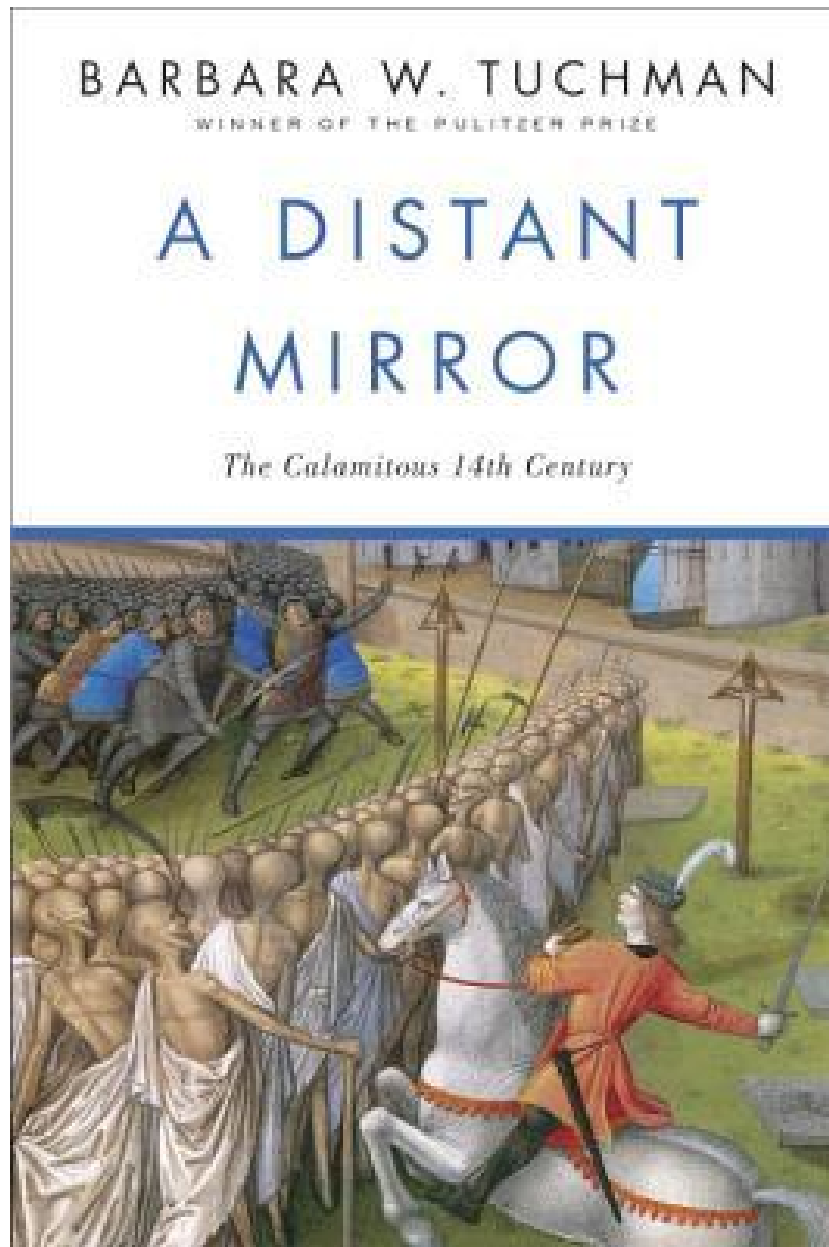


# A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century Book PDF Download



**By:**  
**Barbara W. Tuchman**

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### Kalliope

What an extraordinary read it is when one book is as action packed as thirty riveting novels. And if it also contains rich and erudite disquisitions and is narrated in a language as clear and flowing as water from a spring, then the volume must be given a preferential place in one's library.

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I am not too keen of including quotes in my reviews. But given the amount of material that marshals in front of one's eyes, as colorful as overwhelming pageants and breathtaking jousts, and as dense as the tightly woven wefts and warps of a tapestry, there is no way I could attempt to give a glimpse with my own words of what Barbara Tuchman has achieved with this book.

