



Crown of Aloes

Norah Lofts

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Presented as a personal chronicle, this novel about Queen Isabella of Spain is based on known fact and detail. Isabella's fortunes were very varied: she knew acute poverty, and faced anxiety and danger.

Crown of Aloes Details

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Author : Norah Lofts

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From Reader Review Crown of Aloes for online ebook

Megan Winston says

Very well written and engaging! Norah Lofts does a fantastic job of bringing these historical figures to life, it was quite a lovely read. Highly recommended!

John Lucy says

Norah Lofts is, or at least was, a famous writer. And this historical fiction on Queen Isabella of Spain is not her first or only historical fiction. After reading this, however, I do not intend to read any other of Lofts's books. The writing is often hard to follow: too many commas and semi-colons and disjointed thoughts that are clearly not meant to be disjointed. As a fan of commas and long sentences myself I feel that I have the right to judge.

One could argue that the book shouldn't necessarily be easy to follow because it is written in first-person, from Isabella's perspective as she lies on her deathbed within reach of passing away. Essentially she is narrating to herself. More accurately, she is narrating to God, her Creator whom she is about to meet. In that sense, a person's thoughts cannot be held accountable for coherence or exposition: Isabella and God know of what she speaks. She need not explain who certain characters are to the reader because the "reader" should know who they are. Figuring out who characters are is such a minor inconvenience, though. And, again, perhaps clarity in sentence structure should not be demanded of first-person narration; but I am certain that Lofts intends Isabella to be as clear as possible, as if she were confessing. That she does not do and it seriously weighs down the quality of this book.

The great redeeming factor of this book is its historicity. Lofts brings her own interpretation to the work, as one can expect, but even if we can point to areas where we disagree with the interpretation we can still respect how much we can learn from the story. Here I don't mean "learn" as if we are in history class hoping to learn facts about the famous Queen of Spain. Facts we learn, yes, but more importantly we get an inside look into the characters of Isabella and Ferdinand and the pressures informing those characters. Isabella and Ferdinand's actions cannot be separated from who they are as persons and their family life, among other things, including the politics of the day. Indeed, this book is a great read for anyone quick to criticize leaders of any government or movement.

Despite this last paragraph, I cannot recommend this book. I do not recommend it either. If you are looking specifically for an historical fiction on Isabella, I know of no others. And if you find this book lying around in your house, read it. Still, I am certain that as far as historical fictions go, you can do a lot better. If I were reviewing historical fictions in general, and not this book in particular, I would list a bunch right here.

Jean Marie says

I enjoyed this for the sheer fact that there aren't as many novels written on Isabella of Castile. That being said, this novel had no momentum outside of its general history. Isabella's struggle for the crown, the last leg of the Reconquista, the loss of her family are walked through but not emotionally engaged. Isabella is

presented as a cardboard cut out; a historical character who lacks a heart and emotion. Yes, Lofts tries to give her emotion but it's half-assed and clunky. Lofts could have really engaged with all aspects of Isabella's story and made her human but she holds too closely to the textbook version of Isabella which strips all color from her story leaving only a bland, blurry monochromatic characterization.

The ending also pissed me off. It focuses heavily on Juana of Castile, then the Duchess of Burgundy and her mother's heir, and her deteriorating mental health. Juana is a controversial figure because it's dangerous to apply post-modern medical knowledge to historical instances, therefore leaving Juana's moniker "The Mad" difficult to untangle. That being said, as someone who has studied her, I personally don't think she was crazy. She definitely had a mood disturbance and could have had any number of mental illnesses we are aware of today. Yet, Lofts chooses to present Juana as not only mentally unstable but dangerous. The author emphasizes Juana's attacks on her ladies-in-waiting as being violent (e.g. the scissors attack) and backs this up with Juana killing a parrot brought from the West Indies (something created). Juana is not only dehumanized by the author, but the author has her parents, especially Isabella, dehumanize her as well. This may have been Lofts' way of explaining why Juana never truly ruled as Castile's regnant and laid the groundwork for Ferdinand, Philip, and later Charles's incarceration of Juana for fifty years.

That being said, this book was written in 1973. Juana was not studied as a historical actor and mental illness was not understood as it is now. Furthermore, female rule was equally understudied and often relied on caveats to justify such authority. In this case, Isabella was constantly checked by Ferdinand and in her will makes sure he and the other men around their daughter can check Juana as well.

In spite of its problems, I do recommend this book. Read this, and then find another, more recent novel on Isabella or even Juana or on the period of Spain's unification. See how historical research has altered how these characters are presented fictionally and how they can be historically accurate while also being humanized.

