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Alison Weir

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In her remarkable new book, Alison Weir recounts one of the greatest love stories of medieval England. It is the extraordinary tale of an exceptional woman, Katherine Swynford, who became first the mistress and later the wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.

Katherine Swynford's charismatic lover was one of the most powerful princes of the 14th century, the effective ruler of England behind the throne of his father Edward III in his declining years, and during the minority of his nephew, Richard II. Katherine herself was enigmatic and intriguing, renowned for her beauty, and regarded by some as dangerous. Her existence was played out against the backdrop of court life at the height of the age of chivalry and she knew most of the great figures of the time — including her brother-in-law, Geoffrey Chaucer. She lived through much of the Hundred Years War, the Black Death, and the Peasants' Revolt. She knew loss, adversity, and heartbreak, and she survived them all triumphantly. Although Katherine's story provides unique insights into the life of a medieval woman, she was far from typical in that age. She was an important person in her own right, a woman who had remarkable opportunities, made her own choices, flouted convention, and took control of her own destiny — even of her own public image.

Weir brilliantly retrieves Katherine Swynford from the footnotes of history and gives her life and breath again. Perhaps the most dynastically important woman within the English monarchy, she was the mother of the Beauforts and through them the ancestress of the Yorkist kings, the Tudors, the Stuarts, and every other sovereign since — a legacy that has shaped the history of Britain.

Katherine Swynford: The Story of John of Gaunt and His Scandalous Duchess Details

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From Reader Review Katherine Swynford: The Story of John of Gaunt and His Scandalous Duchess for online ebook

Steven Peterson says

This is overall a very satisfying book. The author, Alison Weir, takes what scraps of information we have about Katherine Swynford and creates what is at least a plausible tale of her life and times. In addition, we get a detailed portrait of her lover and, later, husband--John of Gaunt, son of a king and father of kings. Indeed their liaison produced several lines of rulers--York, Lancaster, Tudor, and Stuart/Stewart. Indeed, the last paragraph of the book notes the even more remarkable descendants of the two focal figures in this book--Queen Elizabeth II, Diana, Princess of Wales, and most monarchs in Europe today, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Franklin Roosevelt, George W. Bush, Winston Churchill, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Bertrand Russell, and others.

Weir seems careful to separate what is speculation and what is known about Katherine (e.g., she speculates that Katherine might have been in the royal court and might have met some future associates at that time). The context of the times is well described, so that even though details are scarce on Katherine, the context in which she lives is richly depicted. Katherine herself comes off well as a character. Weir speculates that she might have been the model for one virtuous woman in Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" (Chaucer was her brother-in-law). Katherine wed Hugh Swynford, who served as a soldier in the king's army and was often away for long periods of time. As were most marriages of the time, this was more of a business deal than an exemplification of "love." Indeed, the record is unclear as to whether or not Katherine was happy with her husband. After having lived at court for a lengthy time, it must have been disheartening for her when she saw the rather plain housing into which she moved upon marriage.

Then, there is the twinned story of John of Gaunt. He was an important figure in royal circles. He married Blanche of Lancaster, and--odd enough for the time--they were truly in love with one another. His story details his role in English politics and international politics as well as his life with Blanche. One of their sons became Henry IV, succeeded by Henry V and the hapless Henry VI. Upon Blanche's untimely death, he married Constance of Castile; their daughter later married the King of Castile. After his marriage to Constance, and after the death of Hugh Swynford, Katherine became his mistress for some time (they may have separated at one point). She bore him, out of wedlock it goes without saying, four children--from those children came the Stuart kings (Scotland), the House of Tudor, and the Yorkist kings (Plantagenets--Edward IV and Richard III). In an extraordinary twist of history, one of the daughters of Edward IV, Elizabeth, married the first Tudor King, Henry VII.

After Constance's death, Katherine wed John and they lived as husband and wife for the few years together left them.

This is a fast moving story, covering an important part of English history. Weir, as best she can given limited information, brings the different characters to life as much as possible under those circumstances. I found this a fascinating book; it is well written. And, the genealogical tables at the end were absolutely vital for keeping the players straight (the notables include: The Roet family (Katherine's ancestors and her siblings), the descendants of Edward III (including John of Gaunt), the House of Lancaster, the Swynford family, the Chaucer family, and the Beauforts (descendants of John and Katherine, including Stuarts, Tudors, and Plantagenets).

Sue says

This is one of her best. Having read Seyton's Katherine first and then Weir's well researched book really made Katherine Swynford come alive and take her place in the extraordinary history of the Plantagenets. Recommend anyone interested in the complex genealogy of the Wars of the Roses read this book.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

I read this hoping to get a clearer picture of Katherine Swynford (of 'Katherine' by Anya Seton fame).

