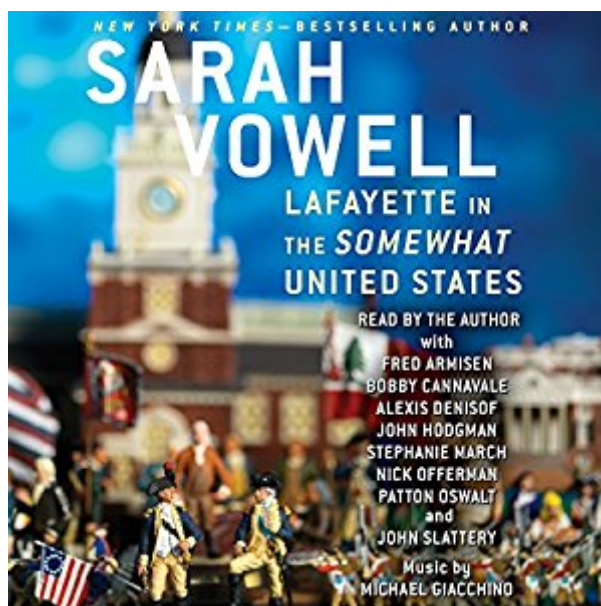


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Lafayette In The Somewhat United States



Synopsis

From the best-selling author of *Assassination Vacation* and *Unfamiliar Fishes*, a humorous account of the Revolutionary War hero Marquis de Lafayette - the one Frenchman we could all agree on - and an insightful portrait of a nation's idealism and its reality. On August 16, 1824, an elderly French gentleman sailed into New York Harbor, and giddy Americans were there to welcome him. Or, rather, to welcome him back. It had been 30 years since he had last set foot in the United States, and he was so beloved that 80,000 people showed up to cheer for him. The entire population of New York at the time was 120,000. Lafayette's arrival in 1824 coincided with one of the most contentious presidential elections in American history. Congress had just fought its first epic battle over slavery, and the threat of a Civil War loomed. But Lafayette, belonging to neither North nor South, to no political party or faction, was a walking, talking reminder of the sacrifices and bravery of the revolutionary generation and what they wanted this country to be. His return was not just a reunion with his beloved Americans; it was a reunion for Americans with their own astonishing, singular past. *Lafayette in the Somewhat United States* is a humorous and insightful portrait of the famed Frenchman, the impact he had on our young country, and his ongoing relationship with instrumental Americans of the time, including George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and many more. John Slattery as the Marquis de Lafayette Nick Offerman as George Washington Fred Armisen as Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben Bobby Cannavale as Benjamin Franklin John Hodgman as John Adams Stephanie March as Evelyn Wotherspoon Wainwright and Linda Williams Alexis Denisof as The British Leadership Patton Oswalt as Thomas Jefferson and Sherm

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Customer Reviews

Sarah Vowell's acerbic, insightful wit comes through loud and clear in this fascinating account of French General Lafayette and his role in the American Revolution, but it took me a while to adjust to her irreverent banter in print--as well as being an author Vowell is also known for her radio pieces on *This American Life*. This book runs almost 270 pages without any chapter breaks, and reads like the long-winded but mesmerizing stand-up routine of a highly knowledgeable, history obsessed comedian who knows how to use humor to make a point. Lafayette was still a teenager when he left his young bride behind and snuck out of France to join the American Revolution against the wishes of his family, but he ended up becoming such a key figure in the winning of the war that cities all over the country are named for him. Vowell has a special knack for revealing the personalities of the many historical figures she writes about, their foibles, revealing quirks, and strengths. Since Lafayette had a close relationship with George Washington he features prominently in the book and I really appreciated getting a clearer picture of the man behind the myth. Vowell even manages to make battles and military strategy interesting, in part by keeping her focus on the people involved, and in part by not overlooking the missteps or ironies of the situations. Vowell finds plenty of opportunities to relate the struggles of the Revolutionary period to American politics today, pointing out that many current ideological divisions and tendencies have an origin, or at least an analog, dating back to the founding of the country. The book also covers the aftereffects of the Revolutionary War in France and Britain, and the America of 1824, which was when John Quincy Adams and Andrew Jackson competed in a notorious presidential election and the then elderly Lafayette made a return trip to the country that was still so besotted with him that two thirds of the population of New York City welcomed him ashore. While researching the book Vowell visited historic sites in America and France and she takes readers along on those trips too, giving us her impressions of tourist destinations like Williamsburg and Valley Forge while relating what happened there in the past. In this book Vowell manages the neat trick of being both funny and stirring. She clearly loves history, and she makes it very easy to join her in that passion.

I am a fan of Sarah Vowell's, owning most if not all of her books. She is extremely knowledgeable but I must say her sardonic writing gets tiring after a while. Not everything about the American

Revolution, George Washington, and one of his favorite "sons" Lafayette, is funny. It just isn't. And while we do need to lighten up and understand the quirky nature of history in general and American history in particular, Vowell's voice in this book simply gets tiring. I am not impressed with this one, although I do admire Vowell's brilliance and ability as a writer. Just hope she expands her horizons with her next effort. If she focuses on something like the American Civil War and tells us about it the same manner she does with this one, I'm going to return the book. Vowell needs to expand the way she tells her stories beyond being cynical or sardonic.

I'd heard about Sarah Vowell, but I was never interested in reading any of her books until I heard her being interviewed about this one. Something about what she said intrigued me, so I got it. It won't be the last book of hers that I read -- in fact, I've got another one on order already. She reminds me of Bill Bryson, though I've only read one of his books, in that she provides lots of history combined with contemporary wit and humor and a sense of the uncanny connections between historical events separated by generations. For example, she discusses a connection between the story of Lafayette and Herman Melville that I found intriguing, but there are quite a few other examples. She also makes some American icons (and their British counterparts) come alive in ways that traditional (i.e., often bland) history does not. I have only one criticism of the book, really: the story of Lafayette recedes in the background (sometimes out of the picture entirely) in favor of her retelling of key episodes in the Revolutionary War; I didn't really expect a history of the War and was disappointed that Lafayette vanishes at times. However, she does a very good job in describing the weird coincidences and serendipity that resulted in the defeat of the British. I also have a second complaint, but not against Ms. Vowell (well, not really). There was one instance where she talks about a soldier named Stephen in one place and a few pages later he becomes Stephens (or maybe it was Steven and Stevens; I can't recall). As I often ask, where were the editors? If I caught this on a casual read, why didn't someone else catch it? Maybe having to do an index would have helped.

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