



The Lute Player

Norah Lofts

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Out of the courts of twelfth-century England strode the legendary figure of Richard of England - leading his knights onto the Saracen battlefields - inspired by a vision of the Holy Land. Here is the story of the Soldier-King and the Third Crusade - of his strange, ill-fated union with Berengaria, Princess of Navarre - of his mother, the She-Wolf, Eleanor of Aquitaine who loved her son with a frantic, possessive pride. And, above all, here is the story of the minstrel whose life was linked with that of the King - the story of Blondel - the Lute Player.

The Lute Player Details

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From Reader Review The Lute Player for online ebook

Shawn says

My first Norah Loft's book. I read it too long ago to give it a detailed review but I remember it as well written and enjoyable.

Tiamat says

I was surprised myself with how much I enjoyed this book. Sadly I didn't find it in English, had to read the Russian translation, which I normally dislike. So I got to reading only because it was about Richard the Lionheart, only to pass the time. The translation was nice enough, and suddenly I found myself immersed in this book, not wanting to put it aside!

I don't know what did the trick for me - there was almost no mention of gay sex (although Richard's being gay was stated quite plainly), no romance to speak of, very few scenes of war and carnage. Just simple life of Ann? of Apieta, Berengaria's half-sister - who isn't even named in the blurb despite her being the main protagonist of the story! The story was nice, warm, humane, intriguing, alive and palpable - and I can't seem to find better words to describe it.

Riccarla Roman says

Having seen "The Lion in Winter", I knew Richard wouldn't marry Alys, but I always wondered about Berengaria (the one he did marry). Her family history, as told by her half-sister, Anna, was just as interesting as Richard's life. Blondel, the lute player, follows Richard on the Third Crusade (which ties in to the whole Robin Hood/King John story). Norah Loft's beautifully details the behind-the-scenes machinations that went on and surprises you with the betrayals and coincidences that make history. I have recently been going to the library a lot and historical books are my passion at the moment. I will be reading more books by the talented Ms. Lofts.

Amanda Edwards says

I am only giving this book 3 stars because it took me so long to finish it. Although it covers a lot of good information, the book is so slow going. I thought I would never finish it. I knew nothing about Richard the Lionhearted before I started this book, so it was all new information for me. I like to read books with strong female characters. Although Berengaria, the wife of Richard, is a main character, she is weak and whiney. It is her illegitimate half-sister, Anna, who carries this book. Anna is strong and holds everyone up except for the King, Richard, who is hopeless. Richard is a horrible husband. He is a selfish homosexual who only marries because Berengaria continues to nag him about getting married. He never even tries to consummate the union and his wife is too weak to do anything about it. I kept waiting for her to take a lover so demand Richard be a real husband, but she meekly gives up.

Every time I think the story is over, it just goes on with no real reason. The story ends with no real

conclusion. This one will go in the give away pile for me. Sorry to the author. Maybe it was just a dull topic to begin with.

Lauren says

I greatly enjoyed this story of Richard the Lionhearted, as told through the eyes of Blondel the lute player, Anna the fictional hunchbacked sister of Berengaria of Navarre, and Eleanor of Aquitaine. The story begins with Blondel as a young boy raised in a monestary and promised to the church who finds that the monastic order does not agree with his moral sensibilities. Ultimately (the novel doesn't exactly explain how), Blondel appears in Pamplona, Navarre several years later, playing the lute with a dancing bear. Blondel attracts the attention of Anna, sister of Berengaria, and he is brought into Berengaria's household. Berengaria is lovesick after seeing Richard Plantagenet in a tournament. However, her love seems hopeless, as Richard is betrothed to another, the Princess Alys of France. Meanwhile, Blondel finds himself in love with Berengaria, which is (or seems) equally as hopeless as Berengaria's love for Richard. However, Richard's betrothal to Alys is not to be and Berengaria's dream of marrying Richard comes true, thanks to her father King Sancho's generous dowry, which enables Richard to finance his crusade in the Holy Land (called Palestine in this novel, rather than Outremer, the common medieval term for the area).

Throughout the novel, Richard is mysterious and unapproachable, though Blondel gets to know Richard quite well. The novel finds its own answers to the question of why Berengaria and Richard never had children, why Berengaria and Richard were estranged, and why Berengaria was the only English Queen to never set foot in England. The novel is fact-centered with respect to Richard and the Crusade. With respect to Berengaria, however, there are few facts that are known, leaving Ms. Loft's with significant leeway to craft a personality for Berengaria. The author's note is helpful in parsing fact from fiction.

