



Katherine

Anya Seton , Philippa Gregory (Foreword)

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This classic romance novel tells the true story of the love affair that changed history—that of Katherine Swynford and John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the ancestors of most of the British royal family. Set in the vibrant 14th century of Chaucer and the Black Death, the story features knights fighting in battle, serfs struggling in poverty, and the magnificent Plantagenets—Edward III, the Black Prince, and Richard II—who ruled despotically over a court rotten with intrigue. Within this era of danger and romance, John of Gaunt, the king's son, falls passionately in love with the already married Katherine. Their well-documented affair and love persist through decades of war, adultery, murder, loneliness, and redemption. This epic novel of conflict, cruelty, and untamable love has become a classic since its first publication in 1954.

Katherine Details

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Author : Anya Seton , Philippa Gregory (Foreword)

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From Reader Review Katherine for online ebook

Melody says

Solid, engaging historical fiction about the mistress of John of Gaunt who was the ancestress of the Tudors. Rich with period detail. The part that makes me knock the rating down is the horrible passage wherein Katherine becomes a guilt-ridden Christian who repudiates her own happiness. It was such a jarring disconnect and so typical of everything I loathe about Christianity that it spoiled the book for me. It's hard to imagine a moral and spiritual about-face of this magnitude and swiftness. Now I wonder about the accuracy of this passage. Luckily, Alison Weir has just come out with a book about Katherine which may answer my question.

Kiri Fiona says

I've come for you, Katrine

This whole, magnificent epic is based on a true story. Either Katherine Swynford, her beloved John of Gaunt, or both (because she gave him 4 - 4 - kids as his mistress), gave rise to the royal lines that include Kings Henry IV, V, VI & VII, Richard III, Edward IV, a Queen of Scots, every sovereign of Scotland since ages ago (sorry, my google is down or I'd sound way smarter right now) and every sovereign of England in the last 400 years. Meanwhile, my branch of our family tree includes an overweight cat.

The storytelling. This isn't the kind of romance I normally read. Like, it's not the kind of romance where it's all about the couple, all the time, and I start to get pissy if they're apart for too much of the book. It's a romance in the way Gone With the Wind is a romance - there's a beautiful thread of love and loyalty and connection that weaves it's way through 30 years, but most of what happens on the page sees our couple separated. We've got crazy mothers-in-law, sniping sisters, arranged marriages, lots of babies being born, strained relationships between a mother and a daughter, Katherine coping with being *gasp - the other woman*, gossip, rioting, plague, wars, and royal dramas. There was **a lot** going on.

And Geoffrey Chaucer was in it. He's super smart.

Women desire six things: They want their husbands to be brave, wise, rich, generous, obedient to wife, and lively in bed.

- Geoffrey Chaucer (not a quote from Katherine)

Katherine. I really admired her resilience. When we first meet her she's a naive, wide eyed young girl with dreams and ambitions and very little idea of the world. Over time, her shine wears off but her character grows and we get to grow along with her. She suffered a lot through her time with Hugh, but she bore the burden graciously and I loved, loved, loved that she carried herself with integrity throughout her marriage. And she was funny! I didn't expect a 14th century real life person to be funny, but she was a quirky little thing.

The Duke of Lancaster. Yum. He was everything I imagine when I read regency romances - heroic, strong, practical, protective, cold, brave. And we saw a different side of him when he and Katherine were alone - he was actually the more sweet and loving one of them when they were alone - but I think at the end of the day he was a knight, through and through. Everything he did was for the betterment of his line, his family, and his king, but I never doubted that he loved Katherine.

Perhaps there might not be included in his epitaph the one tribute to his knighthood that he knew he deserved: 'Il fut toujours bon et loyal chevalier.' (loosely translated: he was always a good and loyal knight)

But whatever the shadowed years might bring, as long as life should last, he knew that he had here at his side one sure recompense and one abiding loyalty.

All the peripheral characters. I didn't like them all, but Ms Seton's writing bought them all to life in a way that I was interested in them all. And, ok, was Nirac gay? I feel like he was, but then I thought maybe I'm projecting because I read too much M/M romance. But was he?

The insight into 14th century life.

Things like Constanza rejecting her physical body to embrace godliness. Which, ew, by the way. Blanche's birth. *Water elf sickness.* How they treated legit medical conditions.

Ok, here's why it's not a full 5 star read for me. The religion side of this, while I learned a lot from it, bordered on fantasy for me. I could literally feel myself tuning out when Katherine was paying penance, and through every reference to God. There was a lot of that, for me.

And also, you just *know*, even before she admitted to it, that had Blanche not (view spoiler), Katherine would have carried on (view spoiler) I just felt that the whole phase was unnecessary. But it was a small thing.

