



The Crown

Nancy Bilyeau

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Tudor fiction like no other. Joanna Stafford, a Dominican nun, learns that her favorite cousin has been condemned by Henry VIII to be burned at the stake. Defying the rule of enclosure, Joanna leaves the priory to stand at her cousin's side. Arrested for interfering with the king's justice, Joanna, along with her father, is sent to the Tower of London.

While Joanna is in the Tower, the ruthless Bishop of Winchester forces her to spy for him: to save her father's life she must find an ancient relic—a crown so powerful, it may possess the ability to end the Reformation.

With Cromwell's troops threatening to shutter her priory, bright and bold Joanna must decide who she can trust so that she may save herself, her family, and her sacred way of life. This provocative story set in Tudor England melds heart-stopping suspense with historical detail and brings to life the poignant dramas of women and men at a fascinating and critical moment in England's past.

The Crown Details

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From Reader Review The Crown for online ebook

C says

Part Da Vinci Code, part Nancy Drew, part historical fiction, the end result was neither an interesting historical story nor a riveting page-turning mystery. While all the pieces are there: the major historical figures of the Henry VIII era, the girl who becomes a nun but still keeps her adventurous spirit, the chivalrous constable who always appears at the right moment; unfortunately, they never quite connect and the leaps and jumps made to attempt it are silly and downright unbelievable.

Joanna Stafford, niece of the disgraced Duke of Buckingham and former lady in waiting for Queen Katherine of Aragon, becomes a novice nun at a priory just as Henry VIII is shutting down monasteries and priories around England. When she sneaks out of the priory to witness her cousin be burned at the stake, Joanna gets caught up in the political mystery of the Crown of Athelstan, an historical artifact believed to hold great power. Joanna is sent back to the priory to search for clues in order to rescue her father, who is being held hostage in the Tower of London (see? random.). The various nuns and two recently arrived friars all carry mysteries and secret pasts of their own. But surprise appearances of the Lady Mary, Catherine Howard, George Boleyn (in a flashback), etc. never fit the flow of the story. Additional attempts to tie in Richard the Lionheart, Edward the Black Prince, Arthur Tudor and greek mythology, of all things, only add to the mess. And Joanna, despite a stubborn spirit, is too dedicated a nun to really convince the reader she can fill the role of heroine.

The initial plot had potential, just remove the fluff, rework the heroine and completely redesign the ending!

Patricia Burroughs says

A mystery set in the reign of Henry VIII (after he set aside Katharine of Aragon and off-with-her-headed Anne Boleyn, during his marriage to Jane Seymour). It is a cracking good tale with murder, blood, betrayal and crimes of passion, set amidst a world of religious peril, because the main character, Joanna, is a Catholic nun. (You might recall Henry VIII's awkward relationship with Rome and the slight grudge he had against the Roman Church?)

I find the point of view of Sister Joanna quite compelling, as her love for her Catholic faith and her God are pitted against her love for her country and her King. I really look forward to the next book in the series.

Margaret Sankey says

Imagine a da Vinci Code plot set in 1537--Evil Bishop Gardiner wants to find a rumored medieval relic, the Aethelstan Crown, which is reputed to kill unworthy kings (leading, tediously, to it being sent away to France and buried and then found and dug up and returned and then sent away and then...). How or if he plans to stop the Reformation or Henry VIII specifically is left as a giant plot hole. Luckily, being that this is 1537, there is no professor of symbology, plane travel or tortured Renaissance technology, just a nun and some donkeys and a lot of trudging around looking at tapestries. Somehow, this manages to be both marginally historically more plausible and dumber.

Aaron says

This incredible first novel brings readers to the months surrounding the birth of King Henry VIII son Edward. Readers are quickly drawn into the tale of Sister Joanna Stafford, the daughter of a fallen English house and a lady-in-waiting to deposed Queen Katherine of Aragon. In fact, Joanna had also served in that capacity in the final days of the Queen's life.

It is that service that led her to a life as a Dominican novice at the Priory of Dartford, an ancient structure that had been set up by King Edward IV many decades previous. Joanna finds herself sneaking out of the priory at the beginning of the novel to attend the execution (burning at the stake) of her beloved cousin, who is accused of treason against the King for her stance on his attacks on Catholic Church properties to despoil them of their riches and land.

