



Blood Sisters: The Women Behind The Wars Of The Roses

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From best-selling historian, Sarah Gristwood comes the true story behind Philippa Gregory's recent novels – the women who gave birth to the Tudor dynasty. It is a fiery history of Queens, the perils of power and of how the Wars of the Roses were ended – not by knights in battle, but the sinewy political skills of women.

The events of the Wars of the Roses are usually described in terms of the men involved; Richard, Duke of York, Henry VI, Edward IV and Henry VII. The reality though, argues Sarah Gristwood, was quite different. These years were also packed with women's drama and – in the tales of conflicted maternity and monstrous births – alive with female energy.

In this completely original book, acclaimed author Sarah Gristwood sheds light on a neglected dimension of English history: the impact of Tudor women on the Wars of the Roses. She examines Cecily Neville, the wife of Richard Duke of York, who was deprived of being queen when her husband died at the Battle of Wakefield; Elizabeth Woodville, a widow with several children who married Edward IV in secret and was crowned queen consort; Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII, whose ambitions centred on her son and whose persuasions are likely to have lead her husband Lord Stanley, previously allied with the Yorkists, to play his part in Henry's victory.

Until now, the lives of these women have remained little known to the general public. Sarah Gristwood tells their stories in detail for the first time. Captivating and original, this is historical writing of the most important kind.

Blood Sisters: The Women Behind The Wars Of The Roses Details

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From Reader Review *Blood Sisters: The Women Behind The Wars Of The Roses* for online ebook

Rebecca says

So the women of the Wars of the Roses -- more specifically, Margaret Beaufort and Elizabeth Woodville (Wydville) have always held great interest for me. A couple of thoughts:

1) This book is clearly meant as a popular history, not an academic one. It's meant for audiences who have some, but not necessarily in-depth, knowledge of late medieval England. I had an easier time keeping the names straight in Gristwood's work than I did in the first Wars of the Roses book I read (another popular history, by Alison Weir, whose work I was warned against using while writing my undergraduate history for not being academic enough).

2) As a popular history, it's done well: eminently readable, and making the women and their various personalities come alive. It's perhaps a little odd that the 'Margarets' all share a strong, forceful and occasionally overreaching nature, while not popping out kids with the fecundity of the Elizabeths...

There's enough of the little tidbits that make history entertaining -- in short, it's the type of read that got me interested in history in the first place.

3) Unfortunately, from an academic standpoint, I cringed when looking at some of the sources. Yes, there were the appropriate primary sources, and many sources that I have on my own bookshelf—but this latter is not necessarily a good thing. I know the time period in question suffers from a lack of suitable sources, but a couple of the works cited made me pause. Then again, this could just be the academic in me rearing my ugly head.

In sum: if you're interested in an entertaining read about the women who altered the course of England's history in the 1400s and early 1500s, then you'll probably enjoy this. If you're trying to write a paper for a class above the 100 or 200 level in undergraduate medieval or early modern English history, your professor probably won't want you citing this...

Deborah Pickstone says

Not as good as *Game of Queens: The Women Who Made Sixteenth-Century Europe* but am so familiar with the characters and why did she have to say that Cicely Neville had had to get her head round Edward IV murdering George of Clarence and Richard III probably murdering his nephews? The first is well documented and the second not at all. In fact, if it hadn't happened she'd have had no need to 'get her head around it' as it's in our time we suspect him, she probably had no thought of it at all. There are a few stray rumours in hers and he'd probably told her if he'd moved them - or killed them. I am annoyed by repetitious gossip. She had probably been talking to Alison Weir - tut! Otherwise, a nice woman looking at women in history approach and I have to say this is one of my preferred English female historians - though sadly they tend to be a sorry bunch of apologists. But she is quite a better one than those, as is Lauren Johnson . I do wish female Historians had some backbone - is always good to meet one who has! And gives wonderful detail as well with little of the flouncy woman-tripe you usually get.

All power to Sarah Gristwood. And Lauren Johnson!

