And good for her, too. How else but by seeking the limelight would she have accomplished anything? Judging from the evidence, this was a young woman who enjoyed hobnobbing with the aristocracy. At the time of her capture, she was wearing a cloak made from cloth of gold. Spoto, however, portrays her as always the simple peasant girl, modest, asking nothing for herself, taking, in effect, a vow of poverty. Because that's how saints behave, dammit. Spoto wants nothing to do with the enigmatic, contradictory (and to me) fascinating Joan. Instead he reduces her to the familiar religious cliche.

The other half of his argument is that Joan was ahead of her time in believing that nations and peoples should exist within safe and secure borders, free of outside intervention. Thus the "English" invasion of "France" was immoral. In this analysis, God and Joan team up to form a kind of prototype United Nations. Coming despite Spoto's repeated claims to historical accuracy and awareness of late-medieval mindset, this argument is patently absurd. As Spoto himself points out, the idea of French nationhood was at best fuzzy at the time; Joan herself was not
"French", she was from Lorraine. The war was not a simple English invasion of France, it was a power struggle between the Duke of Burgundy and his English allies against the house of Valois. To assert as Spoto does that "the existence of France itself was threatened" is simply absurd. Why God (or Joan for that matter) should care which Roman Catholic prince ruled over what piece of territory on either side of the Channel, is a mystery. Equally mysterious is why God couldn't have come up with a better plan. Because Joan did not in fact succeed in driving the English out of France, and her life came to a particularly nasty premature end. If this was God's plan, as Spoto argues, then He made a sad botch of things.
Author Biography

Donald Spoto

A prolific and respected biographer and theologian, Donald Spoto is the author of twenty published books, among them bestselling biographies of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, Alfred Hitchcock, Tennessee Williams, and Ingrid Bergman. His books have been translated into more than twenty languages. Donald Spoto earned his Ph.D. in theology at Fordham University. After years as a theology professor, he turned to fulltime writing. *The Hidden Jesus: A New Life*, published in 1999, was hailed by the *Los Angeles Times* as "offering a mature faith fit for the new millennium." His successful biography of Saint Francis was published in 2002. Spoto lectures worldwide on important topics such as theology, the arts, and social issues.