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The Raven's Heart: A Story of a Quest, a Castle, and Mary Queen of Scots

Jesse Blackadder
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At its best, historical fiction allows the reader to become immersed in another world, presenting a character's life and issues in a way that fully develops the setting. *The Raven's Heart*, the story of a disinherited, tenacious girl fighting for her birthright, is set against the reign of Mary, Queen of Scots, and successfully brings this period to life.

Alison Blackadder has always lived in the shadow of her father's plans for revenge: Blackadder Castle was stolen by the powerful Hume family one generation earlier. Their scheme to win back the manse leads them to the court of Queen Mary, recently come to Scotland to take her place as ruler. Alison finds a position as a lady in waiting, but has trouble adjusting to her new life; to disguise her identity, she has posed as a boy for years. Luckily, when the Queen discovers Alison's secret, she is delighted; parading about Edinburgh as a man seems to her great fun, and a good way to learn what her subjects truly think. Alison and the Queen develop a close relationship as a result, one the girl plans to use to convince the ruler to take back her castle, even as she begins to fall in love with the Queen and become ever more enmeshed with royal worries. The Queen, as presented here, transforms from a whimsical girl into a formidable ruler. Alison quickly learns her love for the Queen cannot be pursued, and she takes up with another court girl, Angi. However, when the Queen is involved in Angi's death, Alison's loss is palpable, and her new focus on obtaining her castle at any cost matches the Queen's growing political machinations. Here, the story turns dark and more intensely political: there is no one for Alison to trust in the court, perhaps not even herself, as she struggles with decisions that could hurt people she loves in the pursuit of her birthright.

Every character, and there is a wide range of supplementary characters here, does what they do for love or power, and the lines are suitably blurred, so that the reader is forced to question the motivations of even those people who had been most trustworthy. It takes a skilled writer to do that, and Jesse Blackadder is that—this book comes from her attempt to understand her own heritage by exploring Blackadder Castle and the family history. In doing so, she characterizes people who actually existed, like the Queen and William Blackadder, and creates Alison to interact in their world. Alison herself is a deeply flawed but ultimately relatable character, and readers will root for her to succeed and find happiness, even as she continually redefines what this means in her life.

The Raven's Heart is a powerful story of revenge, love, and loyalty. While it has broad appeal, this book is certain to delight historical fiction enthusiasts, especially those interested in the history of England and Scotland.
HEATHER TALTY (December 3, 2012)

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