The Afterword. I felt like that 1 page could have been a whole other book? Or even just more chapters? Is it just me? All the time had been taken to weave a gorgeous, multifaceted story, and days of my life were spent enthralled in this other world, and then suddenly it was like *and then this key character died and Katherine's kid got shafted and then this other key character died because good job, and then here's how all these people tied into it, The End.* I wasn't ready!

Ok, so I didn't love every page, but the story was rich and layered and colourful, divine in the development of its characters, and heartbreaking because these people all existed, and I'm having a hard time letting it go. I finished this book on Thursday (so, 4 days ago) and I haven't been more than 2 chapters into any other book since.

Gary says

A detailed and rich novel, with the author showing a flair for the English language and a deep understanding of medieval English history. Colourful wording, and a balance between passionate scenes and descriptive tracing of the events of the life of the incredibly interesting and beautiful Katherine Swynford. One may have to reread parts, but if you focus you will find this a rewarding historical page turner, and understand why after 55 years it is still a best loved classic of historical literature.

The author meticulously researched her sources, and even for minor characters, used where she could, those mentioned in the chronicles.

Hence we definitely do gain an insight into the lives of royalty and nobility as well as the ordinary people of the England of that time.

Katherine Swynford was born from a humble background, the daughter of a herald. While her older sister Phillipa gained a position in the royal court, Katherine through her beauty and charm, beguiled the powerful nobleman John of Gaunt Duke of Lancaster, father of Henry IV, and ancestor of most of today's royal family, through his eventual marriage to Katherine, his long time paramour.

Katherine is first pressured into marriage to the boorish and brutish knight, Hugh Swynford. She gains the friendship and gives her loyalty to Blanche, John of Gaunt's first wife. After the deaths of Blanche and Hugh, so begins the passionate liaison between the flame haired beauty Katherine, and the charismatic Duke of Lancaster and player in the power of England's politics of the time. John is haunted by malevolent slander of being a changeling while he determines to revenge himself on those behind this false charge. Katherine of course was dogged by the charge of the time often levelled against beautiful and passionate women, of harlotry.

But instead of marrying his love Katherine John married the Spanish princess Constance of Castile. Only years later did the lovers meet again after much pain and turmoil and spend three years of marriage before John of Gaunt's death.

Covers events such as the Black Death, and the rebellion of the time led by Wat Tyler, during the reign of the boy king Richard II.

We also get to meet characters such as John Chaucer (married to Katherine's sister) and the mystic Nun, St Julian.

A great work of literature, well worth the effort

Chrissie says

Finished: The last 100 pages or so I was thinking - stop with the crap about the customs of medieval times and just let me know what is going to happen to the main characters! I cared about them very much. I ended

up totally loving Katherine. She was real. She made tons of "wrong steps" in her life, but damn it all we all have to live don't we! Who says we have to be perfect? Who says we SHOULDN'T fall in love and be carried away by our emotions. Also I REALLY learned about life in the middle ages. It felt that I was no longer looking at a foreign time and place, but was part of it. Part of the times - castles with their solars and kitchens and clothes (both jeweled and ragged) and strange foods and smells and holidays and chivalry and plagues, scarlet fever and stupid political and religious leaders, but also truly religious individuals who helped and were kind and understood others' weaknesses. What else? Pilgrimages and shrines and a corrupt Church and Chaucer. All of this came alive and it was an enjoyable read! Not heavy.

Any happiness attained was certainly earned!

Through pages 455: Politics - lies, lies, lies. Will the serfs attain freedom? Katherine has gotten off her high pedestal.

Quick changes here - I am on page 410 and, yup I do like it again. I guess it is just that I got so terribly annoyed with Katherine. Is that b/c the author has made me care for her? Anyhow the following pages with Katherine and her first daughter, Blanchette, sucked me in again. I am not giving any spoilers!

Through 399: Sometimes the stupidity of Katherine annoys me. I am happy that the serfs are being egged on by John Ball. Katherine is getting spoiled by her good living. Is her memory so short? Here is a short conversation between Katherine and her maid, Hawsie:

Katherine says, "The poll tax is hard on folk, no doubt, but wars must be paid for, Hawsie. Why must they show so much hatred?"

"Tis easy to hate, lady dear, when you be poor and starving."

"But they are not!" cried Katherine, her eyes flashing. "Nobody starves in Leicester, or any of the Duke's domains. The kitchens often feed three hundred a day."

"Tis not everyone wants to be beggars, sweeting," said Hawsie.

Katherine has changed. I remember when she behaved more as a commoner, on May Day festivities when she ran barefoot and frolicked with the others. And NOW she is finally beginning to realize that if the Duke dies she will be in quite a pickle..... Everybody makes choices. You have to live with these choices.

