



Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey

Fiona Carnarvon

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Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey, a transporting companion piece to the *New York Times* bestseller *Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey*, tells the story of Catherine Wendell, the beautiful and spirited American woman who married Lady Almina's son, the man who would become the 6th Earl of Carnarvon. The couple presided over Highclere Castle, the grand estate that serves as the setting for the hit PBS show. Following the First World War, many of the great houses of England faded as their owners fortunes declined in the new political and social world of the 1920s and 1930s. As war loomed, Highclere's survival as the family home of the Carnarvons was again in the balance—as was peace between the nations of Europe.

Using copious materials—including diaries and scrapbooks—from the castle's archives, the current Countess of Carnarvon brings alive a very modern story in a beautiful and fabled setting, paying particular attention to the staff who provide Highclere Castle with continuity between generations.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey Details

Date : Published October 29th 2013 by Broadway Books (first published January 1st 2013)

ISBN :

Author : Fiona Carnarvon

Format : Kindle Edition 368 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Historical, Biography, European Literature, British Literature



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From Reader Review Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey for online ebook

Erin says

Find this and other reviews at: <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot....>

Fiona Carnarvon's Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey fell into my lap. My mother had learned of and recommended the book's predecessor after I'd turned her onto the television series, but I hadn't found time to pick it up. That said, my curiosity had been sparked, so it wasn't all that surprising when I jumped at the opportunity to review book two. Unfortunately, my optimistic expectations crumbled when face to face with reality.

To be clear, I don't think Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey a bad book. There is a lot of great information for those whose knowledge of the period begins and ends with the British costume drama, but being slightly more acquainted with the details, I can't say I found the text particularly enlightening. I appreciate getting to know Catherine Wendell, Lord Porchester, and the events that marked their lives, but in looking at the bigger picture, I confess I found myself bored and disinterested.

I found Carvarvon's prose dry and often felt the narration formulaic. As much as I hate admitting it, I had to fight my way through this one and on completion can't say I'm inclined to rush into Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey: The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle.

Beth Strand says

If You Love Downton Abbey, You'll Adore "Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey" If you, like me, watch enthralled as each new episode of "Downton Abbey" arrives, you'll love this book written by the current Countess of Carnarvon. This is one of those wonderful books where the facts are almost better than the fiction. Exceptionally well-written and entertaining, "Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey" picks up the story of the Earls of Carnarvon in the early 1920's and follows the family and the house's fortunes through the Second World War. Catherine Wendell, an American, met Lord Porchester (later the sixth Earl of Carnarvon) when she was just 19. Not long after their marriage in 1922, Lord Porchester's father died and they assumed the running of the family home, Highclere (familiar to television fans as the fictional Downton Abbey.) Beset by financial problems, the future of the house was precarious.

"Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey" reads like a wonderful piece of historical fiction, with the added bonus of it being fact. You'll find yourself enthralled with the intimate details of the efforts of this young couple to save the family home as well as the numerous and charming details of life both above and below stairs at Highclere. Even if you're not a fan of "Downton Abbey", this is great piece of history, an intimate account of one family's experience set against the backdrop of a rapidly changing time.

This book was provided to me by the publisher for this review. The opinions, however, are entirely my own!

Sandra Strange says

This one wasn't nearly as entertaining as the other of the pair about Highclere, the real Downton Abbey, because this generation of English aristocracy isn't as fascinating. This earl comes across as a philandering, egotistical stinker, and his lady Catherine as one of his victims just isn't strong enough to carry the entire book.

Samantha Claire says

I received this book courtesy of the publisher for reviewing purposes.

Though certainly fascinating and well-researched, I wasn't able to connect with this book. I likely would have enjoyed it more if I had read the previous installment before starting this one. I may purchase the book and try again once I have done so.

