



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

*Jesse Blackadder*

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"Jesse Blackadder has all the hallmarks of a great historical fiction writer, achieving a fine balance of thoroughly researched atmospheric detail and suspenseful story. . . . In *The Raven's Heart* she doesn't hit one wrong note."—*The Sunday Telegraph*

Scotland, 1561, and a ship comes across the North Sea carrying home Mary, the young, charismatic Queen of Scots, returning after thirteen years in the French court to wrest back control of her throne.

The Blackadder family has long awaited for the Queen's return to bring them justice. Alison Blackadder, disguised as a boy from childhood to protect her from the murderous clan that stole their lands, must learn to be a lady-in-waiting to the Queen, building a web of dependence and reward.

Just as the Queen can trust nobody, Alison discovers lies, danger, and treachery at every turn.

This sweeping, imaginative, and original tale of political intrigue, misplaced loyalty, secret passion, and implacable revenge is based on real characters and events from the reign of Mary Queen of Scots.

*The Raven's Heart* is a breathtaking epic from a bold, fresh voice. Winner of the Varuna HarperCollins Manuscript Development Award, *The Raven's Heart* was published in Australia in 2011.

**Jesse Blackadder** finally had enough of people asking if she was related to Rowan Atkinson, star of the BBC sitcom *Blackadder*. She traveled to Scotland to find the origins of her surname and discovered the ruins of Blackadder House on the banks of the Blackadder River. *The Raven's Heart* grew from there. Jesse lives in Byron Bay, Australia.

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

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Author : Jesse Blackadder

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**Scots Jesse Blackadder**

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## **From Reader Review The Raven's Heart: A Story of a Quest, a Castle and Mary Queen of Scots for online ebook**

### **Jane Massingham says**

The Raven's heart wasn't the usual book I would have picked up. I like a light hearted, funny read usually as I'm time poor with my reading these days. However, being intrigued by Jesse's quest I bought the book and read it in about 2-3 days which for me these days is unheard of!! I found myself wanting to stall cooking dinner, stall taking kids to school, stall going to work so I could read the next chapter. I was really sad when I finished. Great story, the historical detail didn't slow me up (which usually does), and the quirks in the story really hooked me in. Great story, couldn't wait until for Jesse's next book which incidently I also read in a matter of days. GREAT story, GREAT author. Highly recommended for the time-poor who want quality rather than quantity!!

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### **Mirella says**

Set in 16th century Scotland, The Raven's Heart is a riveting tale of intrigue, obsession, and the fight for power. It is very much a tale about two women, Alison Blackadder and Mary Stuart, Queen of Scots. They meet at Blackadder castle, an ancient fortress that rests on the shores of Blackadder Water in Berwickshire. A rumour about the castle states that when the first Blackadder swore a blood oath and sprinkled his blood into the water, men have been driven by madness in order to own it.

Alison Blackadder 19s father, William, is obsessed with taking back Blackadder Castle after usurpers stole it. Assassins have been trying to kill both Alison and her father in order to keep them from claiming the castle. As a result, Alison has spent her life dressed as a boy to send the killers off their track.

When Mary Stuart was secretly returned to Scotland, Alison and her father were part of the party escorting her home. At her father 19s urging, however, Alison is turned back into a girl in order to become one of the Queen 19s ladys-in-waiting. But when Mary discovers Alison 19s dual role as boy and girl, she tasks her with teaching her and her other ladies to secretly pass themselves off as men to gain freedom from the court 19s restrictions and to preserve their identities.

This novel is filled with life and death risks, treachery, and profound love. Because of her surname, Blackadder, author Jesse Blackadder was always being asked if she was related to Rowan Atkinson, star of the BBC sitcom Blackadder. Her curiosity roused, she travelled to Scotland to Blackadder to find her roots. There, she discovered the ruins of Blackadder Castle. As she began to research, this story came to life in her imagination.

The story gives us a unique look and interpretation into the era in which Mary, Queen of Scots lived and reined. Each character is well drawn, with a depth of personality that truly makes them believable. Couple that will colorful descriptions of clothing, surroundings, and castle life, and it does make for a fascinating read. A strong lesbian undercurrent runs through the novel, which may not appeal to all readers. Nevertheless, it is a compelling, well-told tale with plenty of plot twists and excellent dialogue to keep readers interested.

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## **Page (One Book At A Time) says**

It didn't take me long to agree to this tour. You see, I'm familiar with Mary, Queen of Scots. But only in conjunction with Elizabeth I, and we know how that ends. I've been interested in find out as much as I can about the Queen. This one seems to paint her in a very different light.

I had a hard time with Alison. I understood being raised as a boy her entire life to protect her and then being asked to switch gears was probably hard on her. But, I'm curious how her lifestyle effected the choices she made in life. The psychologist in me questions the idea of nature versus nurture immensely in this story. Which bring me to a very important aspect. This story leans heavily on lesbian themes. I have nothing against it, but I don't want to read about really. So that really put me off the book. I almost put it aside, but I can't digging because I was curious.