I ended up with a much clearer sense of John of Gaunt, Henry IV and Edward III. Which is fine, but not what was intended.

So, do I recommend it? If you have an interest in this particular period of history, this may either augment knowledge you already have or give a starting point. If you're looking for the definitive story of Katherine Swynford - I doubt that such a book can now be written. It's a pity: the snippets of history we have indicate that she was a fascinating woman.

Rachel says

I am a huge fan of Alison Weir. Her writing style is engaging and friendly, and it is obvious she knows her way around the contemporary historical texts concerning her subjects. However, this biography of Katherine Swynford, née de Roët, Duchess of Lancaster, shows without a doubt Weir's talents as a historical researcher, assiduously checking and cross-checking everything available to her in order to get as close to the truth as possible.

Much about Katherine's life must be construed from a tiny handful of documents, and without a vast knowledge of the customs and mores of the period, a biographer would be totally at sea. Weir's conclusions are carefully outlined and logical, and she takes pains to address (and refute, if necessary) the conclusions come to by other, earlier chroniclers. Katherine sits at the root of a large genealogical tree, and the influence of her relationship with John of Gaunt had ramifications on late 14th century English culture and continues to influence Anglo-American culture, literature, and politics today. But so little is known of her. Her will does not survive (but we know she made one), no letters in her hand survive (but we know she was highly educated and most likely incredibly literate for her day), and there are no contemporary likenesses of her left to us. Her children, those legitimate from her first marriage and those made legitimate after her marriage to their father, the Duke of Lancaster, played enormous roles in shaping 14th, 15th, and 16th century England, with her blood continuing to run in the veins of the present English monarchs. John of Gaunt has been called the "grandfather of Europe," for the descendants of his three wives married in to practically every ruling house in Europe, from Portugal --- England's oldest standing alliance, thank you John of Gaunt --- to Germany. Ever heard of Geoffrey Chaucer? Say thank you to Katherine: he was her brother-in-law, and attained much of his fame through oblique preferment by John and other members of the royal family who held Katherine in high esteem and sought her favor or the Duke's by promoting her relatives.

And yet Katherine was practically expunged from the rolls of history within a generation of her death, and she is almost a total unknown today. We've all heard of Henry VIII, Katherine of Aragon, Elizabeth the First, Mary Queen of Scots, and Isabella of Castile who commissioned Christopher Columbus to sail west from Europe in search of a new route to the Indies; many are familiar with the suspicious death of Richard II, with Henry the Navigator and the Wars of the Roses, or know the significance of the marriage of Henry Tudor and Elizabeth of York. But very, very few can name the man and the woman from whom all of this sprang.

It is about time, and I think the culture is right, for such an excellent biography of Katherine Swynford to be brought forward. She was the daughter of a humble Hainaultier knight, but she rose to be the second lady in the land, second only to the Queen of England, and her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to the nth degrees became towering figures of English history, continuing to shape the modern world. The story of her love affair with the powerful Duke of Lancaster is almost exactly the story of another royal love affair, a modern day one, and like Weir I will gracefully avoid pointing fingers, but as Weir does I shall quote the late Queen Mum: Men of title and privilege simply do not marry their mistresses. Such a marriage as John and Katherine had, one made for love after the end of a marriage made for political and dynastic reasons, especially when the groom was such a powerful, wealthy, influential man and a good catch, and the bride relatively low-born though extremely well-bred --- "Even in our own time such marriage would cause comment" if such a man married such a woman, his long-time mistress, for love.

Jane says

I think everyone who has read this, me included, was drawn to Katherine's story after reading Anya Seton's novel. While this book contains a few interesting illuminations into this fascinating 14th-century woman, so little is known--and that fact is reflected in the construction of the book. If you take out all the repetitions, I think it would be a third of its current length (how many times were we told that her petitions for a private altar showed her piety and that the petitions were granted spoke highly of how the church viewed her in spite of her relationship with John of Gaunt? Or that the two stayed in contact for the sake of their children? or, or, or...) And if you take out the speculation, there'd be almost nothing left. The book is far more about the better-documented people she associated with.

Bill Bryson's book on Shakespeare faced similar documentation problems, yet he turned it into a delightful romp through Elisabethan London. This one rather plods through the intrigues of Katherine's time. If you're curious about Katherine, it's worth the speed-read treatment. If not, Weir's other books are supposedly far better written.