Christina (Confessions of a Book Addict) says

Catherine Wendell grew up in America, but after a family tragedy, her mother uprooted the whole family to England. While on vacation, she meets Porchey or Lord Porhester, the man who is eventually going to become the 6th Earl of Carnarvon. Porchey's father, the famous Lord Carnarvon who discovered King Tut's tomb along with Howard Carter, died suddenly making Porchey the next Earl rather quickly. Although he should find a rich American bride to help maintain and pay for Highclere Castle, his ancestral home, he can't deny that he is in love with Catherine, a charismatic and beautiful young woman, but not independently wealthy. The couple marries and fortunately they find a way to keep Highclare Castle and survive life after WWI, thanks to some help from his mother Lady Almina. However, WWII is coming and along with England's precarious position, Porchey and Catherine are having problems as well. Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey by the Countess of Carnarvon is a fascinating glimpse into what life was like for the residents of Highclare Castle in the tumultuous time of the 1920-1930s.

Catherine is someone that I was immediately captivated by. The events of her childhood along with her climb to become Lady Carnarvon was very interesting. I find the time period of the Roaring Twenties as well as 1930 to be equally fascinating, so I completely devoured Lady Catherine, the Earl and the Real Downton Abbey. On the other hand, Porchey is an insufferable womanizer that I didn't care for. Their relationship disintegrates, thanks to his philandering, and of course as the years go by, he struggled to find someone to replace Catherine whereas she was able to move on, but not without dealing with some of her own demons first.

The author, Countess of Carnarvon, includes a lot of historical details, but not so many that it becomes tedious. She did a great job helping readers to understand what was going on in the world at the time and how it impacted Highclare Castle. I also like how she included tidbits about the servants as well as the "upstairs" residents of Highclare. There are also photographs included in Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey, which I thought was a nice touch and added to the authenticity. Although this book is considered non-fiction, it never was bogged down like a history book, but instead was entertaining, gossipy, and downright fun, especially if you are a fan of Downton Abbey.

There's something comforting about reading memoirs or biographies. It's nice to know that people throughout the ages have dealt with both the good, the bad and the ugly in their lives and have lived to tell the tale. I love reading about the ups and downs of a person's life, how they coped, and how they eventually overcame obstacles. Even though Lady Catherine spent most of her life in the lap of luxury, I liked that she dealt with trials and tribulations, just like a normal person.

It comes as no surprise that I am obsessed with Downton Abbey, so I really enjoyed Lady Catherine, the Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey. I can't wait to check out Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey, which is all about Porchey's mother. If you are a fan of Downton Abbey, you must check out these books. They would be the perfect holiday gift for the Downton fan in your life.

Sara says

Quite interesting, especially in the light of having just read The Visitors and spent a little time with the 5th Earl of Carnarvon, father of this one. Another contributing factor in my enjoyment was my passion for Downton Abbey. I was fascinated by how many of the plot twists in that story were ripped right from the true experiences of these people and their magnificent estate.

The book is historically accurate in every detail that I could personally verify. Lady Carnarvon had access to all the historical records and artifacts of the home and that must have helped tremendously in fleshing out these people and detailing life at Highclere. There are all the usual spotings of the rich and famous, coming and going at Highclere, particularly during World War II, but there is also enough beneath the surface revelation on Lady Catherine and the Earl to make them seem individual and not stereotypes.

Rebecca Huston says

Following the first book, Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey: The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle, I was looking forward to the next book, which covered the next generation of the Carnarvon family. While I did like the stories of Porchey and Catherine, most of the book was just a scandal sheet. Items of interest -- Porchey's involvement with the Royal family, especially in the Edward VIII/Wallis Simpson scandal, divorce among the aristocracy, and two inserts of black and white photos, a map of the Highclere estate, and a genealogical chart showing Catherine's family and connections with the Carnarvons. All in all, about three and a half stars, rounded up to four. Somewhat recommended, but only if you are really interested in the history of the time.

For the longer review, please go here:
<http://www.bubblews.com/news/9677094-...>

Judy Benvin says

I gave this book 2 stars because I just couldn't force myself to finish it. Reading the dictionary would have been more interesting. Facts. Facts. Facts. I found it very hard to get 'connected' with any of the wealthy people who lived at Highclere during this time period. Perhaps the author could have thrown in more human interest stories.

