In this sweeping historical narrative, Barbara Tuchman writes of the cataclysmic 14th century, when the energies of medieval Europe were devoted to fighting internecine wars and warding off the plague. Some medieval thinkers viewed these disasters as divine punishment for mortal wrongs; others, more practically, viewed them as opportunities to accumulate wealth and power. One of the latter, whose life informs much of Tuchman's book, was the French nobleman Enguerrand de Coucy, who enjoyed the opulence and elegance of the courtly tradition while ruthlessly exploiting the peasants under his thrall. Tuchman looks into such events as the Hundred Years War, the collapse of the medieval church, and the rise of various heresies, pogroms, and other events that caused medieval Europeans to wonder what they had done to deserve such horrors.

My Personal Review:
Who is Enguerrand de Coucy and why should we care?
Coucy was a French noble whose life and position intertwined neatly with many of the momentous events that defined the 14th Century. He appears, Zelig-like, at the head of armies, at the elbow of both the Kings of France and England and in the great councils of state that determined the actions of a nascent French nation.
His story is remarkable and remarkably well documented. His life and actions serve as the central thread that ties the events surrounding the Hundred Years War between England and France together in this marvelous book.
Tuchman displays this late Middle Age period in all of its nasty burtality. The Great Plague hit in several waves, reducing Europe's population by between one half and one third. A century of warfare left roving bands of knights and armed men loose in the countryside to pillage and destroy between summons to fight for king and country. The common man and woman, evolving from a status of near slavery to severe oppression, owed service to their lord and taxes to almost everyone.
Tuchman brilliantly weaves the above facts of life with the politics and struggles between rival nobles, kingdoms and a corrupt church. This book is very well written, as I had always heard Tuchmans works to be. She possesses the rare ability to write solid history -- this book is fact filled, and thoroughly documented -- in the manner of a great storyteller. Her characters and events, leavened by Tuchmans wry observations and logical conclusions, are marvelously developed.

So much happened in this time period that it does bear scrutiny. Chivalry, the code of the Knight that was supposed to benefit people in exchange for a life free from common worries, had denigrated into a corrupt facade that shielded ruthless brigands from law and sanction. The great Church, long the common denominator among disparate peoples became first hopelessly corrupt then divided for decades by rival popes more interested in Europes balance of power among earthly kingdoms than in promoting the Kingdom to whom they supposedly gave vassalage. Great landed nobility struggled with each other and began a transformation from nearly autonomous players in an ever changing system of alliances across nationalities to becoming the building blocks of the infant state. Policy and war rose and fell on the ability, whim and maturity of changing kings. Although our own recently passed Twentieth Century could witness evil and bloodletting on a more sustained and organized basis than any that preceeded it -- hence the title Through a Distant Mirror, Tuchmans work also illustrates how far society has come in those parts of the world where it is civil and grounded in natural rights. Thus, Tuchmans book shows both the constant danger through time of mans darker side as well as the progress earned by those who have managed to diffuse power and ground everyday people with a voice in their affairs and rights that can not be abrogated.

This is a marvelous work from every facet. I am now ordering other Tuchman books to see how she handles mans affairs in centuries distant from that enjoyed by Enguerrand de Coucy.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century by Barbara W. Tuchman - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!