I think the Lute Player is a very enjoyable novel - I especially enjoyed the sections on the crusades. As a modern Jewish woman, I instinctually think of the crusades as a repugnant period of history, but Loft's did a great job of presenting them from a medieval perspective and it is hard not to admire the bravery of the men who set off to the unknown Outremer in pursuit of an ideal. Although the novel has been around for a while (since the 1950s, I think), the writing itself doesn't seem all that dated. In fact, it covers some "scandalous" topics - including Henry II's rumored love affair with Alys and Richards rumored homosexuality.

Cynthia says

This book was amazing - this author is amazing. Norah Loft's wrote 'The Concubine' which was my first ever introduction to Tudor history. When I saw this in a used book bin I grabbed it and oh my word. Men - people in general, I know, but it is generally men who embark on things like crusades - don't change. They go to war with such enthusiasm and then it is death and hunger and filth and bugs and blood. Men like Richard the Lionheart seem to thrive on it. Back in that day he embodied all the virtues men admired most - insanely courageous, hard working, with a common touch that brought his lowliest foot soldier into the embrace. It reminded me a lot of books I have read about Alexander the Great. What else are these men for, if not war and conquest? Not to be admired, surely not. But in some sense enormously admirable. This book is told from several different points of view and each one is fascinating. Highly highly recommend.

Misfit says

Very, very slow paced and doesn't pick up (2.5). By looking at the other reviews, I can see that I am clearly in the minority here - I do not get those five star ratings. The Lute Player is told in several parts, with each part being told in the first person POV of one of the main characters, Blondel the Lute Player, Anna a fictional half sister of Berengaria and Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard's mother.

The story begins as Blondel finds his way to the Court of Navarre and home to Berengaria and Anna. Berengaria is in love with Richard (who is engaged to the King of France's sister), the hunchbacked Anna is in love with Blondel and Blondel is in love with Berengaria. Richard's engagement is eventually broken and desperate for more funds to finance his crusade, he agrees to marry Berengaria. The rest of the book details known history, the wedding on the way to the crusade, the third crusade itself and Richard's alleged preference for young boys, his being taken hostage on the way home from the crusade and his non-existent relationship with his wife.

I love reading medieval fiction and learning of the history of the times, but frankly I found this whole book to be quite boring and by the time it got to the crusade half way through I found myself skimming quite a bit, and the final third covering the last days of Richard and Berengaria were just one big snooze fest, at least for this reader. It could just be me; I've never been that fond of Richard I and Berengaria I found to be bordering on the TSTL category, almost, but not quite. I guess if you're a die hard fan of this ruler and want to learn more about him it might be worth your while, but I would recommend getting this one from the library first (as I did) and then buy it if you like it. 2.5 stars rounded up to three.

Malacima says

Story of Richard the Lionheart, as told through the eyes of Blondel the lute player (known mostly for his role in rescuing Richard from imprisonment by Leopold of Austria), Anna the fictional hunchbacked sister of Berengaria of Navarre (Richard wife). It's a tale of hopeless love (sad love triangle). By looking at the other reviews - I do not get those five star ratings. The book is so slow going I thought I would never finish it. It did not have the detail (or real historical research- it started out great, but suffers from the fact) that I enjoy from Sharon Kay Penman or Elizabeth Chadwick's works. Richard was homosexual in this book. This is a historical novel so many portions aren't true but I think this one is, yikes (why he is not...you can find the reason in the book of Sharon Kay Penman -Richard the Lionheart).

If you read this book as a pure fiction book is ok.

Katy Lohman says

Romance gone terribly wrong when a lute player loves a princess who loves Richard the Lionhearted who loves...? Warring in the Crusades? I love reading stories about the messed up family of Henry II, Eleanor of Aquitaine, their children and the people around them, and this brought the people into vivid life.

Rowena Sudbury says

This was a remarkable book. Split into five sections, it is told from three different points of view. The narrators are Blondel (the lute player), Anna of Apieta (the hunchbacked half-sister of Berengaria, Richard's ill-fated wife), and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

As an author of m/m romances, I was curious to read this book because it promised to highlight the long-held suspicion of Richard's homosexuality. This book was first published in 1951, and so I was curious to see how the topic would be dealt with.

The first mention comes near the end of Eleanor's portion, almost halfway through the book. She is shocked at a look of lust on Richard's face, directed at Blondel. She struggles with the knowledge, but does not reveal to him that she knows. She thinks he is flawed, but she loves him none-the-less. At this point, Blondel is unaware that he is the object of this lustful look.