Kathleen C says

Lady Catherine, The Earl, and the Real Downton Abbey, by the current Countess Carnarvon, Fiona, is a must for any Anglophile. Particularly, those who are addicted to Downton Abbey. This is the second book by Countess Carnarvon. The first was 2011's Lady Almina and the Real Downton Abbey : The Lost Legacy of Highclere Castle.

Both books center around the Countess of the title. Lady Almina was the chatelaine during the first World War, and was the mother of the titular Earl of the second book. She was the natural daughter of Alfred de Rothschild and brought an influx of wealth and glamour to life at Highclere Castle. Her husband was the Egyptologist Earl of Carnarvon, who along with Howard Carter, discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen. Her daughter-in-law Catherine, is the focus of the second book, set during the 1920's and through World War II. Catherine and her husband "Porchey" are the grandparents of the current Earl of Carnarvon, (whose wife Fiona is the author of the series).

The real centerpiece of the books of course, is the fabulous Highclere Castle, much like the fictional Downton Abbey is that of the PBS series. The family sees itself as the stewards of an estate that has offered jobs, focus, and history for the surrounding countryside and England itself. When so many of the great houses have been lost, especially during the time frame of the two books, one has to admire the persistence and downright cleverness employed by the family in order to maintain and retain the magnificent estate.

But the lifestyle is the most intriguing facet of the story. Catherine Wendell was the daughter of an upper class American family living in reduced circumstances in London after World War I. Popular and pretty, she met and married Lord Porchester ("Porchey" to family and friends) and started her married life as the bride of an army officer stationed in India. Her father-in-law, the famous Lord Carnarvon (of the "curse of Tut" fame) died soon after, and the young couple took up residence at Highclere Castle, the seat of the Earls since 1679. They soon establish themselves as a part of the elegantly aristocratic set that included royalty, politicians, gadabouts and the fabulously rich. Racing, shooting weekends, and house parties are described in great detail, and vividly come to life.

One strength of the book is that the lives of the staff are also examined in great detail. In an age when all of the footman are called "Charles" despite their real names, it is a little touching (and hopeful) to see how interwoven the lives and fortunes of the family and staff are. When Highclere Castle's existence is threatened due to the reckless spending of forefathers, and new taxes, the lifestyle and livelihood of the whole county are affected. The estate is saved, thanks to an influx of money by Almina, the sale of a number of art works, and the advancement of the racing stud by Porchey.

Of course, being down-on your-luck Highclere style is still pretty darn fabulous. This is not a story of scrimping and saving. Life at Highclere seems to be full of hunting, parties and trips abroad. Ultimately,

wealth, birth and privilege do not completely protect one from sadness and loss. Having established himself as a bon vivant, Porchey also established himself as a womanizer, and the marriage with Catherine ended in 1936. She was devastated, turned to drink for solace, and remained fragile for some years, until a happier (albeit brief) marriage to Geoffrey Grenfell restored her self-esteem. She married Don Momand ten years after Geoffs death, again happily. Porchey remarried Tilly Losch, the dancer, actor and choreographer , but not happily, and remained single thereafter, although not without companions.

Most interesting to me were the famous figures that flitted through the Carnarvon's life at Highclere. Prince George, the Duke of Kent was one of Porchey's best friends, as was the Duke of Marlborough, John Churchill-Spencer. Randolph Churchill (the son of Winston Churchill) was an intimate, and the young King Edward VII was part of their set before abdicating to marry Wallace Simpson. Evelyn Waugh and the Duff Cooper's were also visitors to the grand house. Porchey's second wife was Tilley Losch, an actress who brought a touch of Hollywood to Highclere, as did Catherine's mother who was close friends with Adele Astaire (now Lady Cavendish). Political figures, royalty, aristocrats and the wealthy are all a part of life at Highclere Castle.

Also interesting were the World War II stories. The years leading up to the war, the Blitz, and the first years of the War are brought vividly to life by the author. The effects of the war on Highclere are dramatic...it becomes a sanctuary for children from London who are escaping the bombs of London, a training facility, and farmed as a source of produce for the countryside. And the family and staff stepped right up to the challenges and sacrifices war demands. One staff member, the valet-turned-butler Robert Taylor, was a war hero whose romance and war exploits are recorded in detail.

