



The Last Madam: A Life In The New Orleans Underworld

By Chris Wiltz

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In 1916, at age fifteen, Norma Wallace arrived in New Orleans. Sexy and shrewd, she quickly went from streetwalker to madam and by 1920 had opened what became a legendary house of prostitution. There she entertained a steady stream of governors, gangsters, and movie stars until she was arrested at last in 1962. Shortly before she died in 1974, she tape-recorded her memories—the scandalous stories of a powerful woman who had the city's politicians in her pocket and whose lovers included the twenty-five-year-old boy next door, whom she married when she was sixty-four. Combining those tapes with original research, Christine Wiltz chronicles not just Norma's rise and fall but also the social history of New Orleans, thick with the vice and corruption that flourished there—and, like *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil* and *Philistines at the Hedgerow*, resurrects a vanished secret world.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Actually, they called themselves "landladies" in New Orleans, though that didn't change the nature of their business: running houses of prostitution in the city's wide-open French Quarter. Beginning in 1920, when she was still in her teens, Norma Wallace managed a high-class bordello for an affluent and influential clientele, evading the police and asserting her sexual freedom "like a man" despite the nominal confines of several rickety marriages. Obsessive love for a man 39 years her junior and her first-ever jail term finally put Wallace out of the business in the mid-1960s, but her memories were still vivid and raunchy when she tape-recorded material for an autobiography in the two years before her suicide in 1974. Novelist Christine Wiltz makes good use of those recordings in an earthy narrative filled with great anecdotes, from how the name of Wallace's dog became local slang for an out-of-town customer to the time an undertaker's premises served as her temporary place of business. Wiltz also interviewed many of Wallace's lovers and associates; she draws on popular journalism and scholarly monographs with equal acuity to flesh out Norma's story. Her perceptive biography of a colorful and complex woman is equally satisfying as a social history of 20th-century New Orleans. --*Wendy Smith*

From Publishers Weekly

Mystery and nonfiction writer Wiltz (*Glass House*, etc.) offers an affecting portrayal of the woman who for 40 years ran the last successful high-class brothel in New Orleans, and of her vanished demimonde. Born into poverty in 1901, Norma Wallace became a streetwalker in her teens, but by the early 1920s had decided that a more comfortable, profitable living lay in being a "landlady"--running a discreet, lavish, politically protected house of prostitution. Shrewd and ambitious--and a strict madam--she quickly became an underworld force within the wide-open New Orleans of the 1920s-1940s, enjoying numerous romances along the way with a Capone-linked gangster, then-blind champion bantamweight Pete Herman and entertainer Phil Harris, among others. Norma's first serious arrest came only in 1962, and it sped her retirement a few years later. Wiltz, who makes excellent use of Norma's tape-recorded, unpublished memoirs (Norma died in 1974), understands that this tale is necessarily one of corruption and acquiescence in mid-century urban America: Norma could not have prospered without the ritualized, baroque corruption of local law enforcement as well as the town's leading economic lights and political figures, who often checked their pious selves at Norma's door. Wiltz thus elevates a sometimes impeccably assembled historical narrative above its elementary bawdy elements into something more elegant and fragile: the resurrection of a secret world, like those uncovered by Luc Sante and James Ellroy. (Jan.)

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From Kirkus Reviews

Wiltz's biography of Norma Wallace, proprietor of New Orleans's longest continuously operating bordello, exposes the madam's sordid tricks of the trade, yet somehow manages to strip the most titillating frills away from her story. Wallace, learning early in life that sex could pay for many things she otherwise couldn't afford, began her life of prostitution in Memphis at the ripe age of 14. With a savvy knack for self-preservation, she returned to her roots in New Orleans and established her own sporting house, beginning her celebrated career as a New Orleans sexual institution. The city's richest families patronized her establishment, as did movie stars, foreign dignitaries, and local officials. With such a range of clients, Wallace gained access to all the town's dirty secrets, making her more than a match for the many reform-minded district attorneys and mayors who hankered to shut her down. In addition to Wallace's professional life, Wiltz (*Glass House*, 1994, etc.) depicts her subjects search for domestic bliss with five husbands and many more lovers,

including a former boxer punched nearly blind, a hit man for Al Capone, and a young Louisiana buck 39 years her junior who helped her try to go legitimate as the owner of a family restaurant. Wiltz also roams beyond Wallaces professional and romantic affairs to spotlight her state's infamously crooked politics, the licensed depravities of the French Quarter, and Wallace's humorous attempt to realize a pastoral ideal in the backwoods amid a community of righteous citizens. Though using Wallaces illustrious X-rated career to balance a wider range of Big Easy corruption should produce surefire pleasure, only the most ravenous consumers of brothel culture will stand for Wiltz's cutesy wordplay (almost 20 percent of the chapter titles pun on "trick") and pedestrian prose. The real shame here is that Wiltz dressed up her story so licentiously instead of borrowing more of Wallaces own shoddy finery. -- *Copyright ©2000, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved.*

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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