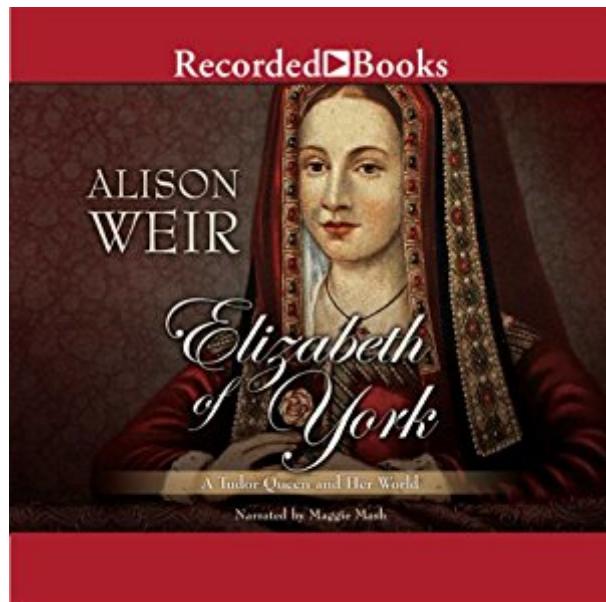


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Elizabeth Of York: A Tudor Queen And Her World



Synopsis

Many are familiar with the story of the much-married King Henry VIII of England and the celebrated reign of his daughter, Elizabeth I. But it is often forgotten that the life of the first Tudor queen, Elizabeth of York, Henry's mother and Elizabeth's grandmother, spanned one of England's most dramatic and perilous periods. Now New York Times best-selling author and acclaimed historian Alison Weir presents the first modern biography of this extraordinary woman, whose very existence united the realm and ensured the survival of the Plantagenet bloodline. Her birth was greeted with as much pomp and ceremony as that of a male heir. The first child of King Edward IV, Elizabeth enjoyed all the glittering trappings of royalty. But after the death of her father; the disappearance and probable murder of her brothers - the Princes in the Tower; and the usurpation of the throne by her calculating uncle, Richard III, Elizabeth found her world turned upside-down: She and her siblings were declared bastards. As Richard's wife, Anne Neville, was dying, there were murmurs that the king sought to marry his niece Elizabeth, knowing that most people believed her to be England's rightful queen. Weir addresses Elizabeth's possible role in this and her covert support for Henry Tudor, the exiled pretender who defeated Richard at the Battle of Bosworth and was crowned Henry VII, first sovereign of the House of Tudor. Elizabeth's subsequent marriage to Henry united the houses of York and Lancaster and signaled the end of the Wars of the Roses. For centuries historians have asserted that, as queen, she was kept under Henry's firm grasp, but Weir shows that Elizabeth proved to be a model consort - pious and generous - who enjoyed the confidence of her husband, exerted a tangible and beneficial influence, and was revered by her son, the future King Henry VIII.

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Customer Reviews

Alison Weir, of necessity, subtitled her biography "A Tudor Queen and Her World" because frankly there isn't that much known about the life of Elizabeth of York that would otherwise merit 450 pages. Yes, she was born in tumultuous times. And yes, the accident of birth, and historical events converge to make her an important figure in the resolution of the War of the Roses. But truthfully, she is the sort of person who was swept along by history's tide, not an active player who attempted to determine its course. Indeed, Weir spends a surprising amount of time telling us who Elizabeth of York wasn't: NOT a formidable, passionate and stubborn advocate like her granddaughter, Mary Tudor; NOT a brilliant, shrewd survivor who wields power with skill like her descendant and namesake Elizabeth I. Nor was she a phoenix capable of rising from the ashes of disappointment like great-grandchild Mary, Queen of Scots. No, says Weir. This Elizabeth, very much a woman of her time, is conventional. Happy to be consort even though she might have been regnant. Happy to be the pious, virtuous and ever-patient helpmate. There is frequent repetition of the deep seeded misogyny of her day (all of it true) and one is almost ready to concur with Weir that we should appreciate Elizabeth (because of these constraints) merely as a survivor. Except.....there were so many formidable women actually surrounding Elizabeth of York during her lifetime, that she comes off as a bit of a milksop in comparison. Her own mother, Elizabeth Wydeville was a shrewd manipulator of power and a fierce advocate of her family interest. Her mother-in-law Margaret Beaufort was relentless and successful in realizing her son's rather presumptuous ambitions. And her father Edward IV had no more implacable enemy than Margaret of Anjou who either went around an addle-brained husband or tried to drive over any member of the House of York who tried to thwart her ambition for her son. So it is perfectly fine that Elizabeth of York was unlike the half dozen women mentioned above. It does however make her dull (or to put it more pleasantly--conventional). Any biography of her deeds is therefore something of a snooze--lots of details about how many yards of fabric she was given as queen (after the sixth or seventh listing I stopped caring) and how many prayer books she owned and what she inscribed them. There's even a few pages devoted to her penmanship (neater than her sister's I'm happy to report). Hence the....And Her World....Weir does do a fine job of sorting out the ebb and flow of Yorkist fortune and astutely observes that Edward IV marriage to the base Elizabeth Wydeville would, decades later, plant the seeds of his House's self-destruction. Stomaching her mother's arriviste family was more than most Plantagenet could or would bear, and the premature death of her father left his heirs, male and female, exposed and vulnerable. Weir deftly delves into the "who killed the little princes?" controversy, which shouldn't be all that controversial, IMHO, concluding it was almost surely

