



A Secret Alchemy

Emma Darwin

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Two murdered princes; a powerful queen betrayed; a nobleman riding towards his certain death...

The story of the Princes in the Tower has been one of the most fascinating - and most brutal - murder mysteries in history for more than five hundred years.

In a brilliant feat of historical daring, Emma Darwin has recreated the terrible, exhilarating world of the two youngest victims of the War of the Roses: the power struggles and passion that lay behind their birth, the danger into which they fell, the profoundly moving days before their imprisonment, and the ultimate betrayal of their innocence.

In *A Secret Alchemy*, three voices speak: that of Elizabeth Woodville, the beautiful widow of King Edward IV; of her brother Anthony, surrogate father to the doomed Prince Edward and his brother Dickon; and that of present-day historian Una Pryor. Orphaned, and herself brought up in a family where secrets and rivalries threaten her world, Una's experience of tragedy, betrayal and lost love help her unlock the long-buried secrets that led to the princes' deaths.

Weaving their stories together, Emma Darwin brilliantly evokes how the violence and glamour of past ages live on within our present.

A Secret Alchemy Details

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From Reader Review A Secret Alchemy for online ebook

Danielle says

3.5 stars

Elysium says

3.5 stars

I really liked the portrayal of both Elizabeth and Antony. They're both usually the villains and power-greedy people and it was refreshing to see them in another light. Antony's story begins when he is taken to Pontefract Castle and knows he is being executed there. Elizabeth is in Bermondsey Abbey where she lived during Henry VII's reign. We don't hear the whole life story of either but few selected episodes. I have to confess I'm not usually huge fan of Antony but couldn't resist falling for him just a bit.

I didn't care for the present day story that much and could have lived without it. Also I had problem with too many narrative switches.. One minute it's Una telling her story, then the next Antony is about to die and then it switches to a scene where he's on a horse riding somewhere. So confusing!

Tara Chevestt says

This has got rave reviews, but it wasn't for me.. too much back and forth. One minute it is Elysabeth long ago, then it is the modern day character, and then back to long ago with Antony about to die and then all of a sudden Antony is riding on a horse thinking about his lover. Confusing. If you don't like "back and forth" (somewhat like The Forgotten Garden) don't pick it up.

Susan says

A Secret Alchemy is narrated by two historical characters, Elizabeth Woodville and her brother Anthony, and by one fictitious one, Una Pryor, a historian who's returned to England from her home in Australia to sell her English property. During her stay in England, the recently widowed Una, who's working on a book about Anthony Woodville and his reading, visits the cousins with whom she was raised and encounters the man whom she loved as an adolescent.

Anthony's story begins with the last journey of his life: he is bound for Pontefract Castle, where he knows that the future Richard III has scheduled his execution. Elizabeth tells her story from the quiet confines of Bermondsey Abbey, to which she has retired from the court of Henry VII. Neither tells his or her life story from beginning to end; instead, they each focus on a few selected episodes, such as Elizabeth's courtship by Edward IV and Anthony's exile abroad. As a result, the cast of characters is relatively small: we meet Edward IV, Edward V, a few Woodvilles, Anthony's lover, and Elizabeth's long-time attendant and confidante. There's a cameo appearance by Thomas Malory and a couple of very brief ones by the future

Richard III.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Anthony's and Elizabeth's stories, and had tears in my eyes after reading both (which doesn't happen very often, especially when I know the ending). Anthony's tale, especially the love story Darwin gives him (which I found very plausible) and his terrible grief when he realizes that his charge Edward V is at the mercy of Richard III, is very moving. Elizabeth, who's so often reduced to a caricature by historical novelists, is beautifully drawn here. She's strong-minded and courageous, yet vulnerable. There's even a touch of humor here and there, as when Elizabeth's earthy sister Margaret comments on the queen's morning sickness.

The contemporary story, Una's, was well done also. I didn't find it as compelling as the medieval ones, but Darwin did a nice job of working the historical strands and the contemporary strand into an integrated whole.

Darwin has researched her novel with care, and she provides an afterword putting the tales of Anthony and Elizabeth in their historical context.

I heartily recommend this novel.

Diane Condon-Boutier says

I found this book very difficult to read. The dual timeline thing usually isn't a problem for me. I even wrote a novel using it! Still the author switches mid chapter, which is abrupt, and slightly disturbing to the flow.

Another switcheroo feature cropping up too often for my ease of reading is the change of point of view: sometimes it's Elizabeth who's speaking then Anthony, then Mark, then the main contemporary character.

I believe the story would be more accessible, and let's face it, the politics of the day which landed those young boys in the tower were complicated enough for our understanding without the flip flopping of pov.

The story is very interesting and I was intrigued by learning about the workings of a family specialized press, and the need to save a family dynasty.

Still, I am quite easy to please and don't often give so few stars to historical fiction...this book is for the diehard historical fiction fan...others abstain.