Teresa says

I've been reading Alison Weir's history books since 1992, as her topics encompass the historical periods I've been interested in for a long time now. I'm always impressed with her insights (usually each book has a fresh, persuasive reinterpretation of some long-held belief) and her clarity (I thought The Wars of the Roses would bore me in its details, but I couldn't have been more wrong). Here, I have to say there were times when I was bored, but that was no fault of the author's writing or of her research, which always seems to be impeccable, or of her subject, except the inescapable fact that there's just not a lot of primary records on Katherine to be found (which the author admits straight off) so, unavoidably, a lot of inferences are made, which is not a problem in and of itself, except her conclusions get repetitive after only a short while.

While I am very interested in this time period and this woman (and I did love Anya Seton's novel, Katherine when I read it way back in the 80s), I think this biography is only worth the time for those who are extremely interested in this time period and/or this woman.

Snooty1 says

Why is there no miniseries about this couple?!?! Someone please make it...PLEASE!

I have fallen completely in love with their story and I need more!!!!

John and Katherine's story kept me on the edge of my chair, I simply had to know how their story would end. I can't even imagine what they went through together and how much they must have loved each other. It's seriously quite overwhelming.

There is an historical fiction about this couple...that I may or may not have just purchased and will consume shortly. ?

Pete daPixie says

So who was Katherine Swynford? Most have never heard the name before. She was the daughter of a page from Hainault who arrived in England under the service of Queen Philippa of Hainault, wife of Edward III. She was brought up in the royal household of Edward & Philippa, married a knight, one Hugh Swynford. She became the mistress and later wife of John of Gaunt (Ghent). Here is 14th century scandal. However at the courts of Edward III & later Richard II, she was highly thought of. Geoffrey Chaucer was her brother-in-law.

Alison Weir's expert research pulls Katherine from the mists of history, to tell a story that reads like a novel. Her genealogy is part of Elizabeth II and nearly every monarch in Europe. Five American presidents, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Franklin D.Roosevelt & George W.Bush. Sir Winston Churchill, Alfred Lord Tennyson & Bertrand Russell.

Jamie Collins says

This is very readable, and it's a nice overview of the life and times of Katherine Swynford. Her story is fascinating, but I must say that Anya Seton's popular novel *Katherine* is a more satisfying read, for all its inaccuracies.

Apparently very little is actually known about Katherine, and this biography seems to be mostly derived from the surviving records of gifts that were granted to her and her family by various people, primarily John of Gaunt. The book is a constant stream of guesswork: Katherine perhaps lived here in this year, and she probably had her third (or maybe fourth) child in this year, and she might have been doing such-and-such in this place at this time. Weir originally wanted to write a biography of John of Gaunt, and I really think she should have stuck with that.

This left me wanting to re-read *Katherine*, and to find a good book on Richard II.

Cynda says

I read this book because

Katherine Swynford was a scandalous woman

She is the ancestor of many monarchs of England, throughout Europe, and various presidents of the US.

Her biography might help to better understand the War of the Roses. It does not.

Because this biography of Katherine does not help, I am unwilling to swim through all the possibilities and likelihoods that Weir writes of.

I understand that Alison Weir writes a book whose topic better matches my goal of getting a basic understanding of the War of the Roses. I am surprised I did not know of her book -The War of the Roses-. I will read either her book or someone else's book on the topic.

Kathy Davie says

A nonfictional, biographical account of Katherine Swynford, mistress and finally wife to the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt. The time period covered begins in the mid-1300s.

I recommend this to anyone interested in writing about the time period between the 1300s to the early 1400s and/or if you have an interest in the Tudors, Stuarts, Yorks, the War of the Roses, the 100 Years War, or the medieval time period.

My Take

It's a fascinating love story of an orthodox yet unconventional man who ignored the social conventions of his time, who adored a woman of learning, wit, and discretion, and she loved him back for himself as well as the financial security it brought her and her children. Hers with her husband, Hugh Swynford, as well as the Beaufort children she bore the duke.

Weir is primarily clinical in her reporting on Katherine, and mostly because, as she says, there is so little primary material available about her. Women were not important in that time, so emphasis was not placed on them. Instead Weir has pulled together facts and extrapolated events. No, she hasn't made a thing up. In fact, Weir has been extremely careful to note what is possibility and what is specific. And still, she brought enough heart to this story to make me cry and marvel. Weir impressed me with what she brought to this biography.

It also made me wish there could have been more Queen Philippas and more Katherines if only because of the way in which they approached child raising. History would have been much less vicious.