Gloucester. I agree. In retrospect, the parts of the biography I liked best had little or nothing to do with Elizabeth of York. Odd praise for certain. It is when Gloucester assumes the throne that Weir makes a good case for its transformative effect on her subject. Briefly, and rather creepily, Weir shows that this now bastardized half-royal, in an effort to regain or secure her position was actually willing to marry the uncle who murdered her brothers, maternal uncles and brought her low. It is a fascinating example of a person doing what is needed to survive and I wish Weir had explored it further. Of course an exploration could only be conjecture, but that resolute Elizabeth, determined to survive was infinitely more interesting than the pious devoted consort who occupies the last half of the book. Frankly, the final 15 years of Elizabeth's life is proof that virtue, while always commendable, can also be extremely irritating. Apparently Elizabeth never objected to being slighted by her husband--with regard to her belated coronation or his miserly dower. Nor did she object to being upstaged by a willful mother-in-law. If your husband mistreats your own mother, canceling her dower, ah well, don't stir the pot. Should your husband's paranoia attaint your brother-in-law, devastating your sister's family, just go along to get along, even though Weir repeatedly tells us how devoted Elizabeth is to the close knit Wydeville clan. Apparently instability and turmoil made Elizabeth of York as timid as a mouse and a bit of a doormat. Happily for her, constant acquiescence gained her husband's eventual, if hard won trust, but at what price? There is no consideration or discussion of what it must have cost her pride or dignity. In fact, one of the more bizarre passages asserts "there is no record of Elizabeth's reaction" to her brother-in-law's arrest for conspiracy and treason. Perhaps not, but I can imagine what any decent woman's response would be to a paranoid husband tearing her sister's family asunder--shock and horror seem likely to me, Ms. Weir. For some reason the author is loathe to draw even commonsensical conclusions like this for they obtrude into her thesis of the contented and pious good-deed-doer. It is entirely plausible the petty but regular slights from Henry mask his own insecurities, and here I think Weir misses an opportunity. She is so determined we believe they genuinely loved each other (which I don't doubt) she fails to explore a very complex relationship where each needed but must also have resented the vulnerability such reliance imposes. Frankly, Elizabeth's claim to the throne was far superior than an upstart Welsh nobleman. Even if she made her peace with the need to subjugate her feelings, it had to have galled her. Further, one may come to love somebody without being blind to their misdeeds or bad behavior--most people have to do so. Weir however seems overly vested in the belief Elizabeth was not just happy, she was happier than most. But for the travail of lost children we might have been told blissful. It apparently never occurs to the author a contented facade can be a mask to conceal more complicated, but dangerous feelings. Weir's less than

thorough evaluation of Elizabeth and Henry's multi-layered relationship foreshadows my biggest qualm about the book--the author's depiction of Henry VII. Recent biographies like Penn's Winter King portray a miserly, paranoid whose spysystem and Star Chamber were akin to modern day secret police. This Henry VII was relentlessly determined to quash any threat, or even a perceived threat to his power. Weir doesn't even hint such a monarch reigned. At worst her Henry VII is a bit cheap and rather suspicious which led to some unfortunate behavior. One doesn't have to endorse portrayals as harsh as Penn's but any thoughtful evaluation should take his excesses into account. A hard look at the ruthlessness of Henry VII tells you much about the Henry who followed. Apples never fall far from the tree, as my grandma used to say. The author insists: "Henry was often a cheerful, witty and congenial companion. He loved court ceremonial, music, cards, dice, gambling, and delighted in the antics of tumblers, jugglers [and] acrobats....to his children he was an attentive and loving father. Also he was a faithful and loving husband to Elizabeth. There is NO assessment of his hated tax system that squeezed all classes and revived the power of monarchy by lining his coffers; nor is there mention of the Star Chamber and spy system he perfected with thugs who could have taught Francis Walsingham a trick or two; ignored is the fact that for the most part, when he died, his nobles and subjects greatest emotion was tremendous relief. He had, to his credit, ended years of civil strife and the instability it entailed. But peace exacted other prices. And yes, Elizabeth did come to love him. But let us also remember this is a woman, who by the author's own investigation was proved willing to marry her murderous uncle Gloucester. If Henry was a catch then it is so only by comparison. Looking back at Weir's effort I am surprised she attempted a conventional biography of Elizabeth of York. There are so many blanks in Elizabeth's life that "we simply don't know" becomes a too familiar refrain. As a result, there is lots of detail about those around her, not nearly enough about herself to be satisfy. And that which is known is almost always readily accepted at face value. Rarely does Weir scratch below the surface of the official, public version. For me that lead to a few spurious conclusions. When writing about a woman who lived 500 years ago, reasoned speculation is perfectly acceptable. What seems strange is to conclude that a life of such tumult and personal danger resulted in a character completely guileless and indifferent to the exercise of power; always complacent, ever content. I liked Weir's fictional account of Lady Jane Grey. It was plausible, well-imagined and looked at the interior life of a historical figure whose life wasn't sufficiently documented for in depth biography. Relevantly, I think it portrayed how easily people can be swept along by events and to some extent be at their mercy. Elizabeth of York's life suffers similar gaps and blanks and therefore doesn't really lend itself to the author's approach. There is lots of information in Elizabeth of York, and much well-recounted history. But biography