Abigail Hartman says

Confession: I read this book in the strangest order possible. Oh, I started at the beginning and read to the end; I just somehow missed about four chapters out of the middle on the first go-round. Somehow my bookmark was moved from early in Part IV to the start of Part V, which meant I skipped 60 pages of Richard III's rule and went straight to the aftermath of Bosworth. I'm not even sure how I managed to not realize that, but I guess it's what I get for reading on an airplane. (In my defense, I was suspicious -- just not enough to act on the suspicion.) At any rate, after "finishing," I had to loop back around and read about Richard and thus end, sadly, after Bosworth. It made for an interesting reading experience.

At any rate, I had conflicted emotions about "Blood Sisters." The subject -- the women involved in the Wars of the Roses -- is certainly fascinating; even if the men were the ones on the battlefields fighting for power, Gristwood makes the excellent point that women like Margaret of Anjou, Margaret Beaufort, and Margaret of Burgundy (among others) were incredibly important as schemers, power-brokers, and conduits of royal blood. Their stories can't *not* be intriguing. The biggest issue, predictably, is with the sources available to help reconstruct those stories. Perhaps the most useful are the expense accounts of queens like Elizabeth of York, but the importance of individual payments seems very difficult to reconstruct; much has to be inferred or speculated. Chronicles and histories are much fuller, but unfortunately many of them were written long after the events of the Wars themselves -- usually under Tudor monarchs. Gristwood acknowledges this, but still lapses at times into quoting from More or Vergil as if their accounts present an indisputable picture of what really occurred. It may just be that she didn't want to burden the prose with lots of "maybes" and "he says" and "supposedlys," but it raised doubts in my mind as I read. I would have liked more specific references in the endnotes so that the reader could trace some of these narratives and find the sources of lines like, "[Henry Tudor] is said to have recited the psalm 'Judge me, O Lord, and defend my cause' (p. 226).

On the other hand, this is a very murky bit of history, and I appreciated the many theories Gristwood lays out about some of the darkest parts. She doesn't tend to state things definitively; in reference to the most obvious mystery, the fate of the Princes in the Tower, for instance, she explores a number of possibilities and weighs the evidence for each without coming to a firm conclusion. The same is true of the identity of Perkin Warbeck or the relationship between Henry VII and Elizabeth of York. I enjoyed both her exploration of these questions and her willingness to let them stand unresolved, which she managed with good grace. I hope the current project listed on her website, "about the chains of women and power running through the sixteenth century," comes to fruition soon.

Dorothy says

I highly and enthusiastically recommend "Blood Sisters" by Sarah Gristwood. A fascinating and compelling account of the War of the Roses from the vantage point of the mothers, sisters, daughters and wives who also played central and catalytic roles. The life of the medieval woman was hard and terribly often, terribly short. Womanhood began early...Margaret Beaufort gave birth to the future Henry VII when she was just 14. She never bore a child or was known to be pregnant again. Elizabeth Woodville, wife to Edward IV, married first at 15, was widowed at 22 and mother to the lost princes in the tower. Her daughter, Elizabeth of York, married to Henry VII, lost her son Arthur, her son Edmund and died in childbed at age 37.

Amidst all of these challenges to merely live and protect their families, these women were pawns and players, victims and victors, and riders on Fortune's Wheel.

This book is impeccably researched and one is almost transported via the descriptions from primary sources of day to day life. The machinations of men and women trumped time and again by fate created a whirlwind of political, social and economic chaos on in England and across the channel from present day France through to Spain.

There is no hagiography here for any of the women or their consort kings, princes and ambitious courtiers. Tudor propaganda is unmasked and all participants are revealed in their humanity.

And a very even-handed treatment of Richard who is stripped of villainy and assumes his proper role as a medieval power player.

Carolina Casas says

This book provides enormous detail into a period that has become as the period that followed, a sensationalist one. The author brilliantly deconstructs in the first sections the myths that every woman was out to out-do the other and they were all natural rivals pit against a medieval cat-fight. By their sorrows, by their experiences, they were all brought together at one point.