But before I present the quote, I would like to draw attention to how shrewd Tuchman has been in the choice of her subject. As she explains in her early pages, she set herself to follow one particular character as he lived during a period in history when the actors were on the count of hundreds, and thereby keep one's focus and walk through the maze and the turmoil without getting lost.

was a member of the French nobility at a time when "French" could also mean "English". Enguerrand in fact acted as both French and English as he had acquired double allegiance: to his own King and to the King and father of his wife. And this he did when the two Kingdoms were at war; a war that would last for over one hundred years. Opportunely Enguerrand is well documented by one of the most striking chroniclers of the time,

. As nothing had been written about him in English before Tuchman, she had found a gold vein for her research and pen to exploit.

Here stops my explanation. It is time now for the quote. This passage is better than an the Index to offer a glimpse to that Distant Mirror that Tuchman has approached to us for our close examination.

If to the above adventures, narrated ever so smoothly, one is to add the excellent studies of various chapters of Material Life in late Medieval Europe, that help us to shorten the Distance of the Mirror and make reflections become what is reflected, then one can begin to imagine the sheer pleasure that this book offers to whoever decides to open up its pages and read it.

As it is often claimed, Tuchman may not be a historian of the academic breed, but in this account she has demonstrated her excellent narrative abilities that many historians and novelists would just love to command as well as she.

## William1

A vivid and detailed look into a lost world. The major players are The Black Death, The Hundred Years War, the sick, uproarious joke of chivalric valor, The Papal Schism, ruinous taxation, serfdom, petty feudal institutions, the utter absence of reason among the so-called ruling classes, murderous vengeance, horrendous speculation, brigandry, the subjection of women, the sheer endless cruelty of mankind, crusade against the "infidel," and so on. A GR friend said that he was disappointed in this book because it did not offer the narrow focus and sleek thematic underpinnings of Tuchman's

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. I see his point. It should be noted, however, that

is a very different kind of book.

is a deft study of the almost systematic loss of rational method leaders experience once they are dazzled by the trappings of ultimate power.

is a survey of a lost world. As such it brings before the reader an almost encyclopedic survey of the particulars of that time, a few major ones outlined above. Reading

is like being in thrall to an endless film loop of natural disasters, pitiless murders, and roadside accidents. Tuchman brings order to this concatenation of relentless self-woundings so that try as we might we cannot look away. If there is only one book you read on the Middle Ages it might be this one. It is not for the squeamish or those afraid of the dark. It is not a light beach- or inflight-read. Highly recommended.

## Glenn Russell

r by Barbara W. Tuchman is, on one level, a seven hundred page encyclopedia of the 14th century's political, military, religious, social, cultural and economic history. Since Ms. Tuchman is a first-rate writer, on still another level, the book is a compelling, personalized account of individual men and women living through these turbulent, disastrous times, especially one Enguerrand de Coucy V11 (1340-1397), a high-ranking noble, heralded as "the most experienced and skillful of

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The 14th century witnessed ongoing devastation, including the little ice age, the hundred years' war, the papal schism, the peasant's revolt and, most dramatically, the black death of 1348-1350, which depopulated Europe by as much as half. Ms. Tuchman's book covers it all in twenty-seven chapters, chapter with such headings as

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and

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Many pages are filled with the color and morbidity of the times. By way of example, here is one memorable happening where the French Queen gave a masquerade to celebrate the wedding of a twice widowed lady-in-waiting: six young noblemen, including the King who recently recovered from a bout of madness, disguised themselves as wood savages and entered the masked ball making lewd gestures and howling like wolves as they paraded and capered in the middle of the revelers. When one of the noble spectators came too close with his torch, a spark fell and a few moments later the wood savages, with the exception of the King, were engulfed in flames. Afterwards, the French populace was horrified by this ghastly tragedy, a perverse playing on the edge of madness and death nearly killing their King.

And here is what the author has to say about the young man who concocted the wood savage idea, "The deviser of the affair "cruellest and most insolent of men," was one Huguet de Guisay,

avored in the royal circle for his outrageous schemes. He was a man of "wicked life" who "corrupted and schooled youth in debaucheries," and held commoners and the poor in hatred and contempt. He called them dogs, and with blows of sword and whip took pleasure in forcing them to imitate barking. If a servant displeased him, he would force the man to lie on the ground and, standing on his back, would kick him with spurs, crying, "Bark, dog!" in response to his cries of pain. All of the chapters are chock full with such sadistic and violent sketches.