It is during the execution and her father's attempt to bring about a quick end to her cousin that the worst happens. She and her father are arrested and held in the Tower of London for treason. While there, she is brought under the influence of Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester. He uses the imprisonment of her father to force her to help him in a search. He believes that her priory holds an ancient relic: one crown worn by the Saxon King Athelstan with a mystic past that is rumored to bring strength and success to worthy leaders and death to those less deserving. The crown also has ties to the Black Prince, Richard the Lionhearted, and Prince Arthur, Queen Katherine's first husband Arthur. Joanna is sent back to her priory with orders for the prioress to take her and two monks into the order to search for the crown in secret.

This is just the start of an investigation that will include murder, political intrigue, rape, and a nation torn apart by the Catholic/Protestant dispute at the core of the Reformation. Fans of Philippa Gregory will be intrigued and not want to put this one down. It is like one of her novels mixed with the Ellis Peters' *Brother Cadfael* series. I would love to read more about Joanna's story!

It is clear that Bilyeau, a magazine editor, has done her share of research. The novel concludes with a list of strong resources. My only regret is a lack of an Author's Note that would talk more about the real people, places, and events that are woven throughout the tale and what liberties she might have taken with history as part of the drama she created! That doesn't detract from how great the story was, though!

Samantha says

The Crown was a unique novel that I had not quite decided if I was going to read until I had an opportunity to get a copy of the latest Joanna Stafford novel, *The Tapestry*. I'm glad that I did. Joanna is an interesting and well developed character, and I enjoyed her story.

The writing and historical research evident in this novel were two of the elements that I enjoyed most. Joanna is incredibly innocent of some worldly truths, yet well connected through her family. She is firm in her faith, but with an independence that makes her foolishly impetuous at times. She came across as very real as she struggled with contradictory desires and goals.

For a nun, Joanna has a lot of men in her life. The way each of them fits into her story left me wondering just

how long she would remain a nun or if she would even have a choice, as the dissolution of the monasteries is occurring around her.

I enjoyed the genuineness of Joanna's faith, even as she learned that not all she trusted in was true. With a quest directly from Bishop Gardiner, Joanna must decide for herself what is right.

The only element that put me off for part of the book was the mysticism that was blended with the very well done portrayal of the Catholic faith. In the end, though, even this was wrapped up satisfactorily.

I look forward to continuing with Joanna's story in The Chalice and The Tapestry.

Christy English says

I enjoyed this one...lots of Tudor intrigue and a loveable heroine...it does my heart good to read a good book :)

Wanda says

29 MAR 2015 - a terrific debut featuring a strong female lead. I look forward to Books 2 and 3. I will be taking today off from reading in order to cook and bake for the week. Will begin Book 2 tomorrow.

Judith Starkston says

The Crown, set in 16th century England, follows a young nun as she tries to save her family, her priory and her faith, armed primarily with a stubborn streak and a good mind. There are a number of pleasures to reading this book.

One is watching the development of Joanna. When we meet her, we are struck by her naïveté and unpreparedness for the world that she has thrust herself into, but also by her determination and intelligence. She's one of those rare people who gain a clearer, more cynical understanding of the world without losing her principles and religious devotion (but allowing them to grow more complex). Her choices don't follow a predictable pattern. She's more subtly portrayed than I would have guessed at the outset. Towards the end, characters sometimes heap more praise on Joanna than feels believable—she becomes almost a 16th century superwoman—but for the most part she's persuasively done. Her limitations and strengths fit within the scope of a well-educated noblewoman who has taken religious vows.

Another delight of reading The Crown lies in its web of intrigue, politics and mysticism. Bilyeu has built a nonstop plot that keeps bringing you to new settings, new crises, and new sides of characters you thought you understood. The Crown reads as a thriller set within the 16th century—hard to put down, full of action. Generally you wouldn't guess that a Dominican Priory would be so intense, but even the extended portion of the book set there twists with ever rising suspense. Much of the plot arises out of the politics of Henry the Eighth's court and the upheavals following his split with the Catholic Church. Katherine's divorce, the Boleyns, Cromwell, the Bishop of Winchester—familiar characters from history take part but not in their

stereotypical ways. Added to these pages from history, Bilyeau interweaves a more mystical thread involving the crown of the title—King Athelstan’s crown, the first king of England. Powers beyond human understanding may or may not lie in this crown, but the actual crown is counterpointed against the mystical power of individuals’ beliefs. What sort of miracles are possible and why? Mixed into this theme are characters such as Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, who proclaim deeply held beliefs but who may have participated in pragmatic power plays to such an extent that their doctrines are only a screen behind which they have lost themselves. Deciphering who is trustworthy is a constant challenge in this book both for Joanna and for the reader.