The only thing that I had a problem were these words that were associated when speaking of Margaret Beaufort and her only offspring, Henry of Richmond and later Henry VII, in the last two sections of this book: "Murderous" "Resentful" "Dominating" "Controller" "Plotting" "Killing spree" "Devising" Mostly they are referred to the former, Margaret Beaufort who comes down as a relentless schemer and she is called so more than two times, if not repeated more in every chapter of the last two sections dealing from Richard's reign to the Tudor regime. The way Margaret is described the first sections is as a woman born into a tragic family whose father played his cards (quite poorly) and lost and because of that Margaret and her mother suffered and she was plunged into the dangerous world of politics, yet Margaret managed to survive despite others making decisions for her and settled well into her second (actually her third if we count her engagement to the son of the Earl of Suffolk, though as explained she was later called to court to deny that engagement) marriage to the Henry Stafford (whose mother the Duchess of Buckingham soon to become Dowager Duchess when her husband gambled as well -fighting for Lancastrian and losing his life in the process- was Cecily Neville's sister). Yet after the turn of events in 1483, we find a schemer, a treacherous and horrible power-hungry-child-eating-monstrous! Oh my Goddess! resentful and jealous Margaret Beaufort.

The theories the book conjures that the Princes were *never* dead but in fact could have been (note the language here. It is never said for certain they were so nobody can accuse the book of putting up any wacky ideas, yet as you read more you realize the book does support these conspiracy theories -for that is what they are) smuggled away and that we should completely disregard Doctor Argentine's remarks that his former charge -the former Prince of Wales- looked forlorn and like a lamb ready to slaughter. The brilliant deduction of this is that the less they were seen that summer of 1483 in the Tower and the news of October (after Richard and Anne's progress to York -with the purpose to make their son, Edward of Middleham, Prince of Wales) that they were not there did not shock Richard because he had put them away into a location far away where they would not be used against him or they could be harmed and the reason Elizabeth Woodville and Elizabeth of York came out of sanctuary was not because they were putting

pragmatism before other consideration or because they knew it was their best option and now had the York sisters to protect, but because they knew a man as honest as Richard could have never done this and it was likely someone more sinister and evil. And on top of that, to prove the public promise he made that same year that he would not lay harm to the daughter of his late brother; Richard let Elizabeth Woodville retire far away from court and it is here she saw her children. However, she adds, that the possible reason why pretenders later came claiming to be the lost son of York, Richard Duke of York, and not Prince of Wales, was simply because Edward must have been murdered and Elizabeth must have somehow smuggled away her son -hence Perkin Warbeck may have been the true Prince of York and therefore the true King of England. Her basis for this latter assumption is that since Henry was judged by his contemporaries in Britain as a Prince, therefore since Perkin was too, he must have been.

It is very interesting that she says over and over "We must not" blame Richard for the crime he has been blamed for centuries by Tudor propagandists "until scientific" information can be proven. And I wholeheartedly agree with this, yet we must not blame Margaret is well or infer she was likely to be the driving force when there is no scientific evidence to prove it as well. If we do, we are doing no better than what those writing after Richard's reign did.