Speaking of the populace, there is plenty of detail on the habits and round of daily life of the common people. And, of course, there is a plethora of detail on the lives of the upper classes. Here is a snippet of one description: "In the evening minstrels played with lutes and harps, reed pipes, bagpipes, trumpets, kettle drums, and cymbals. In the blossoming of secular music as an art in the 14th century, as many as thirty-six different instruments had come into use. If no concert or performance was scheduled after the evening meal, the company entertained each other with song and conversation, tales of the day's hunting, "graceful questions" on the conventions of live, and verbal games."

## Hana

I was a little worried at the start that 600 pages of 14th century history might be, shall we say,

. There is no denying the book is long and very detailed and at times it was a struggle, but every time I was about to give up after yet another pointless battle Tuchman would come up with a telling detail or surprising insight.

Example: the invention of chimneys in the 14th century made separate bedrooms possible and introduced notions of privacy that had never before been possible

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Example: the invention of chimneys in the 14th century made separate bedrooms possible and introduced notions of privacy that had never before been possible in Northern Europe and so she wove her web again, catching me for another hundred pages. There are so many wonderful reviews of this book on Goodreads that I'll just highlight a few things that struck me as I was reading this masterpiece.

About only thing I knew about the 14th century when I started this book was that this was when the bubonic plague spread across Europe from Asia and I only knew this because I've read Connie Willis's superb

in which a time-traveling historian gets stuck in 1348.

One of the surprises for me was that the plague died down and recurred more than once throughout the terrible century – The Black Death returned for the fourth time in 1388-90. Earlier recurrences had affected chiefly children who had not acquired immunity, but in the fourth round a new adult generation fell under the swift contagion. By this time Europe's population was reduced to between 40 and 50 percent of what it had been when the century opened.

If you want to know what happened during the plague and why, and what it meant read A Distant Mirror. If you want to know what it

## Matt

My interest in medieval times is not incredibly strong; it is, in fact, relegated mostly to the hope of someday going to a Medieval Times restaurant. I've read Ken Follett's two Kingsbridge novels, and I've been to a few Renaissance Fairs in my time (and eaten more than my share of child-sized turkey legs), but beyond that, I've never cared much about the Middle Ages.

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not for its subject matter, but because Tuchman wrote it. The winner of two Pulitzer Prizes and a National Book Award, Tuchman was one of the great author/historians of her time, or any time. Her name on the cover demands attention. While

didn't turn me into an expert in making barley bread or choosing the right kind of alligator for your castle moat, it was nevertheless an utterly fascinating read.



Tuchman's focus on the 14th Century began with an interest in the Black Death of 1348-1350, which she states killed an estimated one-third of the people living between India and Iceland. As she explains in the Forward, Tuchman initially wanted to study the effects of such a disaster on society. In researching the answer to that question, her interest grew to include the entirety of the 1300s, a violent, tormented, bewildered, suffering and disintegrating age.

Certainly there was no shortage of turmoil and strife. There was the aforementioned Black Death "the bubonic plague" that caused pus-and-blood-filled buboes (inflamed lymph nodes) to appear on the groin, neck, and armpit. Millions of people died in this, one of the deadliest pandemics in human history. There was constant war between England and France, part of the so-called Hundred Years' War, which ravaged the countryside and depleted tax bases. There was a Papal Schism, with three men simultaneously claiming that tall white hat. And to cap things off, in 1396, the Ottomans put a decisive end to the Crusade of Nicopolis.

To get an idea of the eventfulness of the 14th Century, let's take a brief look at the Battle of Poitiers in 1356. It pitted the English forces under Edward, the Black Prince, and the French under King John. The English won, and furthermore, captured King John, decapitating the French monarchy. In John's absence, the bourgeois rose in France, and the Third Estate attempted to establish constitutional control. Meanwhile, mercenary "free companies" scoured the land, plundering and burning. It's all the bad parts of Westeros, except there are no dragons coming to the rescue. (Conversely, I suppose, there were no dragons to make things worse). All this takes place in just two chapters (out of 27).