Weir's focus is on Katherine but as there is so little available on her, most of the text is of John, and so it becomes an assessment of the times, a gloss of how the politics and infighting affected Katherine and John. It's a different perspective on the times, more of a surface look with no dipping underneath to examine events in any depth, but then the focus of *Mistress of the Monarchy* is not events but on a single woman of whom there isn't much information but what Weir can glean from legal documents, births, deaths, marriages, and household movements.

Weir does look at almost everything about the time period: the peasants, the lords, the politics, the royals,

food, clothing, mores, architecture, gifts, customs, child rearing, the time's idea of Chivalry and what constituted "courtly love", the Church, how foreigners saw England, Chaucer's life, laws of inheritance, obligations, and the like.

What Weir has to say about the Church will make you understand more why Wycliffe and Martin Luther took the positions they did. I certainly wouldn't have wanted to live under a Church-influenced government:

"...all sexual acts were sinful...

Even within marriage, sex was meant to be only for the purpose of procreation:

...all love is disgraceful...

The wise man must love his wife with judgment, not with passion."

And yet, not even the priests could follow this, ahem...

It was fascinating to read the bits of Chaucer and how the verses related to events in his life.

The ending will make you cry and cause you to wish you could go back in time to warn John. To list the *what ifs* and *if onlys*. As it is, I drew some satisfaction for the promise they gave for the future.

The Cover

The cover is gorgeous, but then I've always had a weakness for medieval tapestries.

The title is too accurate for Katherine's descendants "would become the direct forbears of the Royal Houses of York, Tudor, and Stuart, and of every British sovereign since 1461, as well as six U.S. presidents". And those are just the highlights of her descendants, for Katherine was truly a *Mistress of the Monarchy*.

Dana Stabenow says

I'm about fifty pages in, and while I'm fascinated by the subject (Anya Seton's Katherine was one of the first historical romances I ever read, along with everything by Thomas B. Costain), the writing in this book is so sloppy and pedestrian I'm having difficulty continuing to read it. Was there no editor involved in the publication of this book? For crying out loud!

I wish Marion Meade had written the bio of Katherine Swynford. Sigh...

Update on 4/26--

I stuck with it because Katherine is a fascinating character but this book does not serve her well. Or at all. Never would have made it to the end if it hadn't been for the subject matter. Bad writing, bad editing, the people written about have all the life of stick figures, and the author hasn't even a passing acquaintance with logic.

I find it incredible that anyone could have written a biography of Katherine Swynford that was this lifeless. Run away, run very far away.

Temaris says

I picked up a book thinking huh, Christmas present for my mother, and then somehow it was gone 1 in the morning and I'm still. reading.it.

I read the Anya Seton book, and I knew it probably wasn't quite like that, so when I saw a book on Katherine Swynford I may have pounced on it. I have mixed feelings about it.

Alison Weir takes a very small amount of cloth and cuts an exceedingly large coat from it. The cultural and political stuff is fascinating -- I remember enough from socio-economic history of the middle ages that this all slots neatly into the hundred years war, the black death and the Lollards.

And of course, there's Chaucer, and Lancaster and it's all good fun with 700 years distance :-). I did get a certain amount of whiplash from her attitude to Froissart -- depending on whether she likes the inferences or not he's reliable ... or not. And the whole business of taking a possibility and then treating it as established fact and relying on it for the next rather flimsy assumption -- and then taking to task other historians doing the exact same thing (such as assuming that every gift to Katherine related to her relationship with John, and then when similar or greater gifts are handed to other women then no, no those aren't evidence of affairs. Except when they are. *sigh*) is annoying and frustrating. Also, dishonest.

The fire which destroyed the Savoy Palace also destroyed key financial records. More importantly, so little remains from the fourteenth century that much of our history of that period is anecdotal and based on accounts never intended for the purposes to which they are now put, and which bear the weight of historical enquiry with varying degrees of success.

Weir makes no real attempt to derive Katherine's character except from the facts, and from a scattering of maybe fewer than fifty points it's hard to really feel that yes, this was the woman who captivated John of Gaunt. I was left fascinated but ultimately unsatisfied.

That said, it's a riveting read. Flimsy fabric and all.

Jennifer says

This is biography done the old-fashioned way--tracking down every trace of a record and pursuing every obscure sideline. Weir tells the story of Katherine Swynford (c 1350-1403) who had a long affair with John of Gaunt, a younger son of King Edward III, and ultimately married him when they were both well into middle-age (no pun intended). This was a brazen love match in a century when marriage was strictly for political and financial gain and no one expected it to have anything to do with affection. Even more unusually, Katherine and John's four bastard children were later legitimized. Katherine's descendants were major players in the War of the Roses, became the Stuart and Tudor dynasties, and the the ancestors of every British monarch since 1461.