Susan says

It took a lot of effort to plug through this book. I began reading with much hope...after finishing Philippa Gregory's "The White Queen," I was eager to read more about Elizabeth Woodville, the War of the Roses and get another take on the princes in the tower. I was intrigued because this book is split into three different viewpoints-- Elizabeth, her brother Anthony Woodville (who fascinates me) and a fictional modern-day English bibliographer. These plot set-ups are usually fun.

Not so much.

Elizabeth and Anthony were both completely unbelievable-- saintlike and naive, and not very interesting. The modern-day story had the most tenuous of links to the past, and wasn't very interesting on its own. The story was clunkily told throughout, and random facts and characters were thrown in without care. A reader not already familiar with the history of the time period would be hopelessly lost, and it would not be worth the effort to figure it all out at the end of the day. Very poorly written.

Fun fact though: about halfway through the book, I decided to actually read the author's bio on the back and realized that Emma Darwin is the great-great-granddaughter of Charles Darwin. Let's hope that her writing evolves a bit....

Misfit says

Una Pryor returns to England to settle her affairs, as well as the fate of her family's old home and printing business The Chantry, the cousins are torn whether to sell or to preserve it and it's long history. Interspersed with Una's story is that of Anthony and Elizabeth Woodville as they reflect back on their lives and the events that lead to what is now known as the Wars of The Roses and the disappearance of Elizabeth's two sons - the Princes in the Tower.

Darwin does a nice job of crafting the voices of both Elizabeth and Anthony as well as weaving Una's struggles with her grief over the death of her husband and a surprise meeting with a man from her past. It was quite refreshing to see the Woodvilles (especially Elizabeth) portrayed in a more realistic manner and not the black hearted villains you typically find them in novels on this period from today's latest and *cough* greatest authors. I have to say that Susan and S McGee's reviews on Amazon have done such a darn good job of putting this book into words that I really don't have much more to add. While I didn't find it the fastest paced book, I did enjoy it a great deal nonetheless. Four stars.

Missie says

very hard to follow, but interesting

Rio (Lynne) says

I just couldn't get into it. I really tried. :(

Margaret Skea says

A Secret Alchemy, Emma Darwin.

Where this book really shines is in the quality of the writing – it was a pleasure to read for that alone. And if I was rating on the writing alone I would have given it 4 1/2 * but trying to give an overall rating is more difficult. Individually the two stories that it contains kept my attention, though I found the medieval one the

more moving, and the link between them is, I feel, somewhat tenuous. The almost equal weighting of them meant that for me it felt like reading two separate books. Which is the reason I settled on 3 stars. I wish we could subdivide the star rating, if I could I would have given it 3 3/4

(I also found it difficult to work out how the title fitted with the story, which is probably my fault rather than the author's, but which I nevertheless found distracting. There was one very minor reference to alchemy, but as we never got to see the end result of that I was slightly irritated by it. I'd have liked to know if the king was convinced and what chicanery had been used to do so.)

Nevertheless well worth a read, especially if you are a fan of double period books, though you may need a dictionary for some of the Latin and a few technical terms.

E says

A comfortable read.

Kirsten says

There was just enough to keep me going through the whole thing, but in the end, this was just a confusing mess. She switches narrative voice too frequently (and timelines as well), so I was never quite sure *when* we were. And the modern story was just a mess - simply did not belong to the rest of it, and was jarring every time I got there. In the endnotes, Darwin says she included Anthony's voice in addition to Elizabeth's because so many of the major events in Elizabeth's life were off-screen (as it were). However, since much of his narration was in flashback, it *still* felt off-screen (and confusing to boot: when is this bit happening again?). The end twist (a la Byatt's Possession) was just lame - read *that* book instead to see how to wrap a historical story in a modern one, complete with scholarship and found letters. What a disappointment - too many things going on, and trying too hard.

Lindsey says

I'm not sure what this novel was supposed to be. I was expecting historical fiction that actually linked up to something that the present day narrator was doing. I thought it was very well written and did enjoy the sections with Elizabeth Woodville and Antony Woodville as the narrators and liked a lot of the descriptions. However, I failed to 'get' how it really tied in with Una's story - she was a historian writing about Antony and Elizabeth, yes; she visited the same places they had been; she found something about Antony. However I thought it would be a bigger deal than the information she found out and I was disappointed. I did like the Richardian bits but thought the Una parts were a bit pretentious and hard going. I also didn't really think that Darwin revealed anything about the Woodvilles or Richard III that hasn't been done before and actually found the fact that she seemed to be so one sided in favour of the Woodvilles annoyed me a lot. I am not sure if that was the point.

