

Summer reading

History, fun in two novels

By SCOTT TIMMONS

Barbara Tuchman

A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century

If you've already read *War and Peace* and need a single long book to see you the summer, let me suggest Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror*.

That Tuchman's massive 14th Century history has been on the best-seller lists for so many weeks must testify either to her popularity or the faddishness of reading her works.

A Distant Mirror is not an easy book, and it is very long (597 pages). But when you realize that *Mirror* is a significant work of scholarship and research, you're surprised that it's readable at all. Tuchman brings her considerable powers of historical narrative to that distant and foreign time and makes it understandable and immediate. Tuchman uses the same technique she used in *Stilwell and the American Experience in China*, that of using the biography of a single figure to illuminate a whole period. In this case she chose to tell the life of the Baron Enguerrand de Coucy VIII.

The eighth Baron de Coucy was the ranking French nobleman of his day; he was among the richest in lands, fiefs, and wealth, and he was related to nearly all the royal house of Europe. Such distinctions, however, were not enough to qualify him to be the central figure in Tuchman's history. More than these, and more than

any of his contemporaries, Enguerrand de Coucy embodies all the ideals his age held in highest reverence. The 14th century was the age of chivalry (or at least the end of it) when the knight, the armored man on horseback, represented the ideals of service, military valor and courtesy, and de Coucy was the chief diplomat and warrior of his age. As a diplomat he possessed the rare gift of tact; as a warrior and a general he knew when to be prudent and when to be bold, qualities which distinguished him from his knightly contemporaries, who, in their high-born arrogance, fought recklessly and learned little from their mistakes. He also practiced the ideal of service to his lord the king. Consequently, he spent most of his adult life away from home, on one errand, mission, crusade or other in the service of his king, and finally died in a fruitless military adventure that not only deprived France of her greatest knight, but of most of the rest of them as well.

The book is, as I said, very long; covering over a century's time. The sheer amount of stuff will daunt most readers; the dates, issues, conflicts, family lines and customs are manifold. Therefore, the book must be read slowly, with attention, and the reader must take time to re-read, check back and scrutinize the maps (which alas could have been more detailed).

I think the main flaw in the book lies in its title and in its assumption that the 14th century is a reflection of the 20th century experience. The people of both ages must have felt that God had turned his back on

them; both centuries were times of great upheaval, war and death. But few centuries can lay claim to anything different. Perhaps Tuchman might have done her work more justice by using another title, perhaps something like Enguerrand de Coucy and the French Experience in the 14th Century.

Books

Len Deighton

SS-GB

Summer vacation is still weeks off, but it's not too early to begin compiling your summer reading list. I'd like to suggest that you begin with Len Deighton's *SS-GB*.

Deighton's latest novel is one of those what-if books; in this case, what might have happened if the Germans had conquered Britain in 1940-41. We're told the crux of the story in the first sentence: "Himmler's got the King locked up in the Tower of London," said Harry Woods. "But now the German generals say the army should be guarding him."

Whereas Deighton's other novels, such as *The Ipress File*, *Funeral in Berlin* and *The Billion Dollar Brain*, are spy thrillers, *SS-GB* is a novel of bureaucratic intrigue, in which various departments of the German army or Wehrmacht and the SS are led by rivalries and jealousies into labyrinthian and fatal conspiracies. From the first, their rivalry motivates the plot. Everyone else, the metropolitan police, Scotland Yard, even the resistance, is drawn in to take sides with one or the other. At stake is not only the custody of the King of England and the controls of Britain, the Wehrmacht or the SS, but also the German program to develop an atomic bomb—and, by extension, the

safety of the United States, still neutral.

There is little plot. The story unfolds as the hero, Superintendent Douglas Archer of Scotland Yard, investigates a murder.

Archer goes from one lead to another, probing, asking, finding out, until he is caught up in the machinations of the Resistance and drawn into the Wehrmacht-SS rivalry. On one hand, the Resistance courts Archer, while at the same time a fanatical Resistance fighter tries to assassinate him. Archer owes his allegiance to the SS, for his boss is an SS general, but the Wehrmacht, working secretly with the Resistance, also woos him.

Deighton's writing is excellent. He catches people in characteristic actions. "Behind the cash register Bertha lifted glass, too. Holding it to her lips, and tasting only the edge of it, the way people do who live amid alcohol." His depictions of background characters add life to the story: "Around the ballroom there were little groups of middle-ranking German officers, self-conscious in their uniforms and awkward in their lack of English language. Here and there some self-appointed spokesmen fronted each group, behaving like some travel courier guarding a bunch of elderly tourists."

Deighton's descriptions of natural scenery and especially of the weather are striking: "Today the air was damp, and the colourless sun only just visible through the grey clouds, like an empty plate on a dirty table cloth."

The characters are well-drawn, the conflicts believable and the suspense palpable. More I cannot say, for it would spoil the fun, and Deighton's *SS-GB* is the most fun book I've read—and couldn't put down—in a long time. M

Scott Timmons is a book critic for Weekender.

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