

Dark Angels



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From Publishers Weekly

In this sprightly prequel to her bestselling *Through a Glass Darkly*, Koen transports readers to the Restoration court of England's King Charles II. As England recovers from civil war, the court is awash in intrigue, treachery and debauchery. Koen's protagonist, Alice Verney, "a born courtier, wily, patient, steadfast," and maid-of-honor to Queen Catherine, moves seamlessly through this glittering world. When King Charles's sister is poisoned, Alice suspects the mysterious Henry Angel is responsible and has Queen Catherine as his next target. Alice allies with the duke of Balmoral, a statesman and one of the king's advisors whom she hopes to wed, and the young handsome Richard Saylor, the commander of the Queen's Guard, to foil Angel's plot and expose the conspirators within the English government. As she races to save the queen, Alice is increasingly torn between the wealthy, powerful duke of Balmoral and the lowly but dashing Saylor. Koen knows her material and painstakingly recreates the Restoration period. Her large cast—both historical and fictional—are sharply rendered, and the larger-than-life Alice makes a memorable heroine—imperious, even vindictive, but always unwavering in conviction. Koen blends history, mystery and romance to craft a historical romance that will delight fans of the genre. (Sept.)

From The Washington Post

What you see in *Dark Angels* is what you get -- an old-fashioned historical romance, a page-turning read full of love, betrayals, political intrigues and cool clothes. Set in the England and France of 1670, this new novel is a prequel to Koen's bestselling *Through a Glass Darkly* and its sequel, *Now Face to Face*. It tells the story of the early life of Alice Verney, seen briefly in the previous books as an elderly duchess, and her involvement in a life-or-death plot against the king of England. While telling a love story, Koen focuses most of her effort on recounting historical events of the period, and a fascinating period it is, too.

In the mid-17th century, Charles I was beheaded, and England became a protectorate under Oliver Cromwell. At Cromwell's death, however, no successor proved able to hold the country together, and the late monarch's son was invited to return as King Charles II. The Restoration was a time of slippery politics and fascinatingly shifty characters. The chief strength of Koen's novel is her thorough understanding of the era and its people, and her skill in briefly explaining complex historical circumstances while telling a good story.

Alice Verney, a maid of honor to Princess Henriette of France (the king of England's sister), returns to England after her mistress's mysterious and horrible death (a real event), with the ambition to marry the elderly, wily (and really rich) Duke of Balmoral. This ambition holds firm in spite of her attraction to Richard Saylor, a not-so-rich but enterprising soldier who, while he appreciates Alice's wit and political savvy, is competing with the king himself for the affections of a French beauty with sheep's eyes and a brain to match (Louise de Keroualle, one of Charles's actual mistresses).

Alice is a great character, vivid and three-dimensional, constantly seething with plots, ploys and pride. Unfortunately, Saylor is little more than a necessary hero for most of the book, and the required romantic resolution is therefore something of a letdown, the two principals having not so much overcome all obstacles to their union as having had them conveniently removed so the story could end.

Aside from the romance, though, the plot is terrific, involving professional poisoners; court politics; murder in a homosexual brothel; Nell Gwynn, an orange-selling actress and most famous of the King's mistresses (a bit player here, but naked); illegitimate babies and the precariously interwoven lives of everyone near the king -- himself the most precarious of monarchs. While the story is undeniably Alice's, the king is the true focus of the book. The plot is woven around him and his court, and Koen understands not only the politics but the man, giving us a surprisingly empathetic portrait of a ruler often dismissed by history as a playboy sex-fiend. In Koen's hands, we see Charles instead as a monarch whose façade of confidence drapes the rickety skeleton of the political structure that holds him aloft and whose many amours fail to hide his essential loneliness.

Koen's prose here is pedestrian, but it gets the job done. You don't have beautiful imagery or striking insights to linger over, but you do keep turning pages. She also has a deft touch with historical trivia, sliding entertaining factoids and necessary background in without interfering with the story. The book does show signs of ruthless editing, particularly in Book Two, but the few loose ends and incomplete references that result don't really damage the story.

For a story that deals heavily in adultery, sodomy and other forms of interesting human sexual behavior, though, Koen's scenes are surprisingly chaste. The murders that take place aren't particularly graphic but do involve blood or descriptions of the horrid details of poisoning. Her love scenes, though, are brief and few, generally going no further than a scorching kiss or two. Those kisses are often described in terms of thunder and lightning, which gives the reader an odd impression of passion equipped with sound and visual effects. Evidently kissing was a more highly developed art in the 17th century than it is today.

The chief difference between history and good historical fiction (we won't mention the bad kind) is that fiction has a more coherent dramatic structure. Dark Angels is the best kind of historical fiction: very accurate, highly dramatic and thoroughly entertaining.

Reviewed by Diana Gabaldon

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