The Crown (Joanna Stafford) by Nancy Bilyeau

Smart Historical Fiction With Plenty Of Suspense

An aristocratic young nun must find a legendary crown in order to save her father—and preserve the Catholic faith from Cromwell’s ruthless terror. The year is 1537. . . Joanna Stafford, a Dominican nun, learns that her favorite cousin has been condemned by Henry VIII to be burned at the stake. Defying the sacred 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. The ruthless Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, takes terrifying steps to force Joanna to agree to spy for him: to save her father’s life she must find an ancient relic—a crown so powerful, it may hold the ability to end the Reformation. Accompanied by two monks, Joanna returns home to Dartford Priory and searches in secret for this long-lost piece of history worn by the Saxon King Athelstan in 937 during the historic battle that first united Britain. But Dartford Priory has become a dangerous place, and when more than one dead body is uncovered, Joanna departs with a sensitive young monk, Brother Edmund, to search elsewhere for the legendary crown. From royal castles with tapestry-filled rooms to Stonehenge to Malmesbury Abbey, the final resting place of King Athelstan, Joanna and Brother Edmund must hurry to find the crown if they want to keep Joanna’s father alive. At Malmesbury, secrets of the crown are revealed that bring to light the fates of the Black Prince, Richard the Lionhearted, and Katherine of Aragon’s first husband, Arthur. The crown’s intensity and strength are beyond the earthly realm and it must not fall into the wrong hands. With Cromwell’s troops threatening to shutter her priory, bright and bold Joanna must now decide who she can trust with the secret of the crown so that she may save herself, her family, and her sacred way of life. This provocative story 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.

My Personal Review:
The Crown
The Crown is excellent historical fiction, and a satisfyingly suspenseful mystery, set during the reign of Henry VIII. Joanna Stafford, a young nun, learns that her favorite cousin is about to be burned at the stake. Disobeying the Dominican sisters vow of enclosure away from the world, she leaves Dartford Priory to support her cousin.

Joanna and her father are captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London, charged with obstructing the Kings justice. That is where Stephen Gardiner, the Bishop of Winchester, finds her and makes his proposition. In exchange for her freedom and her fathers life, Joanna is to return to Dartford Priory. There, she must search for Athelstans crown, a relic so powerful it might grant eternal life, or brutal, cursed death. If found, it could end the Reformation.

The Crown is just about everything I could want from well-written and well-researched historical fiction. Sister Joannas perspective gives an excellent sense of time and place. Sister Joanna is devout and certain in her faith, and finds purpose in the rituals of the Dominican order. Supporting characters are equally well-drawn. Their ideas and beliefs feel properly anchored in their time period, rather than 21st century imitations mouthing lines and wearing costumes.

As Joanna begins to search the priory in secret, the level of detailed description means I can almost see what she is seeing: the shadowed passages of the priory, half-finished tapestries, leeches in the infirmary. Once things get more suspenseful, there is a distinct whiff of supernatural chill, to go along with the increasingly complex turns of history and conspiracy. Forced to leave her priory more than once as she searches for the missing relic, Sister Joanna has to make choices about her faith and her allegiances, as the conspiracy leaves her questioning who she can trust.

Ive already seen a few reviews comparing The Crown to The DaVinci Code. Maybe its an inevitable comparison, given elements of Church lore, a gory murder tinged with the supernatural, and a main character trying to untangle conspiracy. I hope the comparison boosts Bilyeaus sales of her debut novel. I also think its a lazy comparison that shortchanges The Crown. If Dan Browns fans are led to this novel, theyll read Bilyeaus nuanced characters, and well crafted descriptions, and see what theyve been missing.

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