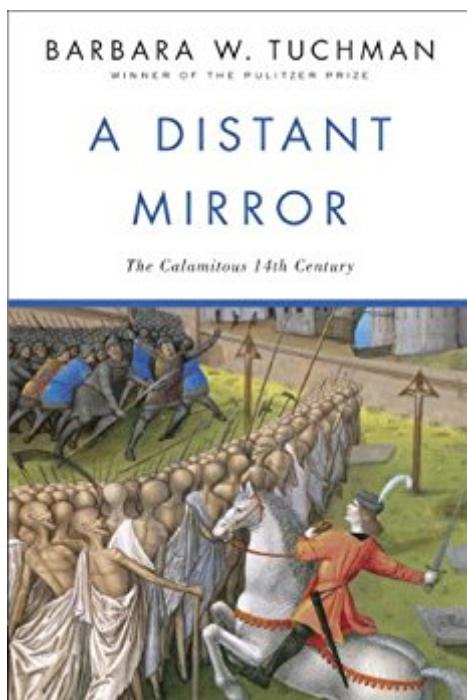


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A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century



Synopsis

Barbara W. Tuchman—^{the acclaimed author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning classic The Guns of August—}once again marshals her gift for character, history, and sparkling prose to compose an astonishing portrait of medieval Europe. The fourteenth century reflects two contradictory images: on the one hand, a glittering age of crusades, cathedrals, and chivalry; on the other, a world plunged into chaos and spiritual agony. In this revelatory work, Barbara W. Tuchman examines not only the great rhythms of history but the grain and texture of domestic life: what childhood was like; what marriage meant; how money, taxes, and war dominated the lives of serf, noble, and clergy alike. Granting her subjects their loyalties, treacheries, and guilty passions, Tuchman re-creates the lives of proud cardinals, university scholars, grocers and clerks, saints and mystics, lawyers and mercenaries, and, dominating all, the knight—in all his valor and “furious follies,” a “terrible worm in an iron cocoon.” Praise for *A Distant Mirror*: “Beautifully written, careful and thorough in its scholarship . . . What Ms. Tuchman does superbly is to tell how it was. . . . No one has ever done this better.” The New York Review of Books: “A beautiful, extraordinary book . . . Tuchman at the top of her powers . . . She has done nothing finer.” The Wall Street Journal: “Wise, witty, and wonderful . . . a great book, in a great historical tradition.”

Commentary

NOTE: This edition does not include color images.

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Customer Reviews

A fantastically written and often riveting introduction to the Middle Ages. I wish my brain were powerful enough to assimilate every last detail presented in this book, but, sadly, I will have to settle for just getting a flavor for the medieval period, something that this book expertly delivers. The most brilliant aspect of this book is the way Tuchman chose to organize it: She presents the life of one figure, Enguerrand VII, Sire de Coucy, a French noble who was prestigious enough in his day to merit chroniclers' attention but not so prominent and singled-out as a king, and uses the narrative of his life as a vehicle to explore the many facets of medieval life and culture. Topics addressed that I found particularly fascinating include all aspects of corruption within the Church, the figures and ideas that paved the way for the Reformation, the perpetual menacing presence of mercenary soldiers and the strategies governments used to subdue their destructive influences, chivalry in theory versus chivalry in practice, marriage during the 14th century, the medieval man's obsession with death and the macabre culture that grew up around that, the real motivations behind medieval knights' insatiable thirst for crusade, the tragic recurrence of plague and so many more. She cites a quote from another historian that I think captures the flavor of the enigmatic medieval noblemen she works so diligently to capture: "...in turn refined and barbaric, generous and bloody, knavish and chivalrous, above mankind in their courage and love of glory, beneath mankind in their hates, their furious follies, their duplicity and savage cruelty" (571). This book is incredibly well-done, and I look forward to checking out more from Barbara Tuchman. It took almost a year of my life to get through, and it was very much worth it.

Tuchman calls this work "A Distant Mirror" yet shows on numerous occasions Tuchman shows that this mirror of our society is, indeed, not so distant. The institutions and conventions of modern civilization have their roots in the late Middle Age kingdoms of Europe. The ways we differ are insightful, as well. For example, knights, retainers, squires, mercenaries and common people all fought for a person -- their King or Prince or Duke -- and not for the concept of "country." With the advent of modern weapons, knights and noble warriors were not as dominant over commoners who began to use matchlock firearms and eliminate the knight's superiority on the battlefield. This led to

larger armies and the emergence of nation building. Tuchman's approach of following one noble family in northern France during the 1300's is efficient and effective. Her style is readable, with just the right amount of facts concerning life in the Middle Ages. It is full of calamities, many of which still haunt us today.

A fascinating survey of Europe in the 14th century through the lens of one man. Well-researched and surprisingly thorough, this book shows us a Europe in flux. It is a time I was only vaguely familiar with before reading but I definitely interested now. This era showed the beginning cracks and the genesis of the upheavals which would rock Europe in the ensuing centuries. Here are the birth pangs of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the French Revolution.

One of my favorite semi-biographical books. Based on the life of a real French aristocrat of the Middle Ages (as much as historical detail was available), this book gives a real glimpse into the life of our ancestors. Aristocrats had more information about their lives saved through family, church, and governmental records, but it isn't too hard to imagine that if their lives were full of danger from war and disease that the common man had it even worse. I've read this twice and predict a third time coming soon. It's fascinating how power was wielded even then. More muscle than brain, but when those were combined in one person, things really moved for them.

Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror* paints a vivid and detailed picture of fourteenth century Europe, a century plagued by social, economic and physical ills that 'mirror' our current era, and can therefore serve both as a lesson and a warning. It's not difficult to see why Tuchman, a brilliant and encyclopedic historian, viewed this century as a mirror for the world after World War II, and her perceptions at the time she wrote the book hold even more true today. Fourteenth century Europe was an era of exceptional economic and social inequality, in which the nobility thought nothing of exploiting and pillaging those less fortunate, in the name of personal gain. A time in which the original ethical foundations of chivalry and mutual obligation had given way to the demands of materialism and self-indulgence. A time of brutal and constant warfare for the sake of territorial expansion. A time of religious corruption and schism, with two so-called Popes (one in Avignon and one in Rome) battling for supremacy and economic power. A time of painful climate change and famine, caused by the onset of what is recorded as a small Ice Age that lasted several centuries. It was also the century of the Black Plague, which killed between a third and a half of the European population. With the exception of this final aspect, all the issues of that century find their reflections,

and their warnings, in today's reality. This book is fascinating, sobering, instructive, and a must-read for any of us who wish to partake in learning the lessons derived from past mistakes.

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