The elements that make the TV Show Downton Abbey so fascinating are the same things that capture us in real life: the magnificent beauty of the home itself; the privileged lifestyle; the famous (and infamous) characters; the nostalgia for a time that is gone' and the just plain glamour of it all make this a most compelling read.

Paperback, 368 pages
Published October 29th 2013 by Broadway Books

Denise says

This well researched book reveals an interesting glimpse into the inhabitants of Highclere Castle, the site of Julian Fellowes' Downton Abbey that aired on PBS.

As revealed in the TV series, the book portrays the life of the privileged, wealthy class and the staff. The book does include numerous photographs that I found fascinating.

Now I must add a 'real' trip to Highclere Castle.

(KUYH's Travel challenge for August....England)

Will Cross says

Misdemeanours and Sloppy Errors

The basis of this elegantly written sketch on the life and times of Catherine Wendell, the Sixth Countess of

Carnarvon - with a fleeting glance to Tilly Losch, the other Sixth Countess- is that it's another Highclere spin off to cash-in on its television fame. Both women married Porchey- the Sixth Earl, who spent his life hunting, shooting and flirting.

The Earl was a rascal who rode race horses and was an over active sex pest to womankind. The Carnarvons display courage in declaring the American born Lady Catherine had a drink problem with bouts of depression and despair.

Having made a close study of Catherine's life (and spoken with people who knew her) I conclude that it is not as simple as that. The reasons for Catherine almost never being sober are complicated and alas not well enough explained here.

The ghost writer could have improved the reader's understanding of Porchey living with Catherine's drink problem by veering away from the copious and meaningless references to the Duff Coopers in the book (since neither Diana nor Duff make any worthwhile reference to Highclere in their letters/ memoirs/ diaries) and instead draw ideas from Debo Devonshire's worthy and compelling account of her husband, Andrew Cavendish's darker moments of being heavily drink infused in the excellent book, *Wait For Me!*

I know precisely what Catherine confided to Almina (the Fifth Countess, Porchey's mother). From that account there are stark differences (not tackled here), Catherine carried burdens including the horrors of a shattered childhood after her father died suddenly when she was aged eleven.

From Almina viewing the attractive, referential, refugee, Catherine, first as a gold digger (which she certainly was, she was skint before marriage to Porchey) the two women found an enmity, against the same foe, Porchey, they became life long friends and allies and shared secrets and lies.

Married off to the Carnarvon heir, in 1922, Porchey's serial infidelities gave further just cause for Catherine's fall into inebriation, inflamed by his abuses too (he repeatedly nagged and slagged her off), that detail is missing from the narrative, although the inferences of bullying are there.

Catherine's own dreadful health issues are sidelined. There is a reference in the book to the glorious years of 1926 and 1927 asserted as the marriage's happiest period but in fact this was when Catherine suffered a complete nervous breakdown and was treated for serious gynaecological problems by the famous Leeds surgeon Sir Berkeley Moynihan, requiring months in a Switzerland sanatorium to recuperate.

The Carnarvons are entitled to say that another reason for Catherine's depression was the sudden loss of the 28year-old Reggie Wendell, her jobless brother (a betting chum of Porchey's); that grief inevitably hit her (and others) very hard. But the actual event of Reggie's pitiful death scene at Highclere Castle is not accurately recorded in the book and the people involved and chronology has been altered or those who compiled this were not aware (which is even more damning on the research process as a whole) of the very full and frank account from Mary Van der Woude (a Wendell cousin who was actually present when Reggie slipped into oblivion). Mary's letters to her mother are held by the Portsmouth Athenaeum in the State of Maine -USA - where many of the Wendell family papers can be found, (as well as at Harvard University). Sadly (despite the combined resources of the Highclere Archives, an international publisher, a ghost writer, archivists and researchers many of the other central particulars linking the story together are unsound, even some shocking errors including a rewrite of history which claims that Lord Kitchener died at the Battle of Jutland but which was over before the ship HMS Hampshire he was travelling on, hit a mine and sunk !

A similar sloppy error can be found in a reference to the reception after Catherine married a second time in

1938. One of the hosts, Percy Griffiths, is mentioned as taking part in fact fell off a horse and died the previous year!