We hear nothing more of it until much later in the book, in a section that is recounted by Blondel himself. After the first victory in the Holy Land, Richard takes in one of the released prisoners. Blondel is unaware that they are lovers. When this man sickens and dies, Blondel is the one who is at his bedside, as Richard has been called to surrender and give up his crusade. This man struggles to tell Blondel to give his love to Richard, but Blondel does not understand what he is asking. It is not until Richard and Blondel go off on their own, to find a different route home, that Blondel finds out the true nature of Richard. It sickens him, and he rebukes Richard. After that Richard leaves him with a purse of money, and when he goes off on his own he is captured and imprisoned. Blondel returns to Eleanor, and eventually Anna.

What fascinated me was Blondel's thoughts about Richard and homosexuality. He says it is considered "against nature" but he then goes on to list many other things that are against nature, fratricide and patricide for example. He says it goes against the teachings of being fruitful and multiplying, but then he says that holy vows also go against that. He says it is not listed as one of the seven deadly sins. His thought process on the whole thing is interesting to read. Although he felt shame at whatever happened between him and Richard (it is not spelled out) he has some sort of pity toward Richard's feelings. In the end he remembers Richard as a brave and courageous man, and thus he does not think the less of him for his desires.

Soon after, in a section narrated by Anna, one of Berengaria's ladies in waiting has a conversation with Anna about Richard. She has been able to figure out his leanings, and is disgusted and wants Anna to tell Berengaria so that she can extract herself from their marriage. Anna wishes to keep the knowledge from Berengaria, but as it turns out she already knows.

The subject is not brought up again until the end of the book. At this point Berengaria is in a loveless marriage, and she all but admits to Anna that she is still a virgin. During the Christmas revelries there is much gossip about Richard and his leanings. Many of the women at court think that Berengaria herself is "queer" and that knowledge of this is what keeps Richard from her bed. The men of the court have a different perspective. They know what Richard favors, but they also know of his valor, his bravery, his virility, and they do not think the worse of him.

In the end, Richard makes a deathbed confession, he says to Berengaria, "But God makes us, you know, and he did not make me--a lover of women--it was not my choice." To me, that is the most powerful observation on the subject in the whole book. This is not a contemporary book, and I was quite pleased to read this observation in a book written in 1951.

Overall, I quite enjoyed the book. I can't vouch for its historical accuracy, but it was a quite enjoyable read.

Angela says

This is a fascinating and absorbing novel which throws a different slant on the character of Richard the Lionheart.

Amelia says

Before I get into the full review, I want to say that although I would recommend *The Lute Player*, I absolutely would not recommend my edition - the 2008 Torc/Tempus. Anyone with less than 20/20 vision is practically going to need a magnifying glass to read the tiny words crammed onto the page. The pages and the cover are very fragile - it looks terribly dog eared after only two reads, the back cover ripped half off simply by the weight of it open in my hand AND the plastic on the cover melted and peeled off when - shock horror - I sat outside for half an hour when it was 20 degrees out. Oh, and it is riddled with spelling mistakes - although whether this is the edition or the original text I couldn't say. Pretty poor anyway.

So, moving on to the review... There's a certain cult built up around Richard the Lionheart. Even though he rather disliked England and only bothered to visit a couple of times when he absolutely had to, even though he viewed England purely as a purse to fund his gallivanting around the Middle East, even though he abandoned us to the tyranny of Prince/King John... people love him. Norah Lofts loved him. I love him. No matter how much I hear that he's nothing like as shiny and heroic as people view, no matter how often I read about his failings... I still love him. If anything *The Lute Player* has made me love him all the more, even though it is not even remotely an idealised portrait. Even Blondel, the lute player of the title, determined to hate him for his maltreatment of Berengaria, doesn't manage it. His respect for Richard is grudging, but it grows and grows. You just can't read about him chipping in, working with the common man, making sure even the lowliest soldier was looked after, and not admire him.

The Lute Player covers a long-ish period before, during, and after the Third Crusade and is told from several perspectives, each of which has been well formed by Lofts - all too often differing voices are written indistinctly, but not so here - there is a real sense of who is talking at any given moment. First, we are introduced to Blondel, the lute player (who is a figure of legend, but may or may not have existed). We see him initially through his beginnings in a monastery, from which he drops out being too compassionate to cope with the self-centredness of the churchmen, and then again when he writes his experiences of the Crusade, from alongside Richard. Our second (and final) voice is Anna, Duchess of Apieta, crippled half-sister of Berengaria of Navarre. I'm rather sad to say that Anna is not a historical figure because she is just wonderful (though she would probably roll her eyes at me saying that!). She's sensible, she's wise and witty, she's kind but not saccharine, a little bit sarcastic and there's this great story built up around her conception and life. I very much wish she was real! The voice for the middle section is Eleanor of Aquitaine. Her section shows us Loft's skill quite as much as the others - we really get a good idea of who she was. It's a pretty realistic portrayal going from my perception of her but it's not unsympathetic. She comes across as fierce and yet we get the sense that she's really just trying to be a good mother. It is in this section that we first come across the notion that Richard may have been gay (there is a fair amount of scholarly debate over this). It is arguably a carefully considered and fairly compassionate portrayal of homosexuality, particularly considering that *The Lute Player* was written back in the late 1940s/early 1950s.