Through page 392: Not as good as before. Why - well I am really not into politics, whether it be of today or the 1300s. It is 95% of the time corrupt and self-centered. Who is ruling is interesting to me more in terms of how it affects the normal lower status people, the masses. That is just where my interest lies. Neither am I that interested in who is marrying who. The more one knows of history the more one is interested in it, and I quite simply don't know very much about medieval royalty! So this book has to be more interesting to those who know a lot about the various kings and queens and their personal traits. I DO have to start somewhere. And then Katherine's role as acknowledged mistress just rolls along. I do admire the blatancy with which the Duke shows this to all and everyone - BUT what about the misery he is causing his Castilian wife? He did marry her, and if he is such a kind person Yes, yes, I know, politics and how kingdoms were made and broken, well that is how it was done - through battles and marriage and then the bed to produce the needed heirs. Furthermore, now "romantic developments" are sprouting for the children too! I am not as attached to them as I am to Katherine so it means little to me. Books often drag 2/3 - 3/4 through. History continues to be deftly interwoven into the story. The book continues to describe the customs of the times. This I continue

to enjoy! So it is not hopeless. I have forgotten to mention that the plague - the Black Death - was well depicted, and bits about Chaucer are interesting! Also the historical developments of part of the 100 Years War are explained.

Through page 151: What a surprise. This is fun to read. The author has correctly followed the historical facts. I read that some say the ending is not agreed upon by all historians, but I am not there yet. So the history is correct and small details of how things were done in the 1300s are interestingly and accurately described. This is history that is fun to read. Never dry text. It takes place during the 100 Years War. Reading it feels simply like reading a fun novel - and you are leaning at the same time. What could be better! There is something about the way the author depicts people that makes them very real. Flesh and bone. Physically when Katherine is frolicking on the day before her wedding, a beautiful spring day of May, you feel the dew on the grass on your own bare feet. She somehow with just a few words catches how one's body interprets the weather, physical contact or sickness. The smells are in your own nostrils. The wetness on your own skin. And it is all done so naturally that it seems you are simply there, not reading about it. The characters are not one-sided. The same person has both good and bad qualities, just like in real life. So far so good. I am enjoying myself. A delightful surprise.

I am worried about this one. I feel I OUGHT to read it, but will I like it?! It seems like it has a religious ending - gulp. And the romance - won't that be too much?. Also some say it has a slow start. With all these negative points, why does it have such a high rating? I can always just stop if I really cannot stand it.....

✿ Julie says

I think I like historical fiction better than historical romance...

Overall I enjoyed this story of Katherine and the fate of her relationship with the Duke of Lancaster. For a "classic" this was a fairly easy read, even if it was a bit overly descriptive. The medieval times were an interesting time period to read about and the historical aspects were certainly not lacking. I enjoyed reading about characters based on real people, but somehow I never felt an emotional attachment to them. Had it not been for receiving this book as a gift I might not have had the drive in me to finish this one, but it had a satisfying ending so I am glad I made it through! I felt it could have been a couple hundred pages less. With this being the second Anya Seton book I've read I'm thinking her style is just not my cup of tea.

Iset says

I persisted with this book for as long as I did because it is so overwhelming rated highly and described as a "classic" of historical fiction. But I'm very much afraid I have to pull a DNF on this one. I just can't stand to read any more of this novel. I'll try and explain the good and the bad below, and why this book just didn't work for me.

The Good:

Anya Seton has really done her research trying to get the historical setting as detailed and accurate as she

can. The ins and outs of daily life in the late 14th century, the objects, attire, and the importance of religion and piety in peoples' lives are all meticulously detailed and expanded upon. I appreciate the intention here, even if it didn't quite come off – I'll explain in a moment. I think it's great that Seton wanted to create an authentic environment for her story, and it is obvious she put time and effort into that.

I'm genuinely wracking my brains for something else to put in this section. Um... it wasn't as bad as the likes of Philippa Gregory, Jean Auel, Michelle Moran, et. al.? The characters aren't butchered and Seton's writing style is basically competent. I got nothing...

The Bad:

Seton takes her research too far. She describes the setting in too much detail, spending too much time describing minute details that are irrelevant to the story, and it gets to the point where it becomes too much. Cut this stuff out and the novel would be a lot more succinct and to the point. As it is it rather meanders.

Seton describes the window-dressing in too much detail but doesn't describe the historical context in enough detail. Relevant events in the lives of the main characters, political upheaval, they're just glossed over and not properly explained. Katherine, we're told, takes no interest in political matters. She exists in a bubble of love and domestic bliss with John of Gaunt and doesn't question what goes on outside that bubble. When John's father is ailing and the heir to the throne is still a child, John takes an ever greater role in government, and faces opposition which keeps him occupied and stressed. Katherine sees this merely in terms of "he doesn't love me any more because we don't spend as much time together!", whilst, when we do get inside John's head, his hardline tactics with the populace are explained as "there was this boy once who told me I was a changeling and I must prove myself to everyone!" Really?! Serious matters of the time – with, undoubtedly, potential for epic drama in a novel – reduced to a grown man nursing a boo-boo and a woman whose life revolves around his love and attention? Urgh. I guess this is where the book is more of a romance novel than a historical fiction, but really I was expecting better.