I also enjoyed the 16th century life Bilyeau paints. Through Joanna we understand the quiet value of the life these cloistered women chose and the small graces of community she feels. We also see, smell, and hear castles and manor houses, lowly inns, hovels, and the Tower of London.

The book portrays great cruelty and viciousness, but the overarching sensibility is one of hope and a clear-eyed optimism even in the face of all that tries to crush the human soul. It’s both a fun, fast read you can’t put down and an insightful read about spirituality and endurance.

Andrea Zuvich says

Darn good book. Wonderful characters, excellent plot, and now I'm half in love with Brother Edmund! Congrats to Bilyeau on a brilliant literary work.

Jo Anne B says

2.5 stars

This was just ok for me. It was a mystery infused with historical fiction. The historical fiction didn't work and it would have been better as just a mystery.

I did not like any of the characters. They were supposed to be royalty and members of the church yet no one was steadfast in their convictions and all succumbed to their weaknesses. This made the book not believable.

There wasn't enough background on the main character Joanna so you never connected with her or rooted for her. She acted courageously several times in this book and stood her ground to chauvinistic men (it was the 1500s after all). That was the only redemption in the book.

The plot wasn't interesting either. Joanna was forced to have to find this Crown that supposedly Jesus wore on the cross because it had special powers. If she did this her father would be let free from the Tower. Coincidentally it was located in the same church that Joanna practiced her nunnery out of. This was a lame premise for a book. It is a real let down when the Crown is finally found too. Nothing happens with it. The whole book is based on finding it and when it is found it is just left there in its place buried (maybe for another book to be written about for a series).

This book jumped all over the place because it seemed like the author was pulling at strings just to keep the

reader interested. There was a murder in the church and there was a whole underlying story about women being raped by their fathers. It was knitted into pictures on tapestries that hung on walls in churches all over England. All the men in this book seemed to be dogs. They just wanted to have sex including the monks. Maybe the author herself doesn't think too kindly of men.

The writing style did not match this time period. Usually these books are more literary and elegantly written than this. This is far from the likes of Phillipa Gregory and Margaret George.

Not bad for an author's first novel. But I only kept reading because I love this time period not because I liked this book.

Jenny Q says

When I picked up this book to start reading I was thinking, OK, how exciting can a book about a nun really be? Well the answer is: VERY! I was pleasantly surprised to discover this book was nothing like I was expecting and Joanna Stafford made for a great protagonist. I think that's mainly because she's really not cut out to be a nun, despite her fervent faith, but she hasn't quite figured that out yet. She's educated and she was raised to be a lady of the court, so she's wise in many ways that her fellow sisters are not. She's opinionated, has a take charge attitude, stands up for what she believes in, and has a hard time keeping her mouth shut. Those qualities don't make for a very good nun, but they do make for an excellent heroine!

This is a mystery and the back cover copy does a good job of setting up the story, so I won't risk divulging any spoilers by describing the plot. But I will say that Nancy Bilyeau is an excellent writer. She really gets into some of the political intricacies of Henry VIII and his advisors, and seamlessly weaves them into a tale of blackmail and the search for a holy relic set amidst the lives of some of the people who have the most to lose from Thomas Cromwell's war against the Catholic Church. The narrative is perfect, the period details are just right, the characters are intriguing, and it really is a well-crafted novel.

But, there are two things that keep me from rating this higher. The story is exciting and takes some good twists and turns, but it also suffers from some very slow periods and I found myself skimming to get back to the action. And, as a hopeless romantic, I was disappointed in some choices Joanna made at the end of the story and I was left feeling a little dissatisfied. So I had to find out if Nancy is writing another Joanna Stafford book, and she is! After the way things played out in *The Crown*, Joanna should be in for some adventurous times in a dangerous environment and I'm looking forward to the continuation of her story.