But let's talk about the thing that irritated me most about this. Elizabeth seemed to be a total victim throughout. She was tolerant of everything her husband did, was a virtuous and good wife to her husbands, a caring mother who doted on her children and couldn't bear to be apart from them and suffered at the hands of

that bad man Richard III. Antony also was portrayed as a kindly mentor to Edward V and seemed to come across as a selfless and godly person who only wanted to keep his young ward safe. Of course history is not that simple and we will never know what happened, but when he was taken by Richard III and sent to Pontefract it was portrayed as Richard desiring to seize power from the rightful heir. Darwin never mentions the scheming attributed to the Woodvilles and the fact that Antony wanted Edward firmly in his power so he and Elizabeth could exercise their own power. Richard III is not whiter than white, but I just thought the Woodvilles were presented too simplistically as was Richard.

I would only recommend this for die hard Richardians as I didn't think it added anything to books about Elizabeth Woodville that are already out there.

Limecat says

Gah! I had to give up on this tosh before it antagonised me into committing an act of unspeakable petulance.

Really, really trying too hard. The main problem is that it flits from character to character before you've got your head around any of them. It then does what my mother does in real life - launches into some topic she thinks you know everything about when you haven't the FAINTEST idea what she's talking about and have no idea who Mrs McFlinty at no 78 is and REALLY don't remember the 1976 incident of the cat, the fridge and a sardine sandwich.

In short - I know a reasonable amount about this period of history. More than is healthy, probably, and I found it extremely difficult to keep adjusting to the change in narrator and historical circumstance from chapter to chapter. Anyone with zero knowledge of the Wars of the Roses, the 15th Century, Elizabeth Woodville and the Grey/Rivers would quite possibly be baffled quite a lot of the time.

And no one wants that from a book.

Steve lovell says

I remember the book. I cannot remember the title, nor the author – but I remember the book. I recall the dominant colour on the cover was red, and it featured a medieval king – maybe it was a Henry. It could have been a William, an Edward or even a Richard. I doubt if it would have been my namesake, Stephen – a short, embarrassing reign. If I said that what I found in between the front and back covers fascinating, firing my love for the post-1066/pre-Tudor period of British history, I would have been telling a porky. I remember nothing of what was in the publication, I just remember it was turgid, dense and I had nary a clue of what was going so convoluted were the machinations of the major players. Their constantly shifting allegiances

completely lost me – it was all a confused muddle in my mind. No doubt I would have been reading the torturous tome for a university course. I suspect any examination question on the era would have been dodged to go to Henry VIII or the Stuarts where I possessed a firmer grasp. But I was nothing if not a conscientious student. I did read the thing, but to no avail. To this day the Wars of the Roses have been a mystery, that is, until this book. Thank you Emma for helping me out. A fictional account has made the period clearer in my mind, but still far from crystal.

I was mightily impressed with Ms Darwin's other semi-historical saga, 'The Mathematics of Love', a novel part set in the immediate post-Napoleonic Wars period – my Goodreads review of it is below:-

<https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/7...>

'A Secret Alchemy' is also very worthy, although not as much to my taste as its predecessor. It did, though, markedly enhance my knowledge of the conflict via the voices of Elizabeth Woodville and her brother Anthony, major participants in the confusing events. Richard III is still the bad guy, but with some redeeming features in line with modern non-Shakespearian notions on the notorious hunchback. It is instructive that gays still had a rough time of it back then too. Just in case we didn't get it from the storyline, Ms Darwin helpfully includes family trees and a precis of the factual events. The latter was placed at the end which is when I discovered it. It would have been of greater assistance to this reader had it been placed at the beginning.

Parallel to the Middle Ages going on is a contemporary story involving bibliographer/historian Una. She has just returned to the UK from Oz to settle her affairs after the death of her hubby. Here she encounters the subject of pre-nuptial unrequited love. Eventually the twosome embark on a journey retracing the sites that featured in the book's other narrative. As it turns out all rather neatly, she is researching the written output of Elysabeth (sic) and Antony (sic). Of course there are linkages between the two story threads - otherwise what would be the point – in what the book's blurb describes as a 'daring' fashion. For me it was all a tad forced. The 'finding' of the significant letter, around which so much hinges, was particularly contrived. The paralleling is far more successful in 'Mathematics of Love'.

Ms Darwin also invokes a sort of pigin Olde English-speake for the tales of Elizabeth and Anthony and for me this was one of the rewards of the book. At times a glossary would have been useful as occasionally meaning wasn't always conveyed by context.

Based on her oeuvre, albeit a brief one at the moment, Ms Darwin is a novelist capable of the most exacting research with an over-riding facility for turning fact into readable fic/faction. Her website is reporting that she is working on a third effort, but given this publication came out in 2008, it is a long time coming. Despite a few reservations with this title, I suspect the wait will be worth it, given that the grounds around her choice of subject will have been thoroughly mined.

I am glad my days of onerous reading tasks, both academic and pedagogic, are behind me. Never again will I have to plough through mind-numbing tracts, but rather I can enjoy 'translators' of Emma Darwin's ilk – writers who possess the chops to turn dry, tedious history into palatable, plausible prose.