Pseudo-medieval dialogue. The text is peppered with the likes of "Nay, sweeting" and "Ay, lovedy" and "What ho, my lord". This doesn't feel medieval, it feels like the 1950s trying way too hard to masquerade as medieval. It's painful.

Flat characters. Minor characters often just walk on-stage and walk right off again without making an impact or serving merely as a deus ex machina to move things along. They're stock characters – the prudent sister, the stubborn-yet-cheerful peasant serving woman, the protective puppy-dog squire, the grasping king's mistress. John and Katherine are worse cases though. They just don't feel like real people. I couldn't see why these two characters fell in love at all. They think each other is good looking, and that seems to be pretty much it. That could work as a Katherine Swynford/John of Gaunt story, I think – two people falling into bed with each other, and slowly over time something more growing of it. But Seton seems to imply that this is an Epic Romance, and that just because they lust for each others' bodies there's some kind of Deep Connection going on, when there's actually nothing to warrant it. Like any cheesy romance, John of Gaunt's childhood boo-boo puts him into Punish Everyone mode, which creates a Big Misunderstanding and leads Katherine to think he doesn't love her anymore. And, like any cheesy romance heroine, Katherine decides she's going to Leave Unexpectedly Without Talking To Him. Did I mention how much I hate it when romance novels create false tension between their romantic leads by creating Big Misunderstandings that could be easily resolved if said characters would only talk to each other for ten minutes? It's so dull being inside Katherine's head too. Her thoughts consist of inconsequential observational narrative, and the Epic Love that she shares with John. She doesn't seem to have a life outside of him. She has children and yet she hardly thinks about them, even when said children clearly express unhappiness with the current situation to her. We're told she

has no interest whatsoever in politics, and nothing else is shown as a topic or pastime she's passionate about. Katherine also suffers from Purity Sue syndrome. She nurses John's virtuous first wife in her final hours because she's Just That Good. She's beautiful, naïve, men fight over her, and she remains a passive inspiration to others, lacking in agency and interests outside of the romance. John's groping her whilst still in mourning for his dead wife, and we're often told that Dead Wife Would Have Wanted It This Way. Meanwhile, wife number two is Foaming At The Mouth Obsessed With Conquering Her Birthright and uninterested in John, other than in his capacity to achieve said Conquering and sire an heir for her. This is probably the biggest problem with the entire book. These people just don't feel like complex human beings, they feel like awkward unsympathetic caricatures.

Too much preamble. The main plot of this novel is supposed to be the relationship between John of Gaunt and Katherine Swynford, right? So why does it take over 250 pages to get there?! I understand a certain amount of setting up – Seton wants to tell a little bit about Katherine's origins, and how she was married and had children before she became John's mistress and had children with him – but 50 or 100 pages surely ought to be the limit. It dragged far too much and the more so for knowing that as readers we're waiting for the inevitable to happen.

I know my opinion is in the minority here, but I've had enough.

3 out of 10

Alice Poon says

I'm giving this novel 3.5 stars. It is overall a meticulously researched and well-written historical romance set in 14th century England about Katherine Swynford, the third wife of John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster.

The first half of the book is dedicated to describing the romantic love that develops in a tortuous way between the two protagonists. Katherine is initially married off against her wish to a brutish husband, whose faults include poverty that results from mismanagement of his estates. Then Prince Charming, who is happily married to a charming and kind princess, comes along and delivers the poor girl from despair. Then the lovers find ways to carry on with their illicit love affair, always plagued by guilt towards their respective spouses. I find this portion too drawn out with too many happy coincidences, that is, too much of a Cinderella type of story. The bits about John's childhood bête noire and his squire's murder of Katherine's husband are contrived.

The second half is much better and more realistic and the pace is quicker. I like the back stories about the Plantagenet family, the political intrigue surrounding religious reform and the lead-up to and the actual June 1381 peasants' revolt in London. But the part about Katherine's self-imposed penitence drags too much.

By the time I was near the ending, I could pretty much predict what was going to happen.

I'm glad though to have learned where Henry V and Henry VI of England came from, and the origins of the Beaufort/Tudor line and of the Yorkists.

Sara says

It is important to say up front that I am a sucker for good historical fiction. I like knowing that these people existed, that these events are part of the human record, that no one can know what these people actually thought or felt, but that this is one possible scenario that fits all the historical information. What is sure is that some things about people do not change with the exchange of horses for automobiles and kings for ego-driven politicians and that it is our ability to find common grounds in our feelings that make us relate to history so viscerally.

Having laid my prejudice for this genre on the table, I wish to say Anya Seton excels at what she does. I was completely invested in Katherine and John of Gaunt as historical characters and as individual people. It took quite a lot to survive in the sphere of the royal house in the 1300s and it is fascinating that these two persons so far down in the line of succession would be the grandfather and grandmother of a bevy of future kings and queens, including the Tutors.

