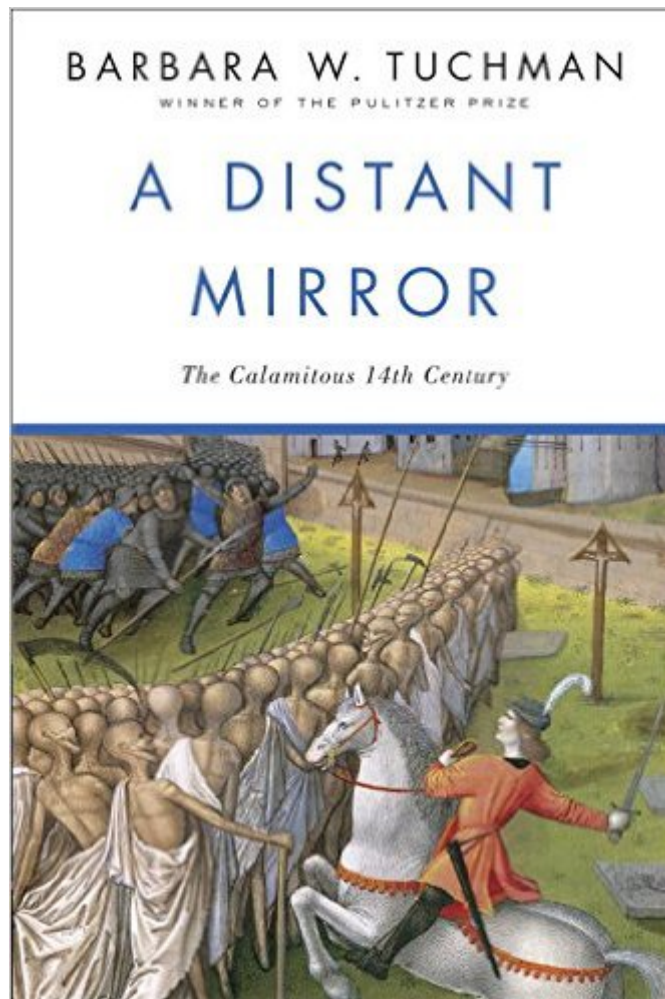


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# A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century



## 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 æ furious follies, a æ 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"

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

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 Year's War between England and France together in this marvelous book. Tuchman displays this late Middle Age period in all of its nasty brutality. 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 Tuchman's 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 Tuchman's 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 denegated 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 Europe's 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 preceded it -- hence the title "Through a Distant Mirror," Tuchman's work also illustrates how far society has come in those parts of the world where it is civil and grounded in natural rights. Thus, Tuchman's book shows both the constant danger through time of man's 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 man's affairs in centuries distant from that enjoyed by Enguerrand de Coucy.

Barbara Tuchman is a great guide for readers beginning their voyage into medieval history. This is

also a marvellous period, in terms of action, romance and great events, with which to begin such a journey. I would also urge readers who are spurred on to further investigation, to read the seminal text from which much of Tuchman's work is based, the *Chronicles of Jean Froissart*. Froissart was one of the great raconteurs of any age. He was basically the Herodotus and Homer of his era. The reviewer might have noted that Enguerrand's disposition towards the peasants under him was dictated to him by one of the truly cataclysmic events of the era. The uprising of the Jacquerie created a hitherto unknown fear and unease on the part of the aristocratic order of the time, to such a degree that reprisals and attitudes were indeed shaped for generations to come. But one must read Froissart to reach a true appreciation of the scope and social repercussions of that horrifying event. The Jaquerie were bent on total devastation of the upper classes and carried out their revolution in countless acts of rape, murder, infanticide and any other mayhem they could engender. Enguerrand was seen as an avenging Angel by his contemporaries. The lords, barons and knights were not merely defending their order, but their lives. This is Tuchman's finest accomplishment, in terms of rendering historical drama and in the cohesive quality of the details she marshals to illustrate her story. It really was not just a calamitous, but quite a remarkable century in terms of the wars that were fought, the leaders of France and England that fought them and the hardships the nobles and the commons all endured. It definitely was not an era for the timid or the weak either in body or in spirit. I guarantee that if you read this work, which is as exciting as any novel, you will want to read the chronicles as well.

With painstaking detail and bittersweet humour, Tuchman delves into the history and events surrounding one of the greatest of the French knights. Enguerrand de Coucy is a knight caught between old and new world orders. Perhaps the highest example of a crumbling ideal - chivalry - he shows the fatal flaws in an oppressive system beginning to decay before his birth, leading to some of the greatest excesses within his lifetime, and finishing with the fall of the French monarchy in the 18th century. Parts of Tuchman's tale are more gripping than an adventure novel, more humorous than a comedy, and more unbelievable than fiction. In fact, her story is so engaging because of its truth. Anyone interested in the Avignon Papacy, the Great Schism in the Church, Popes and Antipopes, the Black Plague, Feudalism, Protestantism, the persecution of witches and sorcery, the prelude to the Renaissance, Italian banking, Antisemitism, and the Medieval in general should adore it. I must admit, my jaw dropped several times while reading this book, particularly during the chapters focusing on the schism in the church. It is not easy to escape the image of a furious Pope screaming anathema and excommunication from the walls of the Castel Sant'Angelo upon the

beseigers below. Unbelievable arrogance and mercilessness seem the hallmark of the times, and Tuchman captures the essence of these with great alacrity. Following de Coucy lets us experience life through the attitudes of someone placed firmly in the time. While many of his attitudes may seem foreign to us, his more modern qualities allow us to identify, if perhaps not sympathize, with him. I highly recommend this book both as an introduction to the study of the 14th century, and as fascinating reading for anyone interested in the human condition.

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