should impart a sense of having come to know its subject on some personal level. In that essential regard, Elizabeth of York doesn't succeed, the subject is still an enigma to me.

I am all too familiar with Alison Weir's reputation amongst historians, but because there has been little written on Elizabeth of York, I went against my better judgment and decided to try this biography, so-called. Initially, I was settling on a 3-star rating, because there was really nothing all that special about the book. Certainly there is little about the writing style to keep the reader engaged, but I suppose that people who know little about this time period might find something of use. But as I read on, that 3-star rating began to wobble, and then slip, and eventually it went into a complete free-fall. There is no actual biography here; there is only a recycling of material from other books, with Elizabeth's life as a pasted-on theme. It turns out that there is a good reason that no in-depth biography has been written on Elizabeth of York. There is little to no source material on her, and what little there is portrays an utterly conventional woman of her times, who would be indistinguishable from a comely, flaxen-haired peasant lass from Middle-of-Nowhereshire, except that she happened to be the daughter, wife, and mother of kings. Since there is nothing about which she can write, Weir resorts to her tried-and-true method (on abundant display in earlier works like the *Swynford* biography and *The Princes in the Tower*) of supposition and conjecture. Other reviewers have commented on the surplus of phrases containing "Elizabeth must have," "Elizabeth probably," "Elizabeth would have," etc. etc., and it was painfully apparent from nearly the beginning of the book. Weir says in her introduction that "there is sufficient evidence from which to draw conclusions about Elizabeth's character," but I'll be damned if I saw much evidence at all in the pages that followed. Instead, the reader is treated to text-padding of the first order, as we are led through the entire history of the Wars of the Roses, and then (and this should come as no surprise to readers of Weir) something which appears to be a prosecution brief against Richard III, who apparently is guilty of all the sins in the calendar. Henry Tudor becomes King and proceeds to take over the biography (except for when Elizabeth has children, attends church and/or shrines, or spends money) until Elizabeth dies 17 years later. There is virtually nothing here that Weir has not written about before --- even the confusing excursus about Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn (which really makes no sense whatsoever, except that it adds a few more pages of text). If she were to distill the text down to the basic facts about Elizabeth and why she is important, Weir would be left with probably a 50-page pamphlet. And so I am left with a thoroughly useless biography which I feel richly deserves this 1-star rating. I know nothing more about Elizabeth of York than I did when I began the book. The other information might be of use to readers who are new to the period, but for those who

are better-versed, the book is (again) useless, and unmistakably biased as well. I suppose it is my mistake for expecting something more illuminating.

It cannot be denied that the research done by Alison Weir for this book is extremely impressive. Her tenacious efforts to ferret out even the smallest known detail of Elizabeth's life are evident on every page. Sadly, it is this extensive research that makes the book tedious. Page after page of mundane and inconsequential facts (like the names and wages of every person she ever employed) combined with lengthy but unrevealing quotes from a variety of contemporary and later chroniclers make this long book feel much longer. Weir seems to want to prove to the reader how well she combed all extant sources. Sadly, her efforts were for naught as she unearthed nothing of import. The ridiculously repetitive, and yet inconclusive, speculation about her relationship with her husband (and, to a lesser extent, with Richard III) leaves one confused and wondering why Weir decided to write this book at all since she can make no definitive assessment of Elizabeth's life. I feel that I better understood who Elizabeth of York was before I read it.

This book was disappointing because the subject matter is the same in all books covering her. Better read for those who want to read about her is *The Women of the Wars of the Roses* and you'll never need to purchase another.

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