It has been a long time since I have stayed up until 2:00 in the morning because I could not wait until the next day to finish a novel. I could not bear to leave John and Katherine hanging on the edge of finishing their story. I didn't want to break the flow of the narrative and when I was done I was not ready to let go of these characters at all. I hope the real Katherine Swynford was half as strong and resilient as this novel heroine; I hope John was as handsome and charming and torn as this John. I hope they did experience a love that transcended common understanding. They broke the rules of their time. He lifted her to his station. There was a reason for that, that only a great love could explain. We all have heartbreak and tragedy, but not all of us have a love that makes that tragedy a footnote.

I have marked all Seton's novels to read. I hope I enjoy them all this much.

Lynn says

This book is both a spiritual coming of age tale and a hauntingly-beautiful love story. Anya Seton wrote some other good books, but make no mistake — this is her masterpiece.

Katherine is based on the true story of Katherine Swynford and John of Gaunt from 14th Century England. John, a younger son of King Edward III, was one of the richest and most powerful men of his day. His marriages were strategic alliances — but the great love of his life was Katherine, the humble, orphan daughter of one his father's heralds.

Katherine grows from an love-struck teenager into an intelligent and aware heroine over the thirty-year course of the story. John has moments of arrogance, but is also capable of tender acts of sweetness — He should join Rhett Butler and Mr. Darcy on the list of sexiest men in literature.

The couple's relationship develops slowly over the first half of the book, but the payoff is well worth the wait. The last page of this story *always* makes me sigh.

Katherine is the kind of novel that sucks you right in to its time and place. If you're anything like me, you're going to want to rush out and find out the true story behind it when you're done because you just can't let it

go.

Richard Derus says

Rating: 2.75* of five

The Book Report: Since this is a resurrected review, I'm putting the Amazon book description here: "This classic romance novel tells the true story of the love affair that changed history—that of Katherine Swynford and John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster, the ancestors of most of the British royal family. Set in the vibrant 14th century of Chaucer and the Black Death, the story features knights fighting in battle, serfs struggling in poverty, and the magnificent Plantagenets—Edward III, the Black Prince, and Richard II—who ruled despotically over a court rotten with intrigue. Within this era of danger and romance, John of Gaunt, the king's son, falls passionately in love with the already married Katherine. Their well-documented affair and love persist through decades of war, adultery, murder, loneliness, and redemption. This epic novel of conflict, cruelty, and untamable love has become a classic since its first publication in 1954."

My Review: Whoo baby! And we thought our generation invented sex, lust, and lechery! Our mamas read this paean to the ripped bodice and flung codpiece with, I feel morally certain, cool detachment and a keen analytical eye for its prosody. Because our *mamas* didn't *ever* think about s-e-x or l-u-s-t, now did they, because that would be ewww.

Well ha ha ha on us. This story of lusty Katherine the Flemish wench, sister-in-law of Chaucer and lover of a Royal Duke, wife of a stunningly boring man who just ups and dies (most handily) one day, and mother of something like six or seven kids (now doesn't that make your baby-maker sore just thinkin' about it?) was about as close to one-handed reading for girls as things got in 1954.

Not being a girl, I had a few problems with it. Crotch-fog did not obscure my vision of the novel as told tale. And there are some things that don't work about it. First is the Romance, the zeal of the organs for their mates, between Duke and minor court lady. It's not a romance, it's his dukeliness wantin' him a piece and Katherine, no dope, trottin' right along with the program. He's ROYAL! What kind of stupid wench says no to a ROYAL in that day and time?! He turns out to be my-t-fine in the sack, bonus!, but he is busy as hell plotting and scheming and what-all, plus he's got a political marriage to contend with, and he and Katherine raise his kids by his first wife, her kids, and their kids in a kind of modern blended family. It is this central fact that makes Katherine important: She did not marry the Duke until they were old, but her four surviving kids by him are...listen carefully, this is true and it's amazing...the direct ancestors of ALL SUCCEEDING ENGLISH ROYALS TO THIS GOOD DAY.

Here's one of the problems: Which story is Seton telling, the one-handed one or the historically astoundingly important one? It's never all that clear. And it's not unclear because the book is too short, because this damned thing is almost 600pp! (Ow.) It's not clear because Seton isn't clear in her mind what she's doing here. She's got two good plots and switches back and forth between them, which makes the book feel patched together.

Another issue obscured by the anticipation felt by lubricious readers of an earlier time is the book's clunky prose. This is La Seton describing Katherine, in her youthful innocence, meeting her future baby-daddy's first wife:

The duchess was today dazzling as the southern May, having dressed to please her husband's

taste, in full magnificence of jewels and ermine. Her silver-gilt hair was twined with pearls and she wore her gold and diamond coronet. She smelled of jasmine and Katherine adored her.