But, I became invested in the idea of Alison getting her castle back. What would she do to keep Mary and her word? And was Mary as aware of Alison's feelings as we the readers are? I wasn't sure, because Alison was in such denial over her own feelings. I felt she was going to extreme measures to make sure her feelings weren't obvious to everyone. Almost to the point that she was reckless with who she was fraternizing with.

I learned a great deal about Mary in this book. I would love to supplement those things with other books, I just need to pick that right one. I was intrigued that she so depended on Queen Elizabeth. As a Queen in her own right, I have no idea why she needed another Queen's approval on who she would marry. It felt like she wanted all the glory that went along with being Queen but none of the work. It seems like she didn't have much control over her own country and thus her own destiny.

Once I got past the lesbian theme, I was ok with this book. It wasn't the best historical fiction, but I think my opinion might have been slightly skewed by my own feelings. I'm still very interested in Mary though!

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## **Patty says**

Mary, Queen of Scots is one of those very intriguing figures in history. A woman, born to rule in a time when women were considered not much more than chattel. She was sent as a child to France to marry but her husband died and she was sent/invited back to Scotland to take up her crown. Was she wanted? Probably only to produce a male heir. But we will never know for sure. What we do know is that she felt entitled to the crown of England as well and factions there wanted her as she was Catholic and Elizabeth was Protestant. She is a woman about whom books could be written ad nauseum and people would read and be fascinated.

In this tale Ms. Blackadder uses her family's history as a starting point for a tale of loyalty, love and revenge. Young Robert Blackadder is the son of William, a man whose mother sent him away when the family castle was about to be raided by the powerful Hume clan. His mother knew he would be killed if he was found as there could be no heirs to the estate. William grows up bitter and vengeful about his family's loss having been constantly told he needs to get the castle back. When his relationship with the powerful Lord Bothwell causes it to be his ship that brings Mary back to Scotland William sees a way to perhaps get close to the Queen. Little does he realize that a Queen does not notice a shipowner.

The Queen does notice young Robert though but William feels that the Queen needs a lady in waiting more than a young boy so Robert - who has dressed as a boy - must return to being Alison. Alison, DAUGHTER of William who was disguised as a boy to hide her from Hume's assassins. The problem is Alison does not know how to be a girl. Her relatives teach her and she is soon off to be a lady in waiting to the Queen. There she is to get close to the Queen and gain back the family castle.

This is a somewhat long and involved book. The kind I really like to sink my teeth into but to try and break out the whole plot would take me 'til Monday. Just know that Alison's adventures truly begin once she starts to live in Mary's household. Alison is a complicated character - she is bisexual and changeable. I'm not completely sure she knows what she wants. She has lived her life in the shadow of her father's bitterness and goes into the shadow of a rather imperious woman in a dangerous court. She is never just Alison - she is, it seems, always someone's pawn. This leads to some frustration with the character. I suspect this is intentional on the part of Ms. Blackadder. Mary is also difficult but most Queens are....

The story plays out against the historical backdrop of the time using all the well documented points of Mary's life with Alison being present for all of them. The book was involving, action packed and entertaining. The last quarter of it was a bit like a tennis match though as the reader is whipped back and forth and back again as Alison learns the truth of her heritage and the ownership of Blackadder Castle is finally settled.

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### **Kate Forsyth says**

I was sure I was going to love this book as soon as I read the subtitle: 'The Story of a Quest, a Castle and Mary Queen of Scot'. And I did love it! A fabulous, dark, surprising historical novel, with a hefty dose of mystery, intrigue, passion and cross-dressing. This was one of the best reads of the year so far.

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### **Melissa says**

Set in Scotland during the early years of Mary Queen of Scots reign, The Raven's Heart follows Alison Blackadder on her quest to reclaim her family's castle from the powerful Scottish family that seized it a generation earlier. In a effort to keep her protected from her family's enemies, who would kill her if they knew she existed, Alison lives her life as a boy. When Mary Queen of Scots returns to her homeland from France, Alison's father, through Lord Bothwell, is able to secure her a position as one of the Queen's ladies-in-waiting. Although this position affords Alison the opportunity to raise the issue of her family's lost castle with the Queen, it also means that she must cast off her male disguise and live as a young woman.

Captivated by Mary from the moment she meets the monarch, Alison manages to adapt to her new role with relative ease. But Alison is keenly aware of the danger she is placed in as a member of Mary's court, and must ensure that she makes no wrong move that would either bring her to the attention of her enemies or cause her to fall from Mary's favour.

