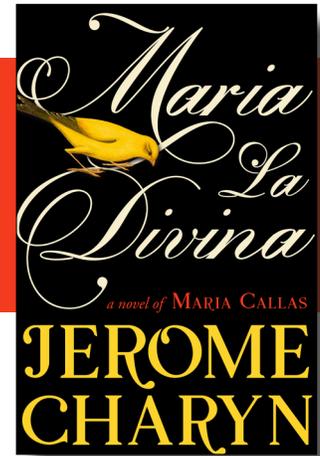




## Maria La Divina

A Novel by Jerome Charyn

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“A bravura performance that hits all the right notes and is sure to delight opera devotees and fans of strong women characters.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“An impressive portrait. . . . Charyn elicits sympathy for his complex lead through nuanced character work, and he manages to channel the excitement of Callas’s performances. This is a marvel.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Charyn’s bracing biographical novel is about Maria Callas’s transformation from a New York daughter of Greek immigrants to a world-famous opera soprano. . . . The allure of an opera legend is rendered with humanizing grit.”

—*Foreword Reviews*

“Charyn impressively covers events, places, and people (even an older Winston Churchill) with a solid pace that never stalls. . . . The complex genius of the Divine Diva will stay with any reader of this work.”

—*Historical Novels Review*

“This vivid portrait of the diva is compelling and dramatic. . . . An excellent choice for biographical fiction and opera fans.”

—*Booklist*

“Preternatural artistic force, persecuted diva, emotionally abused daughter, demanding lover—they all are on display in this reimagined life of the ultimate diva.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

## INTRODUCTION

Maria Callas, called La Divina, is widely recognized as the greatest diva who ever lived. Jerome Charyn’s Callas springs to life as the headstrong, mercurial, and charismatic artist who captivated generations of fans, thrilling audiences with her brilliant performances and defiant personality.

Callas, an outsider from an impoverished background, was shunned by the Italian opera houses, but through sheer force of will and the power and range of her voice, she broke through the invisible wall to sing at La Scala and headline at the Metropolitan Opera, forging an unforgettable career. Adored by celebrities and statesmen, the notable and notorious alike, her every movement was shadowed by both music critics and gossip columnists—until, having lost her voice, she died alone in an opulent, mausoleum-like Paris apartment.

In Charyn’s inimitable style, *Maria La Divina* humanizes the celebrated diva, revealing the mythical artist as a woman who survived hunger, war, and loneliness to reach the heights of acclaim.



## CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. *Maria La Divina* opens with Maria Callas's audition in Greece at the age of thirteen, then quickly jumps back to her birth and early childhood. Why do you think author Jerome Charyn chose to introduce readers to Maria through these scenes? What do they convey about her character and origins?
2. What was your experience with opera before reading this book? Do you need to appreciate Maria's music to understand her life?
3. What is so entrancing about Maria that catapulted her to the highest levels of her art and worldwide fame? How does the novel convey that power, and how does the story challenge it?
4. Maria's appearance is relentlessly noted, and often criticized, by those around her. How do others' praise and derision shape her self-identity? How do her costumes transform her body and herself?
5. How does Maria develop her incredible will? Why does it ultimately fail her?
6. How do Maria's suitors shape her life? How does her enormous talent influence her relationships with them? And why does Aristotle Onassis, the Greek shipping magnate who later married Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, have so much power over Maria?
7. Though "Jackie O" looms as "the widow" over Maria's relationship with Aristotle, the two women only meet once in the book, at Maria's master class. There, Jackie congratulates Maria for diving into the mystery of her art in her master class, but admits, "I do not have the courage to dive that far down into the deep." How are the two famous women fundamentally different? Though they do not have a direct relationship, how does each woman affect the life of the other?
8. Charyn calls Maria a "lone canary," writing, "All she ever saw of the audience was an enormous blur—waves of movement, a sea of inchoate faces. But it was Madame alone who understood the ticket of Maria's success—her utter isolation. She was trapped in a cage..." How does Maria's talent separate her from loved ones and the public? Is this isolation inevitable or a choice?
9. Maria wins a Bulova watch in a childhood singing competition, and it returns many years later in the book's final scene. What does the watch represent, and why has it remained so important to her?
10. In the last line of the novel, Charyn compares the diva to the heroine of *La Traviata*: "She would always be Violetta, whirling about in one room and dying in another." How do Maria's operatic roles resemble her life? How did she change herself to transform into these dramatic figures onstage?
11. Charyn has described his novel as "the first novel to tell the story of the real Maria." Do you agree, even if it is fiction? How does it differ from other depictions of the diva in popular culture?
12. Though this is a novel, Maria Callas was a real person and many details about her life are true. What can a novel portray that a biography fails to convey? Which elements felt authentic, and which exaggerated?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jerome Charyn** is the award-winning author of more than fifty works of fiction and nonfiction, including *Maria La Divina*; *Ravage & Son*; *Sergeant Salinger*; *Cesare: A Novel of War-Torn Berlin*; *In the Shadow of King Saul: Essays on Silence and Song*; *Jerzy: A Novel*; and *A Loaded Gun: Emily Dickinson for the 21st Century*. He lives in Manhattan.

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