

Opening: Good Morning! You're listening to Reading Between the Lines, brought to you by the Friends of the Homer Public Library. I'm Dana Stabenow, and I'm looking for a few good books. For you.

Every single one of the extant sources who wrote about Cleopatra's life had an agenda, specifically to demonize Cleopatra and make hers a name to live in infamy. Author Stacy Schiff writes ...her story is constructed as much of male fear as fantasy," and the Roman men of that time had much to fear. Take the status of women in Cleopatra's Alexandria. Schiff writes

[Alexandrian women] inherited equally and held property independently. Married women did not submit to their husbands' control. They enjoyed the right to divorce and to be supported after a divorce. Until the time an ex-wife's dowry was returned, she was entitled to be lodged in the house of her choice. Her property remained hers, it was not to be squandered by a wastrel husband. The law sided with the wife and children if a husband acted against their interests...They loaned money

and operated barges. They served as priests in the native temples. The initiated lawsuits and hired flute players. As wives, widows, or divorcees, they owned vineyards, wineries, papyrus marshes, ships, perfume businesses, milling equipment, slaves, homes, camels. As much as one third of Ptolemaic Egypt may have been in female hands.

Considering that Schiff is writing about Egypt circa 55 BC that's a bit of an eye-opener. Intelligent and extensively educated, Cleopatra spoke seven languages, and was the only Ptolemy ever to learn Egyptian, the native tongue of most of her subjects. She was smart enough to embrace the role of Isis in all public ceremonies and annual celebrations, too, becoming not only queen but goddess. This made her so popular that in the twenty-two years she reigned, she never faced a rebellion, the only Ptolemy of whom that can be said.

This is a terrific discussion book, partly because there is nothing to tell us how Cleopatra really thought and felt. Everything has to be inferred by her actions, and most of those were reported by men

influenced by Octavian, later Caesar Augustus, who, thank goodness, with his defeat of Cleopatra restored "the natural order of things: men ruled women, and Rome ruled the world." Not to mention which, the treasure Octavian looted from Egypt paid his way to power in Rome.

One of the fun things about a book like this is indulging in "what if." When everyone and his brother was deserting Antony (deservedly so, what a wretched general, this was a guy who had only one good battle in him), what if Cleopatra had deserted, too, what if she had reached out to Octavian? She was in Rome on the Ides of March when Caesar was assassinated in the Forum, she was there when his will was read. He left Antony nothing. He chose Octavian as his heir. Caesar obviously knew both men well, and wrote his will accordingly. What if Cleopatra had taken her cue from him?

One last note: I wanted to give a shout-out to the cover art. It's rich in color and almost tactile, opalescent even, reminiscent of Cleopatra's lush life in Alexandria, but what I love most is that her

face is turned away from us, her features obscured in shadow. We can never truly know her.

Closing: Cleopatra by Stacy Schiff and many, many more biographies of Cleopatra to be found on the shelves of our very own Homer Public Library or through InterLibrary Loan. Library hours are 10am to 6pm Monday, Wednesday, Friday and Saturday, and 10am to 8pm Tuesday and Thursday. That's me in line in front of you.

Tune in next Sunday morning at this same time for "Reading Between the Lines" right here on KBBI, 890 AM.