Her justification is clear, the sources cannot be counted as accurate for their bias and in this I agree with her one hundred percent, however we cannot discount them either. Also just as she says these sources are not to be trusted, it is interesting that she puts stock in sources that are ... let's say a century older? Also Margaret Beaufort as duping the Duke of Buckingham at the time before his rebellion, maybe even being the instigator behind it comes as a sensationalist if not more harmonious picture than the Red Queen's Margaret Beaufort. However I gave this book four stars because unlike her judgment and disregard of characters and sources, just as trusting more in George Buckland and Francis Bacon whom she says we can trust his judgment, especially as he writes that Margaret was a schemer and likely the mastermind behind these plots and that Elizabeth Woodville likely was sent to Bersmondsey Abbey for her involvement in anti-Tudor plots and that she was likely enraged with Henry for having the audacity to declare himself King in that Christmas speech in 1483 when she likely knew her sons were not dead or they had not been killed by Richard; and Margaret Beaufort's piety as described by John Fisher is likely an invention and she was in fact a controlling woman who breathed a sigh of relief once Elizabeth of York was dead for she now became the most important woman in the kingdom and her pious works are too domineering as well as her religious devotion (while religious observance by Cecily is not criticized.). The book still offers in spite of this a good biography of all the women involved in this conflict, women who deserve every recognition and Sarah Gristwood gives them that recognition and manages to bring them back to life. These women of course are: Cecily Neville "Queen by Right" (the mother of two Kings and ancestress as well as Elizabeth Woodville, Margaret Beaufort, and Elizabeth of York of every English monarch) -a woman who often comes across as resentful as well, Sarah Gristwood deconstructed this erroneous image and delivered us the true Cecily. A woman of her times yet strong and courageous and who formed a friendship with the last Lancastrian Queen (Marguerite of Anjou). This last woman, Marguerite of Anjou comes down as a woman who was put in the wrong place at the wrong time. Her husband was sadly not his father (Henry V). He was controlled by his uncles and when he came into his own he would show moments of great mercy but also of cruelty and great indecision. Here is where Margaret took control; and why she chose to take matters into her own hands is also explained by her background. Margaret of Anjou came from a place where women were likely to take a more active role in government, no doubt that influenced Margaret herself, but above all she wanted to take control because she feared the other factions could take away what she saw was hers because she was more capable or worse, his throne and her son's. And she was right. Not long after the long awaited Prince (Edward of Westminster) was delivered, conflict began and as the Duke of York's popularity grew, so did Margaret's worried. When he was named her husband's heir, she could not stand for it and this is where things took a turn for the worse. For Margaret's misfortune, she and the royal family were forced to flee, first to Scotland then to France and briefly to Anjou where she and her son were to live on King Louis of France's pension. Her husband would later be captured into Edward IV (Richard, Duke of York's son. He and his second son Edmund did not live

to see their House triumphant. After their defeat in 1460, their heads were cut off and paraded. However, this Gristwood points out should not be laid entirely on Margaret's door as she was not responsible for her soldiers' savagery) reign; and she would die two decades later after having everyone she ever loved die from her. (Her son would die in 1471 at the battle of Tewksbury. How he dies remains a mystery, Gristwood brings us the sources, some that say he was executed, others that say he died fighting. Either way, this put an end to the direct Lancastrian line).

The other women are Edward IV's less known sisters, Anne, Duchess of Exeter and Elizabeth, Duchess of Suffolk whose de la Pole's descendants as she puts it would be "hunted down" as other York descendants into Henry VII and Henry VIII's respective reigns.

The most well known and perhaps the most amazing of the three is Margaret Plantagenet, Duchess of Burgundy who married Charles the Bold. Although they never had children, this woman took matters into her own hands as well and took care of her husband's duchy while he was away fighting and she and her stepdaughter Mary, after Charles died, had to fight tooth and nail to defend that duchy from the prying hands of domestic courtiers and the foreign menace of France. She received no help from Edward (who at the time wanted to be on good terms with Louis to make the engagement between his eldest daughter and his son a reality); yet this did not deter her from reminding him that he owed her, or her determination to defend her adoptive land from falling into the wrong hands. She proposed Mary to marry her brother George (his wife Isabel had died in 1476, hence he was a widower at this time), however Edward would not have it but Margaret had another card to play. The great Duchess married Mary to the Emperor's son Maximilian and this helped them secure the duchy and such was her abilities as a diplomat, she still ruled the dukedom in their name and after her stepdaughter died, became a surrogate mother to her children.

She would become the bane of the Tudor regime, supporting pretenders, mainly Perkin Warbeck, yet her priority would always be her adoptive family and she proved to be one of the most admirable women of her time.

Anne Neville is given great attention during the reign of her second husband, Richard III, just as well as when their courting and elopement likely started -which I agree it was done in secret after papal dispensation had been granted. Richard and Anne's joint coronation showed the importance of female relations; Anne brought more of the North's loyalty to Richard and her end is just as many of these women's deaths, very tragic after living a life of danger and having her only son die the year before.

It is for these details and other snippets into the women's lives just as their devotion that the book is worth reading despite the judgment on Margaret Beaufort on the last two sections. It is a book that covers all the women who were major players in this dangerous conflict and posthumously. Above all as I mentioned before, except for these last two, this book deconstructs the myth that the women were out to destroy each other and were all rivals plunged into a sort of medieval cat-fight, they were all related one way or another, and in one way or another their past experiences and sorrows despite their husbands and fathers' rivalries brought (some of them) together.

