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The Allure Of The Archives (The Lewis Walpole Series In Eighteenth-Century Culture And History)



Synopsis

Arlette Fargeâ™s *Le Goût de l'archive* is widely regarded as a historiographical classic. While combing through two-hundred-year-old judicial records from the Archives of the Bastille, historian Farge was struck by the extraordinarily intimate portrayal they provided of the lives of the poor in pre-Revolutionary France, especially women. She was seduced by the sensuality of old manuscripts and by the revelatory power of voices otherwise lost. In *The Allure of the Archives*, she conveys the exhilaration of uncovering hidden secrets and the thrill of venturing into new dimensions of the past. Originally published in 1989, Fargeâ™s classic work communicates the tactile, interpretive, and emotional experience of archival research while sharing astonishing details about life under the Old Regime in France. At once a practical guide to research methodology and an elegant literary reflection on the challenges of writing history, this uniquely rich volume demonstrates how surrendering to the archiveâ™s allure can forever change how we understand the past.

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Customer Reviews

First published in French in 1989, this book is now available to English readers thanks to translator

Thomas Scott-Railton, who appears to have produced a very fine rendering of the original work. As the "Forward" by Natalie Zemon Davis explains, author Arlette Farge is a social historian who has focused on eighteenth-century France. But this book of hers is not another historical monograph. It is, instead, a book about the experience, value, and proper uses of archival research. In other words, in *The Allure of the Archives*, Farge does not practice her craft so much as she elegantly describes and reflects on it. The author's approach is to toggle back and forth between descriptive, analytical chapters and brief, autobiographical sections--which tend to reveal how petty and annoying some people in the archives can be, and how one easily distinguishes between veterans and rookies. Along the way, Farge puts in a good word for the necessary task of transcribing old, handwritten documents. Though tedious, she insists that there is something essential and rewarding about such work (15-17). In a section titled "Her Presence," she notes that if traditional histories often omit women, the archives never do: "In every popular expression of emotion, in groups large and small, women were on the scene and dove in headfirst into the action" (39). Farge is convinced that the prime way of getting at social history is to focus on conflict: "Why not choose to take a deliberately provocative position on this, and assert that society's character manifests itself through antagonisms and conflicts? It is more important to say this than ever, because today there is a tendency to doubt the centrality of conflict" (43).

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