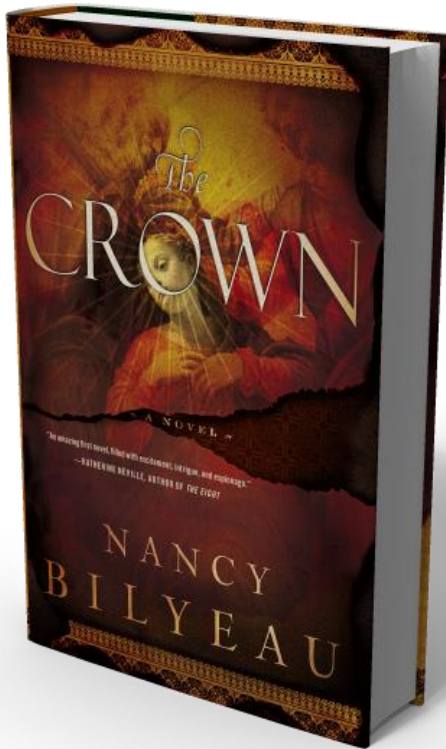


The Crown

By Nancy Bilyeau

Reading Group Guide



Introduction

When Joanna Stafford, an aristocratic young novice, learns that her rebel cousin Margaret Bulmer is condemned by King Henry VIII to be burned at the stake, she makes the decision to break the sacred rule of enclosure and run away from her Dominican Order to stand at her cousin's side.

Arrested for interfering with the king, both Joanna and her father are sent to the Tower of London. During their imprisonment, Joanna meets Stephen Gardiner, the powerful Bishop of Winchester, who allows her to leave the Tower on one condition: that she return to Dartford Priory to search in secret for the lost crown worn by Saxon King Athelstan. In order to save her father, Joanna must become a pawn in a struggle between religious extremes. As she faces challenges on every front, Joanna must determine whom she can trust and how far she is willing to go to protect a life that she loves

Topics & Questions for Discussion

1. What does Joanna Stafford's decision to flee the Dartford priory to attend Margaret's execution reveal about her character? Why is she willing to compromise her position to bear witness to her relative's last moments? Why do you think Nancy Bilyeau chose to begin her novel with Joanna's journey to Smithfield?
2. "[Margaret Bulmer] sought to harm no one. She and the others wanted to preserve something, a way of life that has been honored for centuries. Which gives comfort to the poor and the sick. They rebelled because they felt so passionately about their cause." Why do the Catholics in England face political persecution at the hands of Henry VIII and his government in the aftermath of his annulment of his marriage to Katherine of Aragon? Why does Joanna risk exposing her own religious beliefs in her spirited defense of Catholic rebels like her cousin Margaret Bulmer?
3. Were you surprised when Geoffrey Scovill came to Joanna's aid in Smithfield? To what extent does his decision to protect her seem selfless? Do you agree with Geoffrey that Joanna's decision to attend the execution as an unescorted gentlewoman was ill-advised? If you were in a situation in which a relative in the last moments of her life depended on you for spiritual sustenance, would you take the same risks? Why or why not?
4. "I said nothing. There was no amount of abuse, no device of torture, that would ever make me disclose what had happened on the single day that I spent in royal service ten years ago." Why does Joanna choose to conceal this? How does that episode affect her ability to trust

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men? How does this moment of foreshadowing by the author affect your feelings when the facts of Joanna's having been sexually abused by George Boleyn are revealed much later in the novel?

5. How would you describe Joanna's experience in the Tower? Why does Lady Kingston's servant, Bess, agree to help Joanna try to make contact with her father, Sir Richard Stafford, in the White Tower? What do you think of Joanna's experiences in the Tower tunnels and chambers? What aspects of those scenes were especially evocative for you?
6. Why does Bishop Gardiner seek out Joanna in the Tower? Why does he use Joanna's father to blackmail her into doing what he asks? What does her decision to go along with his requests and deceive the prioress at Dartford, among others, reveal about her sense of filial obligation?
7. How does Joanna's intimacy with the disgraced and dying Katherine of Aragon make her vulnerable to Gardiner's quest for King Athelstan's missing crown? What complicated motives might be behind Gardiner's quest for the crown?
8. On her deathbed why does Katherine of Aragon urge Joanna to "protect the secret of the [Athelstan] crown" for the sake of her daughter, Mary? Why does Katherine choose to reveal the possible existence of the Athelstan crown to Joanna?
9. How does Joanna Stafford get along with Brother Richard and Brother Edmund, when they all return to Dartford Priory on Gardiner's orders? How does their friendship change when Joanna discovers that Edmund sends her letters to Bishop Gardiner and Richard oversees their exchanges and facilitates their work? Why does Gardiner choose not to tell the three of them that they are all working for him, searching for the Athelstan crown at Dartford?
10. How does Lord Chester's murder affect the mood at the priory? How does Joanna's and Edmund's interpretations of the Dartford tapestries yield to uncovering both the murderer and motivation?
11. How does the revelation of the Athelstan crown's existence—and that it contains thorns from the crown Jesus wore—make Joanna's quest more urgent? When Bishop Gardiner discovers Joanna and Edmund disguised at the Howard home, why doesn't he punish or attempt to detain them? What role does Mary, daughter of Katherine of Aragon, play?
12. Did you like the ending of *The Crown*? What do you think will become of Joanna? What could her return to Dartford suggest about her aspirations—spiritual, romantic, and otherwise?

Enhance Your Book Club

1. In *The Crown*, Joanna Stafford exhibits a kind of family loyalty that many readers may relate to. She sacrifices her spiritual calling to show support for her condemned cousin, takes many risks to save her father, and accepts her much-younger stepbrother as her flesh and blood on her father's deathbed. Who in your life has made sacrifices out of loyalty to you? How have you demonstrated your loyalty to others?

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2. Are you interested in visiting or learning more about Dartford, England, where the Dartford Priory was located? Visit <http://www.dartford.gov.uk/dartford/history.htm>, to read up on the history of the village of Dartford. This Web site features a tremendously detailed historical time line and useful information about the priory and its role in the town's medieval history.
3. "Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived." Have you heard this famous mnemonic about the wives of Henry VIII? What possibilities were there for noblewomen in this era? How did members of your book club feel about the portrayal of women—whether it was Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Joanna Stafford, Princess Mary, Lady Kingston, or Bess? What did it mean to be a woman at this time in England? Of the many women featured in the novel, which did your book club most admire, and why?