That is the narrator, laddies and gentlewomen. The Narrator speaks in this breathlessly leaden, numbingly enthusiastic way from giddy-up to whoa. I won't go into what she has the lovers say to each other.

So don't go into this expecting new and exciting prose experiments, and don't go expecting a clearly defined plot. Do, however, go expecting the story to suck you right in and sweep you along, and do go expecting to keep your pillow-sharer awake from the fanning of turning pages. Repress your snorts of outrage at some of Seton's more moistly written passages, overlook some of her wrong-headed guesses at what filled the spaces in Katherine's historical record, and this could be a decent read.

For me, the seams itched and the sleeves were too short and the zipper caught me in a painful and distracting way. I say it's spinach salad, and I say to Limbo with it. (Not quite spinach and hell like the old cartoon. Guess you hadda be there. Sounded funnier in my head.)

Danielle says

I did it! And it only took me a week and a half! The hubby was even getting sick of seeing me reading the same book for so long. And because it was long, it gets a long review. This book was a daunting task and were it not for a sworn pledge from a fellow trusted reader, I'd have tossed the book aside by Chapter 3 and 'promised' myself I'd read it later when there wasn't anything else to do. But I pressed onward, even while hating the first quarter of the book and being miserable along with Katherine (of course I realize now this may have been Anya's intention). I cursed the injustice of life in the 1300's and moaned and whined my way through...all the while muttering complaints about my own poor lot in reading life at the moment.

While things picked up quickly thereafter and I fell in love along with Katherine I was still cursing the injustice. In fact the general undertone of feeling I had through out this book was a melancholic pity for her. Even while I was rooting for her and basking in the love that she shared with John, I was also tsking the ease with which she entered into a sinful life. I had to ask myself over and over, "If I lived back then and shared her circumstances, would I have done any better?" I shook my head when she wore what he wanted her to wear and stained her lips because he liked it that way and lived where he told her to. But that's what it was back then, you did what the royal people told you too and you did what the man you loved wanted you to. And really, don't I do the same thing? I wear that one green shirt 'cause I know it's the Mr.'s favorite and I brush on a fresh coat of lip gloss and pop in a piece of gum before he gets home from work. Not because I feel he'll love me any less if don't but because I want to do little things for someone I love.

As much as I bought into the love and romance and all that mushy splendor I still couldn't completely embrace them as a couple because of the infidelity bit. So, I was thrilled by her 'pilgrimage' and found such huge relief in the spiritual journey she took then. It was interesting to hear about the religious peculiarities of people back then (although I hear this hasn't completely changed for some). This part of the book was absolutely necessary to keep one from squirming with a happy ending brought on by sin. While I felt the romance and love story blossom with beauty, there was always those couple rotten petals that kept the love from being beautifully perfect for me. While I cringed at it at times, I put my trust in author Anya Seton to not leave me feeling tainted at the end and to make sure that everything turns out alright. The pilgrimage and everything that followed was the perfect redemption. She's a trustworthy authoress and you'll be perfectly safe in her hands.

Here's the bottom-line. This book is based on a true story and written in the 1950's when little evidence was available about the people in it. Saying that it was well researched and well executed is like saying "Oh my, I feel a draft," while a hurricane rips the roof off your house and brings a tree crashing into your living room. I'm telling you this book was meticulously well written and researched. If I had something bad to say about it I'd keep my little mouth shut because obviously, you wouldn't say VanGough was too heavy on the brushstrokes or that Shakespeare was too wordy. Neither would you claim the Mona Lisa was slightly understated or that Michelangelo was an overachiever. So it's a good thing I don't have anything bad to say about Anya Seton.

The appearance of Geoffrey Chaucer and faint hinting to the tale of Robin Hood was a delight. This book is certainly the best historical-fiction love story I've ever read! Okay fine it's the only one I've read but I'm pretty sure I've set myself up for disappointment from here on out with Historical-Fiction love stories. The bar has been set in the sky from the get-go. Truly this book is worthy of the title 'Epic Love Story' in a way most stories are claimed to be but fall short. It's not a read for the 'casual reader' and only certain types will find beauty in the details and perfection in the flaws of these characters.

Three cheers for Ms. Seton!

Signed,
Danielle'-Humbled Reader

Stephanie says

If you suspend a string in water saturated with salt or sugar, a beautiful crystal will gradually grow on it. That's what I thought of as I read Katherine. The string is the love story that runs throughout the novel. The crystal is the meticulous detail that Anya Seaton has used to embellish that love story.

Katherine is a beautiful young commoner. John of Gaunt is the King's son. Their love is thwarted at nearly every turn: by marriages, by duty, by social norms and the dictates of their own consciences. In spite of this, their love remained strong and steady throughout their lives, whether they were together or apart.