Werner says

Veteran historical novelist Lofts here turns her hand to retelling the life story of Queen Isabella of Castile (ca. 1451-1504), in a novel cast as the first-person narration of the dying queen as she looks back on her life --and it was, in real-life, one filled with the kind of drama that can easily make the stuff of exciting fiction. Born to a king's second wife, she was only third in line for the throne, behind a half brother and a younger brother, and spent her formative years in virtual exile. The family dynamics were spectacularly dysfunctional; the succession to the throne was disputed in a long civil war, her marriage to Ferdinand of Aragon was not sanctioned by her half brother, and much of her early reign was taken up by wars and civil unrest, in which she had her share of danger. Her married life wasn't always smooth sailing, and the relationships in the family they produced could easily have been compared to those dramatized in modern-day soap operas. All of the facts of the story are real, and exhaustively researched from documented history (the Author's Note credits Frieda Lund with the actual research, which included not only secondary sources but three Spanish-language primary accounts, by Isabella's personal secretary and other household officials). Loft's own contribution is the reconstruction of unrecorded private conversations and scenes, and the attribution of inner thoughts and motives; but even here, the speculation is plausibly extrapolated from fact, and the view of the Queen and other characters is consistent with the way they were regarded by their contemporaries. (The narrative voice is so deft that the reader tends to slip into the assumption that it actually IS Isabella's, rather than the author's.)

Though I'm a history major, I'm an American reader with no particular knowledge of Spanish history; most of this story was new to me, and I learned more about the history of the period than I ever did in my college classes. Going into the book, I had a rather unfavorable impression of Isabella as a bigoted Catholic zealot who was responsible for the particular savagery of the Spanish Inquisition and for expelling the Jews and Moslems from Spain. Based on her knowledge of the available facts, Lofts makes a very plausible case that the real principal responsibility for these outrages rests with others, particularly Father Torquemada who served as the queen's confessor before he was put in charge of the Inquisition (just as other writers have convincingly argued that the real architect of the religious persecutions under her unfairly-nicknamed granddaughter "Bloody" Mary was the latter's Lord Chancellor, Bishop Gardiner). Isabella's faith comes across here as very constructive and genuine (and like any other believer's, severely tried in the crucible by her own experience of family tragedy). Overall, my regard and respect for her has increased enormously, in light of her documented consideration for others, efforts to improve the lot of the weak and unfortunate, and demonstrated striving to rule wisely and justly. Personally, I'd now rank her as one of the best of Europe's medieval monarchs.

American readers' principal impression of Isabella is usually her association with the first voyage of Christopher Columbus, which is invariably depicted as being preceded by intense debate in the royal court (usually fictitiously pictured as between benighted medieval louts who insisted the world is flat vs. the genius Columbus, who alone realized that it's round), with the balance dramatically tilted by Isabella's famous offer to pawn her jewels to finance the voyage. IF there was any debate, it would not have been over the roundness of the earth, which all educated people had recognized since antiquity; it would have been over the SIZE of the earth, which was also known since antiquity, but which Columbus stubbornly insisted was only about half what it actually is. (Wooden ships can't carry enough water to sustain a crew long enough to sail by wind power in a straight line from Spain to Asia; the crew would die of thirst about halfway over!) But in Lofts' portrayal --which, be it noted, is based on the actual historical records-- there's no indication of any serious debate at all, except over the question of whether or not Spain could afford the three ships. (And there's no mention of the offer to pawn the jewels, which suggests that this tale is probably about as "historical" as the anecdote about Washington and the cherry tree!)

All in all, this is another excellent piece of historical fiction from an able artist in the genre. I've sometimes said that I don't like historical fiction about real people as much as I do fiction about invented characters set in the past. Or perhaps I just *think* that's the case. But in any event, this novel was an exception to that dictum, and I highly recommend it to genre fans.

Mary says

This is a novel of Queen Isabella of Spain. It is based on fact and detail, presented as a personal chronicle of her life. Isabella's fortunes were varied: she knew poverty and faced much anxiety and danger. I loved this story - it was very touching at the end. I give this story an A+!

Esther says

As with all of Lofts' books, written in her spare, graceful style. Isabella becomes not just the Catholic Queen, but a real person, and we get involved with her, even when we disparage her thinking.

Nina says

Novel about Queen Isabella of Spain. I hadn't known that Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was Isabella's daughter. I also hadn't known Isabella was instrumental in authorizing the Spanish Inquisition. Lofts tries to soften this by showing Isabella as having conflicting feelings; that it started as a political move and got out of hand. I suppose that is a sympathetic way of looking at it. This was fairly good reading, but I'm used to lots better from Norah Lofts.

Annette says

I am glad that this book was put into Audio form - there were quite a lot of characters and to start with I felt a little lost trying to remember who was who.

The Audio was just brilliant and really made the story come alive.

Rebecca McNutt says

I rarely read books like this, but I still enjoyed it. *Crown of Aloes* is exciting and well-written, very evocative of a long-ago time period.

Joy H. says

Added 2/20/16. Recommended by Werner of my GR group.

See Werner's review here:

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Also see other editions for more GR reviews.

Jo says

The life story of Isabella of Castile, mother of the great Katherine of Aragon. Lofts has this way of weaving a tale that's turbulent and often violent and yet still creates this overall feeling of gentleness. I find her books a cathartic read, very enjoyable and informative.

Linda says

3.5 for the story of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Desaree says

Enjoyed the history but story doesn't develop into much.
