

BOOKS

Christina Vella, 75, Author of Sizzling Works of Narrative History, Dies

By WILLIAM GRIMES MARCH 27, 2017

Christina Vella, the author of several colorful works of narrative history, notably “Intimate Enemies: The Two Worlds of the Baroness de Pontalba,” a tale of wealth and scandal in 19th-century France and New Orleans, died on Wednesday in New Orleans. She was 75.

The cause was cancer, her daughter Robin Vella Riehl said.

Ms. Vella, a historian by training, found one of her richest subjects close to hand, in her native city. “Intimate Enemies,” published in 1997, told the story of Micaela Leonarda Antonia Almonester y Rojas, daughter of the richest man in New Orleans. Her marriage at the age of 15 to the son of a French baron set in motion a family scandal whose intricacies enthralled the novelist Stendhal.

The Baron de Pontalba, enraged when he learned that his daughter-in-law’s dowry was to be paid in installments and foiled in his 20-year attempt to seize her property, burst into her bedroom at the family’s country estate in France in 1834, took out a pistol and shot her three times in the chest. Wounded but still alive, Micael, as she was known, led him in a chase around the house that ended when the baron, admitting defeat, turned his gun on himself.

The newly minted baroness turned her hand to property development. She built the mansion on the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré that is now the American Embassy. On returning to New Orleans in the 1840s, she oversaw the design and construction of the Pontalba Buildings, two red-brick rowhouse complexes flanking the Place d'Armes, which was renamed Jackson Square after Andrew Jackson at her instigation. One of the chief features of the French Quarter, the rowhouses established the fashion for iron railings throughout the old city.

Using court records, family papers, household accounts and government archives, Ms. Vella constructed a gripping family drama that told a larger tale, shedding light on “the complexities of class, marriage, family economy, politics and the law, both in France and in Louisiana, spanning four generations of two families,” Angeline Goreau wrote in *The New York Times Book Review*.

Ms. Vella told the reference work *Contemporary Authors* in 2006, “History is above all a human drama, and peering into it can be as exciting as opening a diary you find in an attic.” She added, “Any analysis of great movements in history is far more fascinating and trustworthy if we can distinguish individual faces among the masses and hear their voices within the din of abstract ideas.”

Christina Vella was born in New Orleans on March 14, 1942. Her father, Mario, was a traveling salesman who married a distant cousin, Nicolina, with the same last name. She was a homemaker.

The family moved to the tiny town of Pearl River, La., when Christina was young, but she attended school in New Orleans, about 40 miles from home.

She enrolled in Louisiana State University but left to teach in the public schools of St. Bernard Parish, near New Orleans. Through correspondence courses she earned a bachelor's degree in history in 1965. She later took night courses at the University of New Orleans, which awarded her a master's degree in history in 1971.

Ms. Vella taught history for several years at St. Bernard Community College (now Nunez Community College) in Chalmette, La., before earning a doctorate in 1990 in modern European and American history from Tulane University, where she

was an adjunct professor of history for many years. Her dissertation, on the Baroness de Pontalba, was the basis for her first book.

In 1980 she married Robert Riehl. The marriage ended in divorce. In addition to her daughter Robin, she is survived by another daughter, Christina Riehl.

“Intimate Enemies” established Ms. Vella as a meticulous historian with a flair for description and an eye for the telling detail.

She also had a nose for a good story, regardless of the historical period. “The Hitler Kiss: A Memoir of the Czech Resistance” (2002), written with Radomir Luza, plunged into the world of the Czech resistance during World War II, seen through the eyes of Mr. Luza and his father, a Czech general.

“Indecent Secrets: The Infamous Murri Murder Affair” (2006) served up another helping of scandal, this time in turn-of-the-century Bologna, where Count Francesco Bonmartini was found stabbed to death in his apartment. Ms. Vella unearthed the details of a celebrated trial involving the count’s wife, Linda Murri, the free-living daughter of a celebrated surgeon — the newspapers called her “the enchantress” — and a cast of co-conspirators.

“It stayed on the front pages of every newspaper in Italy from 1902 to 1906, and it was still surfacing in articles as late as 1910,” Ms. Vella told The Times-Picayune of New Orleans in 2006. “It was bigger than the O. J. case!”

The composer Thea Musgrave turned “Intimate Enemies” into an opera, “Pontalba,” which had its premiere in New Orleans in 2003.

Ms. Vella also wrote “George Washington Carver: A Life,” published in 2015, and at her death had completed a biography of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, the father of modern Turkey.