Orsolya says

Although the bickering between the Houses of York and Lancaster (now known as the Wars of the Roses) was heavily a "man's world"; there were strong female players lurking in the shadows and controlling some strings. Sarah Gristwood explores the links between Margaret of Anjou, Cecily Neville, Margaret Beaufort, Elizabeth Woodville, Elizabeth of York, Anne Neville, and Margaret of Burgundy (Margaret of York) in "Blood Sisters: The Women Behind the Wars of the Roses".

"Blood Sisters" is not merely a portrait of the events of the Wars of the Roses but a biography (hepta-biography?) revealing the hidden links and worlds of the aforementioned key women. The first section

introduces these players and unveils information of interpersonal relationships which I was previously unaware of making “Blood Sisters” hearty at its beginning. This also opens a new angle to learning about the Wars of the Roses and almost a behind-the-scenes look. One can’t help but realize that these women had more involvement than formally believed.

Sadly, this insight doesn’t extend to the individual women themselves, as Gristwood mostly retells events versus bringing them alive or revealing the women’s psyche through any personal letters/writings. Although this makes “Blood Sisters” academic on some level and heavy on facts; it also leads to many sections being too dry, listless, and overly political. The average reader without strong interest in the topic may find “Blood Sisters” to be too heavy at times.

Oftentimes, “Blood Sisters” lacks direction, backtracks, and is downright confusing not due to the topic but in regards to the writing. Not only does Gristwood repeat herself enough times that it is noticeable but she also uses many “would have” and “could have” speculations, sources such as anonymous poems, and depends heavily on quotes from Shakespeare (I thought we agreed that Shakespeare was **NOT** a historian?!). This lowers the scholarly feel and is distracting.

Also frustrating is Gristwood’s constant, and I mean constant, mention of “fortune’s wheel” when describing events turning in favor of one woman over another. This happens several times on one single page and is simply quite annoying.

Some of the women stick out and are more vibrant than others (such as Margaret Beaufort). Whether this is due to personal bias on behalf of Gristwood or because sources are more readily available, I can not solidly deem. This isn’t a positive or negative trait of “Blood Sisters” but is noticeable and worth noting as it may cause some readers to conclude that the work is uneven and chunky.

Even though “Blood Sisters” is more of a history retelling without new information; there are some moments where Gristwood plays detective and presents compelling research or debunks some myths. These perky moments add to the flesh of the book and keep the pace of “Blood Sisters” moving. Another positive is that Gristwood doesn’t appear to have any major biases and doesn’t merely point fingers, allowing the reader to make self-decisions on who is to blame for what.

The highlight of “Blood Sisters” is without a doubt, the climatic description of the Battle of Bosworth. Gristwood’s coverage is exciting and descriptive. This flows into a strong portrayal of Elizabeth of York and her relations with Margaret Beaufort in the early years of Henry VII’s reign. As Elizabeth tends to be somewhat hidden in history, Gristwood gives her ample due in “Blood Sisters”. Also satisfying are the in-depth theories relating to Perkin Warbeck’s background and motives. Basically, the last quarter of “Blood Sisters” is the strongest.

Although Gristwood makes firm statements which haven’t yet been proven; “Blood Sisters” is relatively up-to-date even mentioning the 2012 finding of Richard III’s body in a Leicester parking lot. Sadly though, “Blood Sisters” tends to otherwise use poorly sourced facts and annotations which dampen the academic value.

“The conclusion of “Blood Sisters” over-reaches in attempts to be emotional and to tie the women of the book to Elizabeth I. It felt a bit stretched and forced.

Overall, “Blood Sisters” is a readable look at the Wars of the Roses with a unique angle of the women involved—it merely has execution flaws. My biggest complaint is that I didn’t really feel that I got to know

these figures any more than I already did and therefore didn't feel the book was memorable or that Gristwood succeeded her goals of revealing these women. Despite this, "Blood Sisters" is great for a review of the Wars of the Roses or an introduction to the women involved.