Lisa says

Katherine Swynford is a figure of romance and scandal, remembered best as the low-ranking mistress who married her lover, John of Gaunt, and became the Duchess of Lancaster. Their children, the Beauforts, would be legitimised by Richard II and rise to prominence in the reigns of the Lancastrian kings, before their descendant, Henry VII, would ultimately claim the throne of England as the victor of the Wars of the Roses.

I neither enjoyed this book a great deal or found myself terribly annoyed by it. I picked this up with some hesitation, aware that Alison Weir has something of a reputation as not being reliable as a historian, but this, surprisingly, did not arise as a significant issue in my reading. Maybe I just don't know enough about Katherine Swynford and John of Gaunt to be a proper judge.

Katherine's life is poorly evidenced – some records, such as her will, have been lost or destroyed – and for many, Anya Seton's interpretation of her in the iconic novel *Katherine* is the dominant image. However, Seton's work was fiction and by reading Weir's biography, some (but not all) of Seton's inaccuracies are revealed – of course, as Weir notes on her appendix on this novel, it reflects more accurately the time when it was written and published more than it does Katherine's own historical period.

But how does Weir build a biography out of such limited evidence? There is some speculation – honestly, I tired of reading “it is impossible to know/there is no evidence/we will never know” (or some variation) before Weir told us how Katherine “must have” felt. And there is some repetition – we heard a lot about how pious Katherine was and how Chaucer owed pretty much everything to her influence.

Moreover, Weir turns the narrative into a sort of roving tale. This is subtitled as a biography of Katherine and John of Gaunt, but we also get a lot of biographical detail and conjecture about other figures. At one stage, the book even felt like a biography of Katherine, Gaunt and Geoffrey Chaucer (I suppose that's fair – he was, after all, Katherine's brother-in-law and enjoyed Gaunt's patronage). Other figures briefly sketched by Weir include Katherine's sister, Philippa Chaucer; Gaunt's first two wives, Blanche of Lancaster and Constance of Castile; all of Katherine's children, the Swynfords and the Beauforts; the future Henry IV and his wife, Mary de Bohun; and Richard II. In some ways, this makes sense as an approach – for instance, we get information about Mary de Bohun because Katherine served her as a lady-in-waiting. But it does have its downfalls – Katherine barely appears in the second chapter, for instance, and a reader solely wanting to know about Katherine might be frustrated by the diversions Weir takes. I'm interested enough in this period and some of these figures that I didn't mind learning about them.

However, I do think Weir could have done more in biographizing John of Gaunt. I also felt frustrated that her discussion of his death was limited to a few pages discussing the theory he had died of a venereal disease. It makes for a convincing argument, but then, with no other options presented, it's hard to come to any other conclusion.

I was also not entirely comfortable with Weir's tendency to turn to Chaucer's works to extrapolate details and interpretations to the real-life figures. I know very little about Chaucer and I accept there is some logic in extrapolating from *The Book of the Duchess*, written about Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster and Gaunt's first wife, but his other works?

There were some details of Weir's that I took issue with. Her discussion of Edward of Woodstock ('the Black Prince') and Joan of Kent lacked nuance, and after recently reading biographies of both figures, this was disappointing. Part of this might be due to the book's age – it is eleven years old. Michael Jones's

recently published *The Black Prince*, for example, convincingly challenges the account of Edward's abhorrent behaviour at Limoges. Weir states that Edward died of amoebic dysentery, but the more recent studies I've read challenge this (I think one pointed out that it would be impossible to survive amoebic dysentery for nine years) and instead suggest other causes, such as rectal cancer or a venereal disease.

Weir also repeats the narrative that, in 1382, the twelve-year-old Mary de Bohun gave birth to her and Henry Bolingbroke's firstborn son that did not long survive, which is now discredited and outdated – it is now accepted that their firstborn child was the future Henry V, born most likely in 1386. Additionally, Weir is a bit odd with her sources – in some situations, she upbraids Walsingham or Froissart as unreliable, then turns around and uses them as though they are reliable.

The writing is largely fine – it's clear and accessible, but it wasn't as readable as I thought Weir's writing would be, given her status as a bestselling author of popular history. I wearied of the detailed descriptions of the numerous buildings Katherine lived in at various times of her life. Furthermore, Weir's attempts to succinctly summarise Richard II's deposition and the Wars of the Roses were overwhelming. It was like being smacked about the face repeatedly by information at high speed.
