



A Dagger for Catherine Douglas

Euan MacPherson

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In the historical novel A Dagger for Catherine Douglas, a young couple contemplates the value of sacrifice.

Though its impetus is the fifteenth century murder of a Scottish king, Euan MacPherson's historical novel *A Dagger for Catherine Douglas* centers on a young couple in love.

Sean is the second son of a second son in Scotland. Thus, fighting for the Holy Roman Empire is his best chance for a good life. In signing up for this service, though, he dares to hope for fame and fortune, too. Meanwhile, Catherine, a lady of the royal court, longs to make her own decisions, though an arranged marriage to a merchant is available to her as a shot at happiness and security.

Sean and Catherine meet when he receives orders to work as a mercenary, plotting the king's assassination. They find that courtly life is viperous. As they fall in love with each other, they begin to question where their true loyalties lie. Their troubles prove to be an engaging backdrop to this based-in-truth tale.

The book's conversations are lively and constant, if not period specific. They focus on soldiers as they tease each other; Catherine, as she spars with her mother; and the king and an enemy of his, as they devise strategies to ensure each other's demise. These exchanges contrast with the central couple's inner thoughts well; the latter reflect the dichotomy between what people say, and what they really want to do. More period-centered are the book's details about people's clothes, food, and weapons, including a dagger that acts as a segue between events.

When it focuses on instances of action, the narration is harrowing, with images as of a horse thrown over a castle wall during battle. The appearance of new challenges, dangers, and threats is perpetual. Sean's own story amplifies this: he is often on the move, shifting between battles and the king's court. Catherine, in contrast, fills her days by babysitting royal children, performing household chores, and staving off the interest of other men. The chapters toggle between the two lovers in a balanced manner, working to generate suspense about their futures.

To sustain investment in Catherine and Sean's tale, the novel includes both graphic sex scenes and evidence of small gestures between them, like gifts and brief declarations. But secondary plot lines take focus from the couple's tale: the king and queen discuss their early marriage, contrasting their feelings of love with their senses of duty; a soldier who lost a woman during battle realizes too late that he loved her. These stories are fractals of the central plot. In the end: Catherine and Sean's love story is that which holds the most interest, functioning over and against the illusions of political life.

In the historical novel *A Dagger for Catherine Douglas*, a young couple contemplates the value of making sacrifices for the sake of their love.

MARI CARLSON (April 4, 2022)

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