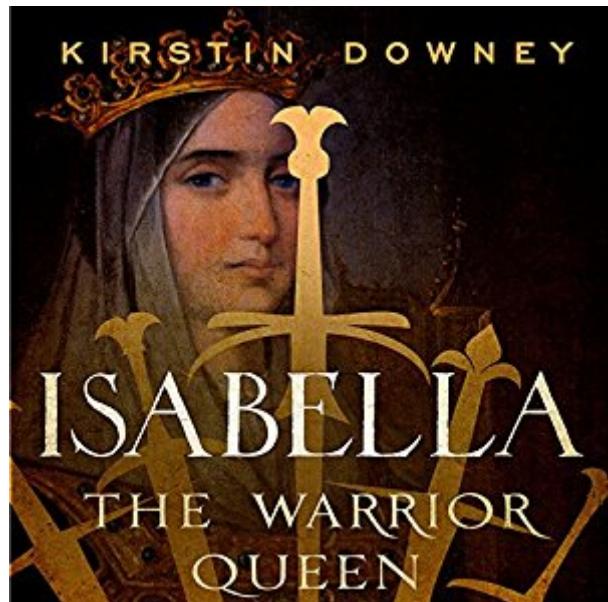


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Isabella: The Warrior Queen



Synopsis

An engrossing and revolutionary biography of Isabella of Castile, the controversial Queen of Spain who sponsored Christopher Columbus's journey to the New World, established the Spanish Inquisition, and became one of the most influential female rulers in history. Born at a time when Christianity was dying out and the Ottoman Empire was aggressively expanding, Isabella was inspired in her youth by tales of Joan of Arc, a devout young woman who unified her people and led them to victory against foreign invaders. In 1474, when most women were almost powerless, 23-year-old Isabella defied a hostile brother and a mercurial husband to seize control of Castile and León. Her subsequent feats were legendary. She ended a 24-generation struggle between Muslims and Christians, forcing North African invaders back over the Mediterranean Sea. She laid the foundation for a unified Spain. She sponsored Columbus's trip to the Indies and negotiated Spanish control over much of the New World with the help of Rodrigo Borgia, the infamous Pope Alexander VI. She also annihilated all who stood against her by establishing a bloody religious Inquisition that would darken Spain's reputation for centuries. Whether saintly or satanic, no female leader has done more to shape our modern world, in which millions of people in two hemispheres speak Spanish and practice Catholicism. Yet history has all but forgotten Isabella's influence, due to hundreds of years of misreporting that often attributed her accomplishments to Ferdinand, the bold and philandering husband she adored. Using new scholarship, Downey's luminous biography tells the story of this brilliant, fervent, forgotten woman, the faith that propelled her through life, and the land of ancient conflicts and intrigue she brought under her command.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Reading about Isabella of Castile was certainly an eye-opener. I was enticed into reading this book by this title. I didn't know much about the history of this period (apart from what we are taught in grade school), so the concept of Isabella as a warrior queen was unusual. I had always thought of her as an appendage to Ferdinand. The book explains why not only I but most of history views Isabella in a similar fashion. I was surprised at how much children of nobility of this time frame were treated like pawns on a chessboard. Their marriages were arranged and rearranged almost from the time they were born. There was so much inbreeding it seemed unreal. Both the inbreeding and the use of children to seal deals seem barbaric in these times. Isabella was neglected by most of the people who should have cared for her but was heavily influenced by a number of individuals (especially those in the Church) who planned great things for the young woman. It helps explain her dedication to and how her world view was formed by the Catholic Church. She was a female leader at a time when women simply did not assume that kind of role. By the time she rose to power, Europe was dominated by male leaders. They had arranged the system of inheritance such that women were not important and were used for political purposes and to breed. Isabella was a unique woman who could play the system and accomplish what she wanted in spite of the "handicap" of being a woman. She was also unfortunate in her marriage - Ferdinand seems to be his father's real son - vain, conniving, and philandering. Isabella must have been hurt by his attitude but it certainly gave her a spine of steel when it came to who actually was the ruler and called the shots.

"Isabella: The Warrior Queen", by Kirstin Downey is not only an excellent bio of Queen Isabella, but is a splendid overview of European and Ottoman history in the second half of the 15th century. Isabella of Castile has not been well-received in writings of history. Seen as the "other half" of Ferdinand of Aragon, she has been blamed for the Inquisition in Spain, the mass deportation of the country's Jewish population, and the problems of exploration and colonization of the "New World". Downey takes the effort to view each of these topics in the context of the time and how Isabella reacted to world events. For instance, two years after Isabella's birth in 1451, the Ottoman Turks finally captured the city of Constantinople. They soon began to take Christian lands in what is now eastern Europe. They threatened the entire Mediterranean area and were alleged to have done unspeakable horrors to Christians in the conquered areas. Isabella grew up with this threat and as a fervent Catholic, her most important task as queen was to make sure the Muslims in the small part

of Spain they already controlled, did not extend further into her lands. She and Ferdinand - King of Aragon - embarked on the military battles to drive the Muslims completely from the Iberian peninsula. Their success - called the "Reconquista" - brought Christianity to the former southern part of the country. Isabella rode into battles along with her troops. But driving the Muslims from Spain did not bring religious unity to her lands. She and Ferdinand began the Inquisition in an attempt to purify religious worship in Spain. They first went after those Jews who had converted to Christianity, called "conversos".

Kristin Downey wrote an interesting and well-written story of Isabella. And it's worth reading for that though there are some glaring errors scattered throughout the book "like the assertion that Isabella's line was wholly noble (not only did they come to power via regicide but Isabella, like Ferdinand and like over a quarter of Spaniards today was of Jewish descent) or like the claim that after Isabella's death Ferdinand took no interest in the Indies (again false). Still, these and similar factual errors "made because the author is (in my opinion) too devoted to her argument to write accurate history" aside, this makes for interesting reading. It is the only reason I am giving it three stars. It simply is a good way to begin (I emphasize begin) learning about a very controversial ruler who created or at least played a major role in creating the first truly global superpower. Having said that, the story Downey tells is riddled with problems. To make her argument: which is (in a nutshell) Isabella is the only ruler in Ferdinand-Isabella alliance worth paying attention, all good things stemming from her reign are to her credit and all bad things are largely if not wholly Ferdinand's fault she bends history more than a little and, just to make sure we get it, uses pop psychology to make her case. So here is Isabella terrified by the Ottomans taking over all of Christendom; here is the new mother with storms gathering around her; here is (by contrast) the master and completely calm-under-pressure strategist who drove the Muslims out of Spain. You would never know the two people are the same person existing at the same time, would you? But of course the first explanation is so we can excuse at least somewhat the Inquisition.

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