The love story alone is compelling, but it was Seton's detailed description of life in fourteenth-century England that really kept me engrossed in the story. I enjoyed reading about the politics of that time. I was fascinated by the religious practices (I had never heard of an anchoress, for example). I was shocked by how difficult life was then, especially for the poor, but even for the fabulously wealthy. No one was immune to illness or the Plague. I'm no historian, so I can't say for sure, but Seton's work feels well-researched and accurate. (And it is based on a true story!)

Katherine herself was a complex character. The book follows her life for over thirty years, and we see her grow and mature, evolve and sometimes devolve. At various times, I liked her and disliked her, sympathized with her and grew frustrated at her decisions. In other words, Katherine was very *human*.

In the end, Seton's attention to detail and the realism of her characters result in a story that is so much more than just another historical romance novel. Like a crystal, this book is a multi-faceted delight.

CLM says

Perhaps my favorite book in the whole world! Anyone who loves historical fiction, but has not read it, should immediately buy the 50th anniversary edition.

Kate Quinn says

This is one of the great historical fiction romances of all time, and a surprisingly accurate portrayal of the Middle Ages. Katherine is a pretty fifteen-year-old girl in 13th century England, just come to the glamorous court of King Edward III of England - and no one is more glamorous than the King's third son, the handsome and charismatic Prince John of Gaunt. John saves Katherine from rape in a moment of kindness, but nothing can stop her marriage to the clumsy and sometimes brutal Sir Hugh Swynford. Marriage, motherhood, and endurance strengthen Katherine, as does the memory of John - and when they are both widowed, neither propriety or John's new marriage to a Spanish princess can stop him from carrying Katherine off. Their romance was the scandal of the Middle Ages, as for the next ten years he kept her as his beloved mistress and doted on their four illegitimate children - until Katherine unexpectedly broke with him. Why? Read and find out. Notable minor characters weave through the story - Geoffrey Chaucer, who was Katherine's brother-in-law, and the mystic Julian of Norwich. The book's end may seem like a fairytale when John and Katherine reconcile in middle age, but it is all true to history. A tender love story with a solid feel for the Middle Ages in all its grit.

Shelbi says

In keeping with my Barnes and Noble binge, I also bought this wonderful book. But I am so mad that it doesn't have a family tree in the front!! I may have to photocopy it from someone.

This book is amazing. I had my doubts when I first picked up my borrowed worn out copy, but hearing Steph and Amy rave about it finally piqued my interest.

It is a book of adventure, romance and suspense. If you do happen to pick it up, it starts off a little slow, but I strongly urge you to keep with it. This is probably one of the best books I have read in about a year. And that's saying something.

One of the biggest things going for the book is John of Gaunt, Katherine's love interest. For those of you who have read Twilight, he is a rival of Edward's, at least in my mind. The best part is that John was a real person! This book takes you through Katherine's adventurous life. She starts off as a naive 15 year old from a convent and by the end of the book, her posterity is well on its way of becoming the future royalty of England.

I love this time period. I realized that it is the same of that from "A Knight's Tale," and reading about Chaucer and other historical figures made this book all the better. It has also made me seriously regret not taking Euro History.

It had a great ending. I just wish there was more. *Sigh*

Jill says

Here's the thing about historical fiction: *we already know what happened.*

So the wiles of plot are nullified. There's no reason to wonder how everything will turn out when Wikipedia exists.

Okay, then how about the writing? We may know what happens but the author can sprinkle the story with good prose and keen insights to keep us reading.

Unfortunately, most historical fiction authors try to echo the language spoken in days of yore. A good tactic, certainly, but one that is rarely successful. The balance of modern language with antiquated cadences is finicky. Too often you read sentences like this: "Yes, Sir Hugh, I'm quite alone and helpless. Have you come to ravish me?"

If the plot is useless and the writing questionable, is there any other reason to read historical fiction?

Yes! For a storyteller's touch. A fiction writer can skim facts if it makes for a better story. A historian cannot. Yet in *Katherine* Anya Seton writes her fiction much like nonfiction. She is a slave to the facts, reporting in minute detail the manueverings of various Western European nobles and the birth of every new royal descendant. She should have focused solely on the romance between Katherine and John of Gaunt because it is truly an epic tale. It spans decades and plague outbreaks and political strife. It produces four bastard children--and I love bastard children! Their offspring cause the War of the Roses and basically every royal house in Western Europe has some relation to Katherine or John Lancaster. But for every bastard child, for every clandestine dalliance in a secluded castle, there are pages of overly detailed description and simplistic writing.

What a shame. True stories are rarely packaged like fiction. The story of these two medieval lovers was made for our consumption, but Seton made it rotten.

Carol ?? says

"Cease, daughter!" said the priest at last in a trembling voice. "I cannot grant absolution, no priest could..."

Widely considered to be Seton's best work, this is a fast paced and fascinating interpretation of Katherine's life lived in a time of turmoil and copious bloodshed.

The only thing that made me read this slowly was the edition I had has a small font and little space between the lines. At first I could only manage 20 pages at a time. I guess kindle has left me spoilt. However, I soon adjusted and this morning I was so eager to find out Katherine's fate that I was up before 6am, feverishly

reading.