For all that I feared this might be a dull read - dry with endless descriptions of battle and life on Crusade (I prefer my history day-to-day rather than battles, women more than men if I'm honest) and perhaps rather dated (odd to think of historical fiction as being dated, but it can be!) - it was actually highly entertaining and not even once did I feel bored. In the foreword, Lofts tells us her hope that the reading would be without disappointment or fatigue and that it most definitely was.

Carol says

Full of spelling, punctuation and grammatical mistakes. Certainly made the experience less enjoyable. Since I did not remember my elementary school English history I forgot which Richard this might be. Also forgot about what the Crusades were all about. First narrator almost made me put down the book. Improved after that. Some parts engaging, some boring. Long drawn out ending with little to make me care about how it ended. Interesting that some references to homosexuality seemingly enlightened, followed by references to it being perverse. I will accede that it was written in 1951. Will not seek out other books by this author

Judy Richey says

SUPERB..Told in the voice of the real Eleanor of Aquitaine, a fictional hunchback Duchess who is half sister to Berengaria, (the little known but real wife of Richard the Lionheart), and the mythical Troubadour who discovers Richard held for ransom in Germany after the Crusades. This, for me, is ultimate historical fiction.

These characters are alive, and eminently appealing, and Lofts deals with Richard's homosexuality in a touching and delicate way. It is the only written portrait, probably highly fictionalized, of Berengaria, the woman Richard married I have ever encountered. I have never read of her elsewhere.

The path of Richard's Crusade through Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Holy Land is alive with real events woven into the fictional fabric of the relationships of these real, and totally fictional characters, the Duchess, and The Lute Player. The Lute player is based on historical reference to Richard's disappearance after his ship went down. He was held captive for some months, with no word of his survival, until a lute player sang a song co-written with Richard beneath an obscure castle. When Richard answered with the correct verse, the whereabouts of the missing English King was conveyed to Eleanor who arranged his ransom.

It is also a love story, touchingly told. But I won't say more. It is my favorite historical novel of all time, and taught me what to expect in a novel of this genre.

I have re-read it repeatedly, and highly recommend it.

Kerry Hennigan says

I don't know why it took me so long to read a book by Norah Lofts. She has long been a celebrated historical

novelist, having produced numerous Tudor titles and at least two on the Plantagenets (the period I prefer). Anyway, thanks to my local library, I recently came across a reprint of *The Lute Player: A Novel of Richard the Lionhearted*.

Now Richard I is famous for a couple of things – fighting in the Third Crusade, and being associated with Robin Hood. The possibly mythical Robin doesn't make an appearance here, but what we DO have is a very believable portrait of Richard based on the historical evidence available to Ms Lofts at the time she wrote this novel.

The Lute Player of the title is Blondel, known mostly for his role in rescuing Richard from imprisonment by Leopold of Austria. Richard's early allies in the Third Crusade had all become disgruntled or disenchanted with the English king or the Crusade (or both) and in some cases turned against him. Only Blondel and the women in Richard's life seemed to care what happened to him and want him back.

The women in question are his mother Eleanor of Aquitaine, his would-be wife Berengaria, and Anna, Duchess of Apieta, who is destined to always live in the shadow of those more beautiful and desirable than herself. But Anna comes to know love, and, like Berengaria, to want someone who does not, or cannot, love her.

Lofts uses multiple narrators to tell the tale – Blondel, Eleanor and Anna all provide different viewpoints on the principle people and events. Blondel's account of Richard's crusade to recapture Jerusalem from Saladin is by far the most interesting part of the novel, but is rather long in coming. This is why I became impatient with Ms Loft's slow, densely detailed story telling style.

I found myself wanting to find out what happened next, for the story to move on at a faster pace, especially once the principal characters and the situations had been firmly established. First published in 1951, it truly seems that Ms Loft was writing for an audience for whom life moved at a slower pace, who had more time to spend on what to me was procrastination and unnecessary detail.

However, as an historical novel *The Lute Player* certainly does a good job of shining new light on aspects of events usually ignored or glossed over by the history books. For that it is well worth reading.

Kerry Hennigan © August 2011