Jo Barton says

The War of the Roses shook the very foundations of England, when cousin armed against cousin, fought for power in a domestic drama on a grand scale. The ruling Plantagenets had two warring factions; the House of Lancaster and the House of York, both had equal and valid claims to the English throne as descendants of Edward III. Taking their symbols as red and white roses, the royal houses of Lancaster and York not only divided their family, but also alienated England.

Generally overlooked by their more war worthy male counterparts, the women behind the men who fought in this protracted dispute, have a fascination all of their own. Undertaking a history of the women behind the Wars of the Roses is no mean feat, and yet in this factual account, Sarah Gristwood has done an admirable job in explaining the complexities of family politics, and shows how the cousins and their wives were interlinked both by birth and by dynastic marriage.

Easy to read in manageable sections, and with extraordinary insight into the time, Blood Sisters is a fascinating account of a troubled period in England's complex history. In explaining the precarious position of the Plantagenet families and more especially in the role the Plantagenet women played in this remarkable game of thrones, only adds credence to the myth that behind every strong man, is an equally strong and courageous woman.

My thanks to NetGalley and Basic books for an e-copy of this book to review.

Lisa says

Women such as Marguerite of Anjou,, Margaret of Burgundy and Margaret of Beaufort recruited armies, arranged marriages and supported political factions. They also gave alms to charity and even played a large role in supporting universities and scholarship. These important women of the Middle Ages certainly didn't let any grass grow under their feet! The women of the Wars of the Roses have often been regarded as unimportant, but Blood Sisters does them justice.

This book also evokes the splendid pageantry and celebrations of the Middle Ages and the 'lifestyles' of these women. Even their books are described. There are also some lovely legends and anecdotes in this enjoyable and interesting book, such as the love story of the beautiful Elizabeth Woodville.

Unfortunately, I still find the Wars of the Roses pretty confusing, but Sarah Gristwood certainly does her best to explain them. The facts of this area of history are just baffling by their nature.

I highly recommend this thoroughly researched book for lovers of English history.

K.J. Charles says

A book supposedly focused on the women of the Cousins' War (Wars of the Roses if you're old school) which is meant to take away the focus from men and battles into the domestic-political sphere and show us the more human face, not the clash-of-kings. Only, it basically doesn't, at least so far. Evidently there isn't the source material, so in fact it is a procession of the various twists and turns and stuff the main players did (ie mostly men and Margaret of Anjou), with added descriptions of clothing and mentions of where the women were, or indeed "we don't know where the women were". The author doesn't go massively into the "how Cecily Neville must have felt when her son killed her other son" school of writing, but without speculation or evidence there's not a lot to put in.

If you want an account of the Cousin's War, this is very reasonable but it isn't the female-focused book I expected from the title and blurb.

DNF at 30%

Mariana says

Such a good read!!! It is definitely a must read or anyone looking to know about the women behind the War of the Roses.

Jennifer says

Wow; what a fantastic book! I've read quite a bit about the "Wars of the Roses", but as is typical of the times, the story was centered around the men in the story. It's too bad; because there were some incredibly complex, strong, independent women supporting these men. These women schemed, manipulated, sacrificed, protected their children, triumphed and failed. All seven of the women profiled in this book deserve our respect; they lived in a time when men controlled politics, but these women didn't allow that to happen.

Anne Neville, wife to the Lancastrian heir and son of Henry VI, and then later the wife of the Yorkist Richard III, is perhaps the saddest character in this story. Very little is known of her, which is truly a loss. She must have felt such strong, conflicting emotions. She was a pawn in this complicated game, being married first to Edward, the Lancastrian claimant to the throne, before he was killed by Richard, Duke of Gloucester, who would later become Richard III, and her second husband. How could that have felt, to be married to the man who killed your husband in battle?

Elizabeth Woodville perplexes me. She was raised to be Queen of England upon her marriage to Edward IV, and upon his death was forced to take sanctuary in Westminster Abbey while her 12-year old son, Edward, was moved to the Tower of London to await his coronation. That would never happen, and his younger brother, Richard, was removed from sanctuary and taken to the Tower, where both boys later disappeared. There are two main suspects in this crime; Richard III and the future Henry VII. Personally, my money is on Henry VII. Richard had declared both boys illegitimate and therefore ineligible for the throne; he had nothing to gain upon their death. Henry VII, however, had no claim to the throne while the boys lived.