Author Guest Post and Giveaway Jan. 16-24 at Let Them Read Books!

Shruti says

[when Joa

Chris says

This is not a perfect book. The ending is a bit too much thrown at the reader too soon, and some of it doesn't really seem to have a point. The reader is told one too many times how perfect Joanna is, though in fairness the perfect is more moral and intelligence than looks (a nice change).

Yet, I found myself enjoying the book. It's a step above The Other Boleyn Girl (anyone else crack up about PG's quest for historical accuracy in movies?). I found something likable about Joanna, perhaps because she found herself in situations that felt real. The most compelling part of the novel is the sequence in the Tower of London.

Allison says

I started out reading *The Crown* on my phone, since historical fiction is often slow enough for me to read it gradually. About half way through I abandoned that plan, and finished it up in a couple of evenings instead. Enough said.

I really enjoyed the details of life in the priory combined with the mystery, which finally truly surfaced halfway through. What I liked best about it is the way I really felt the impact of Henry VIII's war on the Catholic church at the level of the people tossed around by it. I love it when historical fiction deals with the smaller people. Somehow it's more interesting to me than reading about kings and queens, it's less predictable because I don't already know how it has to end, and the details of daily life are fascinating. The characters felt so real to me, and it brought the time period alive. I love it when historical fiction doesn't turn out to be dry as dust!

Believe it or not, there's a little bit of romance, too, even though the characters are mainly nuns, novices, and friars. It was just enough not to feel out of place in the setting, and it added complexity to the struggles of the characters who really believe in their vows of chastity.

I can't wait to read more about them!

BrokenTune says

DNF @ 23%.

I was quite excited about starting *The Crown*. Usually I don't seek out historical fiction set in Tudor England but the prospect of reading this with a book club was too good to miss.

This is the first installment of a series following Joanna Stafford, a daughter of a Catholic family that has been regarded a threat to Henry VIII, a novice at Dartford Priory, and an accidental adventurer it seems.

The beginning of the book was really promising as Joanna sets out to London to witness the execution of her cousin and to offer her moral and spiritual support. What I liked about the beginning was that Joanna's character and motivations seemed very similar to those of Antigone in the play by Sophocles, and I was hoping to see if her character would develop in a similar way.

From then on, the story gathered a lot of pace and Joanna seemed to be thrown from one task to another in no time.

I don't know what my expectations were with respect to the story but there seemed to be an imbalance between the task of writing to move the plot and writing to convey the historical aspects of the story.

And this is where the book lost me. There is a lot of detail about life in Tudor England, but it didn't somehow manage to create Tudor England in my imagination. Partly, I think this is because the author has been very ambitious to show that she really understands the times and this sometimes comes across as info-dumping and sometimes as plain name-dropping of historical figures. I know that Cranmer etc. were around at the time, but this has nothing to do with the actual story at hand. And while the political and religious tensions of the time are a catalyst to Joanna's story, I feel it would have better served the story to replace the constant name dropping with an investigation into the characters motivations and thoughts and a little more detail of their spaces they inhabit. To replace it with writing that makes the reader feel like they have been transported through time and that provides a near visceral experience of what it would have been like to walk in Joanna's shoes.

Moving on...

Audra (Unabridged Chick) says

I dare you to read the first sentence and not want to keep going. From that oomph of a beginning, Bilyeau's fantastically fun and engrossing historical novel takes what is an overdone era (for me) -- the Tudors -- and provides a fun angle: the story of a noblewoman-turned-nun who finds herself an enemy of the state when Henry VIII declares himself head of the Church. At the novel's open, she's left her convent -- without permission -- to attend the public execution of her beloved cousin, and finds herself embroiled in both a battle for her faith and a fight for a legendary relic. While this has shades of Dan Brown, I didn't find this plot twist to be tiresome or over-the-top: it was the right mix of mystery and thriller.

Bilyeau's writing is the winner for me: her characters were fantastic and the pacing wonderful. In particular, I found her articulation of Joanna's faith understandable, even if one isn't a devout Catholic. Despite the religious theme to the plot, this novel isn't inspirational. (I think more Mary Doria Russell than Rumor Godden.)