Good prose masks many howlers as does a Readers Digest version of some 20th century history frolics with an irksome tendency to sweep too many irrelevant people and places with an unnecessary timeline of the non-players in the dull tales of Prime Ministers, and seedy diplomats downwards including a appalling chunk of inflated history on the Abdication crisis (where Porchey claims fame in his wildly inaccurate memoirs which are repeated, but is just as inaccurate as they were when he regaled them to his ghost writer, Barry Wynne. in 1976 and on the Michael Parkinson Show).

This extra data pads out the book but it will not appeal to the common herd (as Almina, the Fifth Countess dubbed those beneath her) : those who follow Downton Abbey, who either lust or are shocked over rape and drugs and parlour games in and out of jazz clubs in coat tails or corsetry) and it all spoils the plot, for Catherine's story is worth telling, but she was (like Almina) no angel, another flaw in the book, since her infidelities (that were a clamour for genuine love) or her irresponsible gambling excesses (much to Porchey's horror and reprimands, and he bet foolishly too), or Catherine spiting him by bedding several famous historical figures, of course that gets left unmentioned de facto but can be inferred from the dramatis persona, if the reader is smart enough to pass through the veneer. Against the odds too Catherine made a passable Highclere chatelaine, she had good taste and style in fashion trends and make up innovations of the age. She was a good looking woman her whole life, despite the knocks and the fact that she felt despised and humiliated by Porchey and was crippled emotionally by a perceived embarrassment possessed by her own son. Catherine was left out in the cold especially when the young Lord Porchester (later the Seventh Earl) walked high with Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret Rose. The bankrupt granny, Almina, was also snubbed by the House of Windsor. Almina snubbed back!

Some parts of the book are adequate and praiseworthy. Catherine's loss of her second husband Geoffrey Grenfell is moving and well captured. The interesting testimony of servants and their fate in war time and peace is fascinating and a redeeming feature of the book is there are some wonderful photographs.

Lady Almina gets heroic coverage- but it's not always accurate. By the way, she was NOT an American, she was born in London, in Bayswater! Nor did she take two days to reach Egypt in 1923, when Lord Carnarvon lay poleaxed, awaiting death. Nor did she travel all the way out there in a by-plane ! The plane came down in France and Almina (after she took ill) had to continue by rail, ship and rail again before reaching the Continental Hotel, Cairo. This pilgrimage was not an expression of love (Almina was always afraid of Carnarvon, she never loved him) it was the action of a nurse, who had saved lives of men in the Great War in her nursing homes, she knew she could end Lordy's suffering and did just that.

The lethal details of the decades of vileness between Almina and Porchey is not surprisingly massaged out of the book.

Incidentally, Almina's second husband, Colonel Dennistoun did not break his hip nor was he in a wheel chair at least until the mid 1930s when Almina bought him a motorised chair to sail his miniature boats at Hove and Brighton and on the Solent.

Almina's collection of photographs of the Colonel show him walking unaided to and from their homes at Temple Dinsley and Eastmore, Isle of Wight until 1935-6. She married him because he was useful to her purpose of money laundering the hundreds of thousands of pounds left to her by her guardian, Alfred de Rothschild in assets at his town house at 1, Seaford Place, which Almina used as her main home (not Highclere), from 1919 . Moreover (as can be gleaned from the Court evidence in Denniston v Dennistoun in

1925) Almina first met the Colonel in 1922, when the Fifth Earl was still very much alive.

The primary source of the present narrative appears to be the Visitor's Book at Highclere Castle (and a sprinkling of family letters) and this limits it's scope; as a result it's heavy with dullness and streams of dull house party guests, horse racing and shooting chums of Porchey. The ubiquitous mention of Prince George (PG) (later Duke of Kent who was killed in 1942) is curious and needs more conclusion. PG was as frequent a presence at Highclere Castle as Prince Victor Duleep Singh was at the time of the Fifth Earl, the generation before. The reasons are not properly identified for its possibly similar an astounding likeness to Duleep's purpose of saving the Carnarvon blood line. The Sixth Earl's successful career as a jockey and horse breeder would have been good to see breached , as well as more on his war time exchanges with his son Porchester in the very interesting and entertaining Carnarvon Letters, published in 1992.