There is so much to say about these incredible women. I just loved this book and learning more about how

much they directed the course of the Wars of the Roses.

Chris says

Read ARC via netgalley.

I'm not sure when the current popular fascination with the Tudors began. Was it simply the Showtime series with the glorious Jonathan Rhys-Myers? Or was it Philippa Gregory's *The Other Boleyn Girl*? I'm not sure. But it does seem like this book, at least in its release, is an answer to Gregory's fiction surrounding the Tudor and Pre-Tudor women.

Blood Sisters takes an in-depth look at the royal women who were involved in the Cousin's War (aka The War of the Roses), a difficult task considering that the women left little to go by. I'm not sure if it is a response to the *Women of the Cousin's War* by Gregory as well as her fiction set in the time period. It doesn't really matter because the book is actually very good.

Earlier this year, I read a biography of Elizabeth of York, and my complaint about the work (and it was an older work) was that the reader didn't really learn anything about Elizabeth of York. This book is broader in scope, looking at all the women, yet reading this I learned more about Elizabeth of York than when reading a biography of her.

Gristwood starts with Cecily Neville and Queen Margaret and follows the war as she traces the lives of the women caught up in it. Surprise, the women were not at each other's throats as their husbands were. The two opposing queens – Elizabeth Woodville and Margaret - might have been friends had circumstances been different.

If you are fan of the fate of the princes, there is speculation here. Gristwood doesn't seem to choose a conclusion when dealing with the princes, and presents all the suspects for each valuation. She points out the flaws in each of the theories.

However, the primary focus on the book is the women. She even manages to flesh out, to a degree, Anne Neville, the wife of Richard III who has always been a shadowy figure, standing, if she stood for anything, for a victim caught up in the war whose second husband killed her first, and who was abused. Gristwood says, quite simply, we don't know. She speculates, and she is quite clear when she speculates, but she admits the fact that there is no way we can know. (Honestly, why can't more historians do this?)

She comes to some interesting hypotheses about some of the women - Cecily and her relationship with her children, Margaret Beaufort's relationship with both her son and her daughter-in-law, and how long after some men had been carried from the field, women were still able to fight on, and did so for a mixture of reasons.

Having a general knowledge of the English Cousin's War will help before reading this book. Gristwood presumes that the reader has the basic knowledge and adds to that. She keeps the men somewhat in the wings – discussing them in terms of the relationship they have to the women (how many wives Edward IV might have had, what he found attractive, how he fled and his wife stayed).

One can understand the attraction to this time period in today's society. After all, romance is romance. But too often books that are historical fiction value romance and sensation above history. This is fine. Historical fiction is fiction. But many times, writers and readers forget how interesting and gripping the actual history was. Gristwood writes history and shows that while the Tudor forerunners may not have been hopping out of each other's beds, or being feminists before the word was invented, how the women still managed to live, if not on their own terms, and effect the fates of those around them.

Caroline says

When you watched "The White Queen", did you think:

"Hmm, it seems kind of weird that a devout Christian woman would be practicing witchcraft. It also seems weird that this witchcraft defines several historical events."

"Wow, Elizabeth Woodville's French manicure is better than mine!"

"Is that a zipper???"

If so, you were in good company. Luckily, Sarah Gristwood has released "Blood Sisters", a wonderful book that combats all things Gregory and should be required reading if you're interested in the women of the Cousins' War. By the way, you should probably ignore the non-fiction book Gregory released on the subject. Just... don't.

The best part is that Gristwood not only covers all of the women of TWQ, but a few that were either ignored, glossed over, or hopelessly slandered (Marguerite of Anjou, Margaret of Burgundy, and Cecily "Proud Cis" Neville). She's unbiased and at times refreshingly cynical, refusing to apply modern sensibilities to fifteenth century people. Believe me: it was amazing to get an analysis of Richard III and Anne Neville's relationship that reviewed what little evidence we actually have, versus romanticized wishful thinking. Speaking of Richard III, Gristwood does the best analysis of him I've read so far, not taking a dominant stance as much as she weighs the evidence of either argument about his character and activities.