Even if you're suffering Tudor fatigue like me, give this novel a try -- I loved the focus on the religious community and Henry and his sexual shenanigans aren't a part of the story the way much of the Tudor fic is. The novel's heroine, Joanna Stafford, was wonderful -- human, real, authentic to the era and herself, and quite compelling. She's made the list of fictional character I'd like to have as a real life bestie.

A wonderfully fun debut -- treat yourself and pick this one up, especially if you're a historical fiction fan. I understand there's a second Joanna Stafford novel coming, for which I am deeply grateful. Joanna is a heroine I want to spend more time with and I'm wicked excited for Bilyeau's next novel.

Orsolya says

Nancy Bilyeau's "The Crown" began on a sour note; as I instantly gathered that it was trying "too hard" to

be historical fiction. Meaning: that it tried to follow the epitome formula (major event on the initial pages, character flashbacks, etc). Sadly, “the Crown” fails to deliver on a truly deep story which is not only reflected by the plot but also by the characters and writing style. For instance, the sentences are too choppy and short, which leaves much to be desired. Furthermore, Bilyeau lacks in the literary language department. Simply, “The Crown” feels too modern.

Regarding the characters, Joanna (main character) is too child-like and naive for her supposed numerical age causing a lack of the reader defending her actions. Joanna tends to simply be annoying. Remember the mentioning of flashbacks? “The Crown” employs an overuse of jumping back-and-forth between the memories and the present (this is in the beginning half) which comes off as Bilyeau not having a strong hold of the current story’s essence. Plus, this technique is clearly used to strengthen Joanna and allow the reader to “get to know” her but it becomes too excessive and is not seamless with the rest of the story.

“The Crown” is easy to read (a bit too easy) which results in a page-turner of sorts. However, the plot and attempted suspense and drama fall flat. The reader keeps awaiting intriguing and intricate designs but these never seem to fully occur. This can also be said about Joanna, herself; as she is one-dimensional and never grows with a proper arc. Joanna continues to be unlikable due to this lack of layers. Simply, “The Crown” lacked depth and was as complex as a Nancy Drew mystery. The context of the plot lacks anticipation and the up and down movement which is common to most mysteries.

Some of the events described are so atrociously unbelievable, that they literally cause eyes to roll. The second half (beginning at page 200) tests the strength of a reader to continue. At this point in the novel, Bilyeau presents event after event in quick succession. However, instead of adding depth, these events are so ludicrous that they detract from the story and make it less believable. Basically, instead of “getting better”, “The Crown” became less gripping as it progressed.

Reflecting more on the second half of the novel; it seemingly had little to do with the first section and did not link cohesively. It can be argued that Bilyeau had an idea for a beginning and an end of a novel and struggled to fill in the middle. Plus, “The Crown” is light on the actual history and the characters don’t pull their weight to make up for this absence. Their actions don’t even make sense. For example, a friar making a comment to Joanna (a novice) that he considered sleeping with her and she didn’t even mind. Joanna later kisses another man and it’s not even a big deal. Yeah, right.

The ending of “The Crown” felt rushed in the sense that Bilyeau tried to explain each facet of the mystery, yet they felt forced and didn’t add to the story. Not to mention, the ending was abrupt in terms of the actual mystery and unsatisfying AND is too romanticized. Furthermore, the unexpected entrance of George Boleyn is ridiculous and absurd.

Sadly, it is very clear that “The Crown” is Nancy Bilyeau’s first novel and I’m not sure if there is enough potential for better works and inclination to read from her again. If you think that PG and “The Other Boleyn Girl” is a masterpiece then you may enjoy “The Crown”. For those seeking a deeper historical fiction piece, this can be skipped.

Sandra Helen says

I first learned of The Crown by Nancy Bilyeau when I saw a tweet with a link to a teaser/trailer. This 60

second trailer made me want to know more about the book, and it made me want a trailer for my own book *The Hounding*. (It's forthcoming.) I found the author's blog, I went to amazon.com, and I knew for sure I wanted to read the book. Then an exciting thing happened. I won the book in a contest! Now, I have read it, so I want to tell you about it.