Catherine's pedigree (which is triumphantly matched to American history and well known figures at that, with a family tree to show them off, well, that's fine) but her childhood (with her siblings and Wendell grandmother) in New York and in Kitterey, near Portsmouth, New Hampshire, USA gets only a few lines as does her important developmental years at the home of the Griffiths family (who were well to do cousins of Catherine's mother, Marian) at Sandridgebury, Sandridge, St Albans, Hertfordshire where her mother (a remarkable marriage fixer to equal Dolly Levi) was given a roof over her head in 1911 after sensibly fleeing with her four children far away from her late husband's creditors. The part the Griffiths' played in Catherine's life is insufficiently chartered.

We are also left knowing very little (or anything that is reliable) about Catherine's dad, Jacob Wendell Jnr, (a businessman turned actor in New York), his rogue gene pool, his influences upon her, or follow up of his other daughter, Philippa, Catherine's younger sister who went on to be the 12th Countess of Galloway. The book is quite wrong in recording Randolph Stewart (Philippa's only son, the present 13th Earl of Galloway) as being an epileptic. They can't bring themselves to say 'schizophrenic' but is a more accurate term. I've talked to friends of Randolph. Moreover, his whole life (in the book : An Unlikely Countess Lily Budge and the 13th Earl of Galloway:) was ruined after his parents forced him to be lobotomized. Catherine was his godmother, she could not do anything to stop the butchery that still haunts this poor wretch daily.

The Highclere book ends suddenly in 1945 before so much else befalls the main characters. Is Catherine (saved it seemed by a conversion from alcoholism to Roman Catholicism) destined to spend her Christmases at retreats as plain 'Mary Herbert' among the Bethany nuns? Does she live happy ever after, or not? After the Tanis Guinness affair (a girl whom Porchey attempted to marry (even before divorced from Catherine : a story well told in the book) who else does Porchey try to line up as his next duped Countess? How were Porchey and Catherine's last days spent, in more than just one sentence, please!!! And what of dear old Tilly Losch, the dancer who married Porchey (for hard cash and a wobbly coronet) in 1939, what became of the dancing Countess of Carnarvon? What a gal! You will have to look elsewhere for the answers!

Does this current book leave one's appetite whetting for more? The answer, probably is yes and no. Yes, if it's more accurately drawn (which would mean Olympic somersaults in parts in this and in the earlier book on Lady Almina); but no, if it is all another contrived piece of too much hokum history with real (or more like sugary) pieces thrown into a sponge cake like glace cherries. There are not always happy endings, Downton shows us this bitter truth well. Whilst this text is as craftily worked as a Downton Abbey script the real truth (they keep telling us it is here but isn't, not in total). That disturbing, hidden truth is even more astonishing. There the courage shown initially in revealing Catherine's drink problem ends!

Overall, I found the book readable but as difficult as a gobstopper to swallow whole. The poor research is bad show given the extent of the resources available to the army of backroom workers. The book is no more than a quick fix on Catherine's life. As with its earlier title on Almina, another Carnarvon Countess there are

misdemeanours in the story telling and they know it! The sloppiness goes all the way to the end with Catherine's age at death being given as 79 (in fact she was 76). I would have been more than happy to co-operate to ensure that all the errors were expunged and I am still available to ensure any future titles are spot on or before any reprint.

A.L. Sowards says

I enjoyed *Downton Abbey*, so this audiobook caught my eye and it was a fun listen. It's kind of fluffy—lots of society stuff and scandal, but also a look at life in Britain from WWI through WWII. The narrator was really good. I was actually surprised at how much the fictional TV show had echoes of real history.

Lois says

This books gives excellent and crucial info on this time period, home and ancestors alive at this time. It's just extremely dry and not enough on what I was intetesting in and too much focus on name dropping.

Hayley says

As amazing as the history of Highclere is, Countess Carnarvon can't write. Such a shame.

Anne says

I loved it

I am reading the books in the wrong order as I have started the one about Lady Almina now. This is the generation BEFORE Lady Catherine
