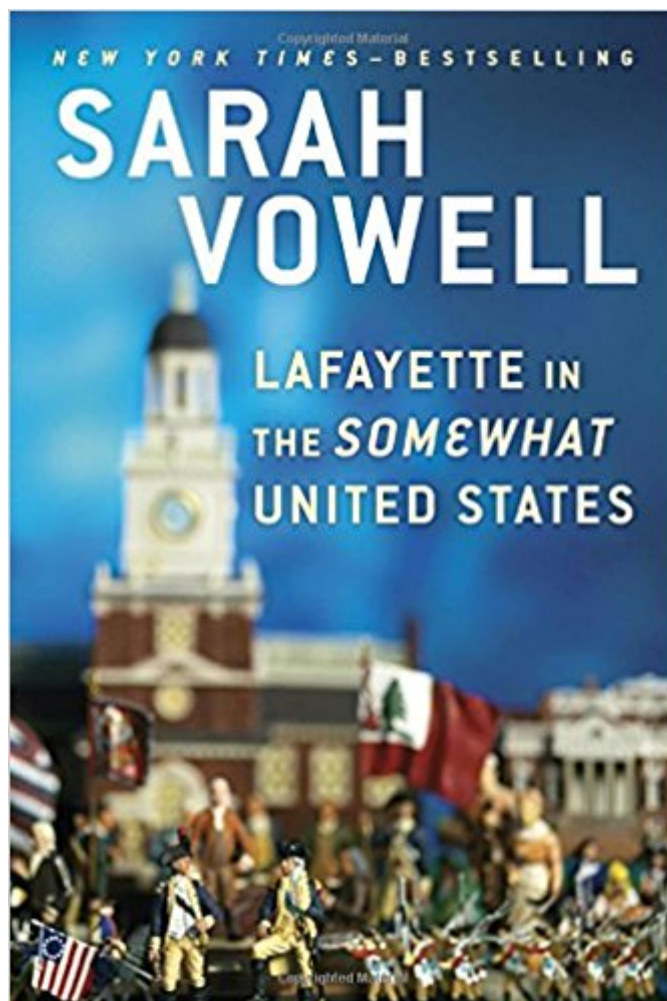


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Lafayette In The Somewhat United States



Synopsis

From the bestselling author of *Assassination Vacation* and *The Partly Cloudy Patriot*, an insightful and unconventional account of George Washington's trusted officer and friend, that swashbuckling teenage French aristocrat the Marquis de Lafayette. Chronicling General Lafayette's years in Washington's army, Vowell reflects on the ideals of the American Revolution versus the reality of the Revolutionary War. Riding shotgun with Lafayette, Vowell swerves from the high-minded debates of Independence Hall to the frozen wasteland of Valley Forge, from bloody battlefields to the Palace of Versailles, bumping into John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Lord Cornwallis, Benjamin Franklin, Marie Antoinette and various kings, Quakers and redcoats along the way. Drawn to the patriots' war out of a lust for glory, Enlightenment ideas and the traditional French hatred for the British, young Lafayette crossed the Atlantic expecting to join forces with an undivided people, encountering instead fault lines between the Continental Congress and the Continental Army, rebel and loyalist inhabitants, and a conspiracy to fire George Washington, the one man holding together the rickety, seemingly doomed patriot cause. While Vowell's yarn is full of the bickering and infighting that marks the American past—and present—her telling of the Revolution is just as much a story of friendship: between Washington and Lafayette, between the Americans and their French allies and, most of all between Lafayette and the American people. Coinciding with one of the most contentious presidential elections in American history, Vowell lingers over the elderly Lafayette's sentimental return tour of America in 1824, when three fourths of the population of New York City turned out to welcome him ashore. As a Frenchman and the last surviving general of the Continental Army, Lafayette belonged to neither North nor South, to no political party or faction. He was a walking, talking reminder of the sacrifices and bravery of the revolutionary generation and what the founders hoped this country could be. His return was not just a reunion with his beloved Americans it was a reunion for Americans with their own astonishing, singular past. Vowell's narrative look at our somewhat united states is humorous, irreverent and wholly original. From the Hardcover edition.

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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.

Sarah Vowell has a way of bringing history to life with knowledge and humor, and I was thrilled to obtain her latest effort, Lafayette in the Somewhat United States, through Vine. Not too long ago, I wondered why there are so many cities and towns named Fayetteville throughout the United States. When reading the history of Fayetteville, NC, I realized that all these places are named after Revolutionary War hero, the Marquis de Lafayette. Unfortunately, the contributions by this French citizen to our own country have been largely forgotten. So leave it to Vowell to bring Lafayette back to life in this interesting and entertaining book. Lafayette was born Marie-Joseph Paul Yves Roch

Gilbert du Motier de Lafayette. Mostly, he is known as the Marquis de Lafayette or just Lafayette. "The thing that drew me to Lafayette as a subject" that he was the rare object of agreement in the ironically named United States "kept me coming back to why that made him unique." His father died when he was only two in the Seven Years' War and he was born hating the British. When he was 19, he sailed to the United States without the knowledge of his family to offer his services to the Continental Army. His reasons were varied including a lust for glory, the appeal of escaping his nagging in-laws, boredom with the court shenanigans of Versailles, and a head full of Enlightenment chitchat about liberty and equality. It didn't hurt that he was independently wealthy and agreed to serve without pay. At first he was given the rank of major general, but without any duties. But it didn't take long for George Washington and Lafayette to form a father-son bond and General Washington soon started trusting the young Frenchman with more leadership rolls.

I first became familiar with Sarah Vowell's work via her radio appearances on NPR's "This American Life". While she brings an unapologetically slightly left of center view to her work, she also brings the subjects she examines to vivid life in ways that are insightful, humorous and reflect strong academic discipline. While her overall approach may not be appreciated by staid historiographers, for those looking to plug gaps in their knowledge of historical subjects: she is a great resource. "Lafayette in the Somewhat United States" explores the role of the teenage general, Gilbert de Motier, Marquis de Lafayette in the American Revolution. Centered on Lafayette and his access to the military and financial might of France in assisting the US colonies, it expands in a series of other examinations, to include Lafayette's relationship with George Washington, the politics of colonial military command and the larger evolution of diplomatic relations between France and the colonies. Vowell is very effective at providing context on what is really going on in the background of the rather staid documentary records of events from the late 18th century. She does this in ways that are often laugh out loud funny and useful for providing contexts on issues we face in the modern world. I started placing dog ears on the funniest passages as I read...and then stopped, because she is witty at every turn, and she uses this wit to effectively illuminate what she writes about. About his arrival in Charleston, Vowell quotes Lafayette's letter: "Everything around me was new...the room, the bed draped in delicate mosquito curtains, the black servants who to me quietly to ask my commands...the luxuriant vegetation...".

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