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Making Masterpiece: My 25 Years Behind The Scenes At Masterpiece And Mystery! On PBS



Synopsis

The Emmy Award-winning producer of PBS's Masterpiece Theatre and Mystery! reveals the secrets to Downton Abbey, Sherlock, and its other hit programs. For more than 25 years and counting, Rebecca Eaton has presided over PBS's Masterpiece Theatre, the longest-running weekly prime-time drama series in American history. From the runaway hits Upstairs, Downstairs and The Buccaneers to the hugely popular Inspector Morse, Prime Suspect, and Poirot, Masterpiece Theatre and its sibling series Mystery! have been required viewing for fans of quality drama. Eaton interviews many of the writers, directors, producers, and other contributors and shares personal anecdotes about her decades-long career. She reveals what went on behind the scenes during such triumphs as Cranford and the multiple, highly rated programs made from Jane Austen's novels, as well as her aggressive campaign to attract younger viewers via social media and online streaming. Along the way she shares stories about actors and other luminaries such as Alistair Cooke, Maggie Smith, Diana Rigg, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Daniel Radcliffe, whose first television role was as the title character in David Copperfield. Listeners will also get to know Eaton on a personal level. With a childhood steeped in theater, an affinity for 19th-century novels and culture, and an "accidental apprenticeship" with the BBC, Eaton was practically born to lead the Masterpiece and Mystery! franchises. Making Masterpiece marks the first time the driving force behind the enduring flagship show reveals all.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

If you watch PBS whatsoever, you should get this book by Rebecca Eaton. Also, if you are a woman wanting to get ahead in the media fields, you should be highly interested in Eaton's story of her journey to the top. Eaton tells the story of how Masterpiece and Mystery were established at PBS. When I'm watching, I know I've always considered them to be permanent fixtures in the PBS lineup. Not so. It is an ongoing battle to keep these programs there, mainly because they are very costly and funding has to be found every time. Also, there's the problem of drawing in a younger audience. The new "Sherlock Holmes" set in modern times has drawn in many younger folk. I am not a fan of it myself, preferring the older Jeremy Brett Sherlock series, but I understand their need to draw more younger viewers so that airing of these Mystery can continue. Masterpiece itself has evolved from its first great hit, "Upstairs, Downstairs." She talks of "Downtown Abbey" which surprised PBS and the Brits when it became such a big hit in the U.S. Eaton turned it down twice before accepting it and it almost didn't happen. (What a grievous loss if she hadn't changed her mind!) To find out what turned her around and what she has to say about the series and all others, you'll have to buy the book. I have rated it at four stars rather than five stars because although it is thoroughly readable and absolutely fascinating, it didn't grab my heart. It isn't poignant due to its subject matter, I suppose. And, I suspect that Rebecca Eaton is a pragmatist and pragmatists don't write heartfelt books. But if she weren't a pragmatist, it's possible that she couldn't have kept Mystery and particularly, Masterpiece, on the air and developing all these years.

Whenever I pick up a history, memoir or biography, the first thing I do is look at the pictures. Naturally, that's what I did when I got home from the library with Making Masterpiece. I was puzzled, because the first photos in the book are of the author as a young girl. I thought this was a book about producing PBS's Masterpiece Theatre and Mystery! series, not about the author's life. It turns out that it's both and it also turns out that's mostly a good thing. Those of us of a certain age remember Masterpiece Theatre's first big hit from 1974: Upstairs, Downstairs. Rebecca Eaton was just starting her public television career then. An English literature major from Vassar College, she'd done an internship at the BBC and then landed her first real job at PBS affiliate WGBH in Boston. When Masterpiece Theatre's original executive producer, Joan Wilson, died, Rebecca Eaton stepped into her shoes, taking responsibility for both Masterpiece Theatre and Mystery! It was a daunting assignment for Eaton, who hadn't ever understood the appeal of mysteries, who had just discovered she and relatively new husband Paul were expecting a baby, and who felt she didn't have nearly enough experience to take over from Wilson. Eaton is very frank about her failures, like having to be talked into Prime Suspect and turning down the Colin Firth Pride & Prejudice miniseries

because Masterpiece Theatre had shown a version years earlier. She even discloses that she had a run-in with contacts at Mobil Oil, Masterpiece Theatre's sole sponsor, about editorial influence, and Mobil insisted that PBS fire her. She wasn't fired, but she was put on probation and told she very much needed to work on her people skills. I don't think I'd want to confess something like that, so I had to admire Eaton's openness.

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