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Cleopatra: the Myth, the Reality; Author Stacy Schiff visits

October 6th, 2011 | By Jennifer Kaufman
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Stacy Schiff, author of "Cleopatra: A Life"

Cleopatra is a figure shrouded in mystery. Mention her name and people might think of the Elizabeth Taylor movie. Perhaps they think Cleopatra as a temptress who had affairs with powerful men like Mark Antony and Julius Caesar. But according to Stacy Schiff, the author of *Cleopatra: A Life*, Cleopatra was much more than a movie role or a cunning seductress.

Schiff spoke at the Central Library on Tuesday, Oct. 4. The event was sponsored by Friends of the Milwaukee Public Library and Boswell Books. Schiff provided the rapt Milwaukee audience with provocative insight on Cleopatra's life and influence.

"What a great coup for Milwaukee," said audience member Nancy O'Donnell. "We get both Stacy Schiff and Cleopatra."

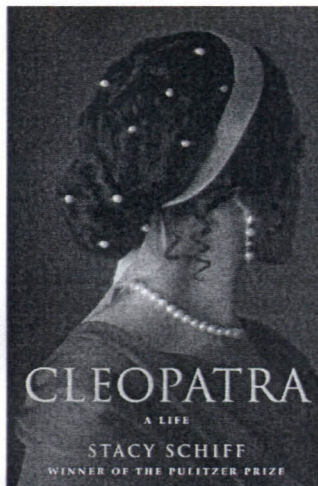
After a brief introduction by Milwaukee Public Museum President and CEO, Jay Williams, Ms. Schiff took the stage. Before her talk began, she treated us to a one-minute video where people on the street were asked about their impressions of Cleopatra. Not surprisingly, Elizabeth

Taylor came up in responses. Cleopatra was called powerful, beautiful, misinterpreted and a seductress. One person mentioned rhinoplasty, and another thought Cleopatra was around in medieval times, both of which got chuckles from the audience.

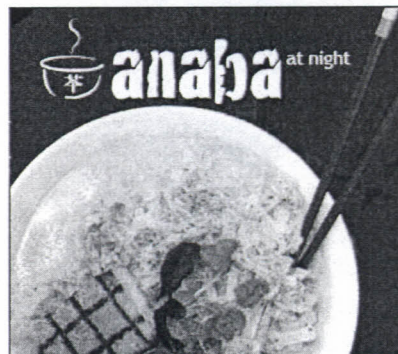
"Biography is revenge on the bigger people by the little people," said Schiff. "And you don't bigger than Cleopatra."

Schiff wrote biographies on other notable figures such as Benjamin Franklin, but said writing about the Egyptian queen was a daunting task because of the difficulty finding information about her. When writing about other subjects, Schiff was able to find mundane information like bathing habits and shopping lists, but Cleopatra lived in pre-factual time. The geography, religion, calendar and language of her time have all changed. Schiff traveled to Alexandria, Egypt for two weeks to conduct research about Cleopatra, examining texts and classical sources, but that was only part of the five years of research that went into the book.

Still, this did not deter her, and with tenacious research, she was able to find out a great deal about her subject. First, Cleopatra was no great raving beauty. She had sharp features with a strong chin and a beak nose. What she lacked in beauty she made up for with keen intellect and beguiling charm. Cleopatra knew nine languages and was highly educated. Yes, she did have affairs with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, but she also forged strong political alliances with both of these men. Though we hardly think of ancient times as being particularly



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enlightened, Cleopatra's gender was not an issue. Schiff also discussed the drama and danger surrounding Cleopatra, as incest and murder are part of her legacy. She married two of her brothers and called for the assassination of her siblings.

A member of the audience asked Schiff about the book being optioned as a movie with Angelina Jolie as the lead. Schiff said she has the script but the movie is still in the planning stages and no director has been named, though she said Jolie has the charisma to play Cleopatra.

Schiff gave advice to aspiring writers in the audience, stating that one of the most important things a writer can do is read. Ms. Schiff worked in publishing, and said that editors are looking for writers; they are hungry for fresh, new writers with something to say.

Schiff's visit was kismet. On Oct. 14, the Milwaukee Public Museum will unveil its newest exhibit "[Cleopatra – The Search for the Last Queen of Egypt](#)," which will feature nearly 150 artifacts on Cleopatra and Egypt. Schiff was given a sneak peek of the exhibit and said Milwaukee is in for a real treat.

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