I've read this account isn't historically accurate (how could it be when so many records were destroyed by the fire at the Savoy and so many other events in these tumultuous times) but in any case I was happy to make allowances for crackling dialogue, a novel that doesn't shy away from showing the importance of religion in medieval life and a great and passionate love story - a really racy one considering this was written in 1954! Seton even captures the smells as well as the customs of the times and I felt like I had jumped into the pages and was on this journey with Katherine. I don't share Katherine's love for John of Gaunt (view spoiler) but wow. A fearless, decisive, clever man.

My only quibble which is not going to make me lower my rating is (view spoiler)

But a cracking tale until then.

Diane says

This is the book that made me fall in love with historical fiction. It's based on the true story of the 14th-century love affair between Katherine de Roet and John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster.

As a young woman, Katherine was a reputed beauty but had few prospects, so she married the brutal Sir Hugh Swynford and had two children. By chance, her marriage put her in the path of the Duke, who was struck by her beauty. After Hugh died, Katherine and the Duke stole away and had their long anticipated love affair.

While the plot sounds simple, the time and setting were not. There was a plague going on. There were peasant riots. War. Political battles. Katherine suffered many trials in her life -- this is not a romantic comedy. Indeed, I was so captivated by the story and the details in Seton's writing were so vivid that I felt as if I had been transported to medieval England.

Published in 1954, the book has been beloved by innumerable readers over the years. I remember when a fellow librarian first mentioned Katherine to me. "Read it," she implored. "You'll LOVE it." And she was right.

Laura Leaney says

Oh Sweet Lord. Two lovers "bathed in light." A woman "so pure" that the "beauty of her arms and breasts gleam[ed] like alabaster between strands of long auburn hair." Her lover? The most powerful man in England. Swoon. This is the tale of long-term love based loosely on the facts we know about John of Gaunt and his "paramour" (later wife) Katherine Swynford. Medieval romantics need not fear; this novel is fat with surcotes, prie-dieux, jeweled coifs, emblazoned hanaps, and fearful gorge-swallowing friars (I love how they're always sweating and tightening their lips). Seton must have spent a century in the library to put this together. Part of me ate it up. This is a world I would have wanted to see – unfortunately, my people, Irish peasant forebears all, wouldn't have had a squinty-eyed chance in toasty hell of seeing anything remotely kingly. Not even a cup o' Malmsey.

Bitterness at my blood lineage aside, this book has a couple of things going for it. It brings to life – as all decent historical fiction does – the world and inner thoughts of those who have left us nothing but marble effigies and flattened lifeless portraits. There is no chance I'll forget the children of Edward III now. If only Mr. Beeman had made us read this book instead of memorizing genealogical diagrams of the English royals! I would have studied the Peasant's Revolt with rabid interest, I'm sure.

The part of this novel that's hard to overcome is the style, which has the scent of the Harlequin Romance upon it.

I shall not always be gentle, Katrine," he said looking up into her face. "But by the soul of my mother, I shall love you until I die."

She bent over and opening her arms drew his head against her breasts. A gull mewed again outside the fortress, the fresh tang of the sea crept through the windows to mingle with the warmth of jasmine."

He raised his head from her breast and they looked without fear or striving but quietly; deep into each other's eyes."

Still, it's a grand operatic interpretation of the relationship between the Duke of Lancaster and the mere daughter of a lately knighted "commoner." Katherine is given quite a complex character; she's torn between religious correctness and the true love she feels for John. In Seton's book, she is no "whore" but a passionate woman in love, trying to live within the constraints of courtly life, which castigates adultery and lewdness while engaging in it. In contrast to her character, the Duke is a handsome noble yawn. Where is le noble chevallier of my imagination? Enwebbed by women. Three wives and the psychological dysfunction caused by a childhood nanny. Oh, brother. I just don't want to envision Lancaster this way.

I ended up siding with the peasants. Those boorish, gross, lip-smacking, taxed-to-death, bored, obstreperous, pains in the ass.

Dottie says

Anya Seton was a best selling author in the 50s and 60s. I read it in 1970 because a friend told me it was her favorite book, and it became 2nd on my list (after Jane Eyre) for many years. Anya wrote historical romances based on factual history, and her extensive research for her novels is usually noted in any of her bios. This book is based on the lives of Katherine and John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster. John is son of Edward III. Katherine comes to court as to join her sister as a servant to the queen. John marries her off to one of his knights then regrets it because he falls in love with her.

This is trivia and not part of the book, and it is probably not interesting to anyone but me, however it shows that these are people that actually lived: Katherine is the grandmother to Queen Isabella (married to King Ferdinand who made Columbus's voyages possible) of Spain. Isabella named her daughter Katherine after her own grandmother. This Katherine becomes the first wife of Henry the 8th.