"Blood Sisters" reads like a novel. I was never bored. In fact, I was often riveted. She never goes so far as to presume what these women must have felt: but she does point out the innate tragedy of their lives. (Sometimes overusing a certain phrase, the book's only major flaw.) From Marguerite of Anjou's reversal of fortunes to the sheer bad luck of Cecily Neville--outliving so many children, one of whom became so infamous that she couldn't quite claim him as her own.

Gristwood doesn't make anyone to be a saint here. Nor are they villains. She's flat-out honest when she doesn't have much solid information to go on (as with Anne Neville) no matter how much that may upset her readers. That in itself is very admirable.

Basically, this is what feminist history should be. Go read it.

Sam says

I was really excited about the approach to this book. It's a look at the royal women during the War of the Roses and the impact they made on the war. While I was interested enough in the subject to keep going, I thought the book fell a little flat. At times it lacked a solid narrative direction which made the reading confusing. This mostly happened in the beginning when there were a lot more people to address and introduce. Unfortunately, the book bounced from woman to woman without a lot of clarity and it was a struggle to keep everyone straight. I know part of that is the downfall of the time and important people

sharing the same name, but I've read other nonfiction books without the same struggle.

Most importantly for me, I just never thought the book really made the women come alive. It was dry and I don't feel anything was really offered up about the women that I haven't gotten in a book focusing on the war overall except to tell me what they spent on clothes and servants. Nothing new was presented to really give me a sense of these women; just facts and events. I'm not saying I want fiction, but I really thought a book focusing on the women would do more to dig into their lives and actually focus on them. I'm still wondering what the book thought their impact on the War of the Roses was. Honestly I think the book might have been better served to take a look at each woman one at a time rather than trying to go through a timeline of the war.

Overall it's probably 2.5 stars. At the very least it is very readable which doesn't always happen with nonfiction books. I think the turmoil of the times and all the events/action helps with that. I really don't think I would have made it through this book if work hadn't been so slow.

Sarah u says

'Blood Sisters' by author Sarah Gristwood aims to tell readers the true story of the Cousin's Wars- the Wars of the Roses- from the point of view of the women involved. Her seven case studies are Marguerite of Anjou, the Lancastrian queen; Elizabeth Woodville, the Yorkist queen; Cecily Nevill, the would-be Yorkist queen and Elizabeth Woodville's mother in law; Margaret of Burgundy, Cecily's youngest daughter who made an illustrious marriage to a duke; Margaret Beaufort, Henry VII's mother; Anne Nevill, Richard III's queen and Elizabeth of York, daughter of Elizabeth Woodville and daughter in law to Margaret Beaufort. The aim of this work was to weave the seven lives and stories together into a narrative history, teaching us that the Wars of the Roses were as much about the women as they were the men.

The book is a good read, well written in an easy to digest narrative of the period. It clearly has a wide potential audience, and I would say with confidence that you do not need any prior knowledge of the period to understand and enjoy this book. Everything is clearly written, and as a popular history there are not endless notes and citations. Gristwood does quote from primary sources; when she does she tells us the author of her quote, but not always the name of the writing and never the page numbers. This might prove frustrating for people wanting to look at the sources for themselves.

The seven stories are interlinked nicely, and the move from one woman to another is smooth and does not disrupt the author's prose at all. The women who I especially enjoyed in this book were Marguerite of Anjou and Elizabeth Woodville; their stories were covered well and rumours against them argued fairly. Margaret Beaufort was treated well in the beginning, but I thought the balance slipped towards the end of the book when she was discussed alongside Elizabeth of York. (That could just be me, though.) Sadly, even though Anne Nevill was one of the author's case studies, she does not feature much in the narrative. That is of course not the authors fault; sources about Anne are scarce.

As one would expect from a work of non-fiction, care was taken to be factually accurate and fair throughout. One thing that did stick out was towards the end we had Edward of Warwick executed because the Spanish said so- there was no mention of him plotting with Perkin Warbeck, which actually is the crime he was executed for.

On the whole, this is a good book and I would recommend it to people interested in learning more about the

period.