This is an historical novel set in Tudor times, the era of King Henry VIII specifically, but Bilyeau has moved a bit sideways and chosen something more obscure than Henry's court. In this debut novel, her protagonist is a young novice of the Dominican Order, Joanna Stafford, who was also a noblewoman.

Soon after entering the novitiate, she goes off on her own to try to aid her cousin Margaret who is condemned as a traitor and is being burned at the stake. There she meets her father who is also doing something illegal and they are both confined to the Tower of London. From this exciting beginning the author takes us on a page turning adventure in which she leads us deeply into the life of the 16th century. I felt as though I had lived in the walls of the Tower, the Abbey, ridden on those rutted roads, cobbled streets, felt the damp cold, the hot summers, tasted the dry bread. My heart beat faster with every twist and turn. I stayed up late, got up early to read on. I wanted to finish the book, and I didn't want it to end. I'm delighted to know there is a sequel. If you enjoy a good Tudor novel, strong female protagonists, a great story and excellent writing, you will love this book.

(This review is posted in my blog Red Crested Chatter in WordPress.com)

Kate Quinn says

I somehow missed meeting Nancy Bilyeau at the last Historical Novel Society Conference, which is a pity because I'd have liked to congratulate her on just what she pulled off with "The Crown" - a serious investigation of the personal ramifications of the Dissolution, paired with the headlong chase of an Indiana Jones magic-relic hunt. The plot is simple: Sister Joanna has entered the Dominican order as a nun at a time when nunneries are on the brink of going extinct in England under Henry VIII. Joanna is blackmailed by the sinister Bishop of Winchester to find the mysterious Athelstan Crown, a relic whose power might be useful in stopping the dissolution of the monasteries . . . oh, and there's a killer on the loose, too. The murder mystery and the McGuffin of the crown are great fun, but I found Joanna and her theological dilemma the most fascinating. She's a woman of faith but not fanaticism, and the dilemma of how she will live her life if she cannot be a nun is movingly handled. Most Tudor-centric fiction takes a positive spin on the dissolution of the monasteries: Catholicism = bad, and without Henry VIII's split from the church, we would have no Elizabeth I. But "The Crown" shows us the plight of those like Joanna who were horrified to find their way of life - a good, moral, and gentle way of life - torn away from them. I will be eagerly moving on to Bilyeau's sequel "The Chalice" to see how Joanna adjusts to her new world.

Jane says

A sincere thank you to the recommender of this novel!! I dislike the Tudor era; I feel film and fiction have been saturated with it. To the usual tales of courtiers and royalty, this novel was an outstanding, happy exception! The author approached the period from a different slant--the religious enmity gripping England in the time of Henry VIII, and the forced dissolution of monasteries and churches. The narrator and heroine is the appealing Sister Joanna Stafford, a Dominican novice. The novel was a page-turner and hard for me to put down.

Sister Joanna escapes by night from her priory and travels in disguise to be near to and to pray for her dearest

friend, also cousin, Lady Margaret Bulmer, who is being burned at the stake for treason. Sister Joanna is arrested for treason herself and is then held in the Tower of London. She sees her father being tortured, then is told by the Bishop of Winchester if she can find and give to him the Crown of Athelstan, the early English king, he will release her father and will put pressure to have the breaking up of the religious houses halted. The crown apparently has some kind of power--a blessing? A curse? It is hidden supposedly in her priory. Sister Joanna, in the company of two friars, Brothers Edmund and Richard, returns to begin her mission. There is a murder of a local nobleman on priory property. Clues as to the murderer and to the location of the crown, abound. There is espionage, deceit, treachery, vengeance, as well as love of God and human love.

Sister Joanna is strong, principled, intelligent, and courageous. I was 'rooting' for her all through the story. Characterization on the whole was very good; some of the people, though, surprised me by revealing different faces than those they had displayed originally. I liked the stalwart Geoffrey Scoville, the constable. The author painlessly worked in some early English history along with the narration. The device of the Greek mythological tapestries and their symbolism was a very clever touch. Each chapter ended as a 'cliffhanger', so I didn't want to stop reading. The writing showed a deft hand. The ending was open-ended; there is a sequel, *The Chalice*, which I'd like to read. Of any medieval mysteries, especially those involving monastics, I find this novel easily the best, except possibly the Brother Cadfael oeuvre.

Most highly recommended!