With a quick-moving plot, well-developed main characters and a strong sense of both time and place, The Raven's Heart is a thoroughly enjoyable novel. Narrated from Alison Blackadder's point of view, the reader is able to fully appreciate the desire for revenge driving her quest to reclaim her family's castle. Through Alison's eyes the reader comes to know Mary Queen of Scots, a woman used to getting her own way and one who is easily able to charm all those she comes into contact with, including Alison. While Alison's quest is at

the heart of this story, it is set against the backdrop of the early years of Mary's reign. Although Alison is a fictional character, author Jesse Blackadder has seamlessly inserted her heroine into the actual events that shaped Mary's reign, including her marriage to Lord Darnley, the murder of David Rizzio, and Mary's later marriage to Lord Bothwell, a match that turned most of Scotland against her. As a result, this novel not only tells a great fictional story, it also brings 16th Scottish history vividly to life. In Alison, Jesse Blackadder has created a strong and memorable heroine. While Alison is willing to do whatever it takes to maintain the Queen's favour, and thus place herself in a position to gain back what she feels is her birthright, she acknowledges that not all of her actions are honourable. The author has also done a commendable job with the characterizations of each of the historical figures that feature prominently in this novel, most notably Mary Queen of Scots and Lord Darnley, whose portrayals are consistent with history. The only weak spot of this novel relates to Alison's short love affair with another lady of the court. While Alison is portrayed as having fallen in love, the reader learns next to nothing about the woman to whom she gives her heart, or what she has done to earn Alison's devotion. The only thing they seem to share is lust for one another and, as a result, it is difficult to believe that the affair is a great love match.

The Raven's Heart is recommended to all fans of historical fiction, especially those interested in Scottish history.

Note: A copy of this novel was provided to me by the publisher in exchange for a fair and honest review.

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### **Ulla says**

This is a beautifully written historical adventure!! I have a feeling I'll start from the beginning tomorrow and investigate all the castles and persons online as I read!

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### **Mary says**

Alison Blackadder has lived her entire life disguised as a boy to protect her from the murderous Hume clan who imprisoned the Blackadder women and stole the family's castle. When Mary Queen of Scots returns to Scotland to claim her throne, Alison's father forces Alison to throw off her disguise and become the Queen's lady-in-waiting, a position he hopes will earn her the queen's favor and ultimately, the return of Blackadder Castle. Alison reluctantly relinquishes her boy clothes (and all the freedoms that go with them). She is prepared to ingratiate herself with the young queen, but she is blindsided by the queen's effect on her.

**"I am no poet, so it is only my imagination's parchment where I scratch down that she has exploded into me like a gunpowder flash and I am still half-blinded, ears ringing."**

In her quest for Blackadder Castle, Alison is drawn into the danger and intrigue of the queen's court, but her devotion to the queen costs her dearly.

Scotland and Queen Mary have a sad and bloody history, and though I've read a number of books set in Scotland, what I knew about Mary's life was confined to the museum blurbs at Holyrood. *The Raven's Heart* details the events of Mary's reign, but since it is told from the viewpoint of a fictitious character, the author

has the freedom of interpretation. I liked how she interpreted charismatic Queen Mary, nasty Lord Darnley, and ambitious Lord Bothwell, as well as a number of other minor characters. Alison Blackadder is a great narrator: clever, resilient, vulnerable, and conniving, even. She moves artfully between the streets and the court, changes her identity from man to woman and back again to suit her purpose and plays her own small role in orchestrating events in her favor. Her story winds through historic events in a believable way, and her struggle to understand herself was sometimes poignant, sometimes frustrating, always interesting. This was a great piece of historical fiction, esp. for those of us who love Scottish historical fiction. Recommended.

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### **D. Leigh says**

This is a well-written, intriguing book, worthy of the literary notice it has garnered from the Lambda Literary Society and others.

However, I have to admit that several twists in the plot left a very bad taste in my mouth: 1) the whole distasteful demise (not just the last scene) of the main character's first lover 2) the main character suddenly becomes bisexual in the middle of the story 3) the sex scenes seemed vague with the first (female) lover, which I chalked up to the author's preference for writing such scenes until I reached the hetro sex scene which didn't seem suffer from lack of description.

In short, I got the distinct feeling the story was a nod to lesbian fiction, but deliberately slanted so mainstream readers would also find it to their tastes. So, I'm giving this book three stars for craft -- because the author is very skilled -- no stars for the story as a whole. I can't honestly recommend the book to someone looking for a good story with lesbian characters. I want to emphasize, however, that this is a totally my personal opinion of the story line, and no reflection of the ability of the writer.

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### **Erin Al-Mehairi says**

From my blog, with giveaway open there now through 11:59 pm. EST Dec. 17, 2012....

The Raven's Heart, by Jesse Blackadder, was set in the 16th Century at the time of Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland's return from France to her Scottish throne after the death of her French husband. Scotland, ruled by regents during her time in France, is cold, despairing and void of life.

The novel surrounds the Blackadder family who had lost its claim on their beloved lands and castle along the vibrant, flowing Blackadder River. The remaining heirs have been hunted down and killed for years by the Hume family, the castle's new owners. Alison, the main character and 16-year-old daughter of would-be heir, William, are hiding in plain sight. Alison has been raised by another family disguised as a boy, Robert, her entire life.

Now, after meeting the Queen first dressed as Robert, she is sent to the Queen as Alison in hopes of making a friendship and asking for a favor of having Blackadder Castle restored to her family. What ensues is more than she had imagined and she finds herself fighting for her life at every turn, while also learning who she is and who she wants to be.

It was such a phenomenal read that it's a book that will haunt my soul for a longtime into the future. It's now

on my list as one of the best books I read all year, as I longed to read it during times I had to put it down and when I picked it up again got lost in it during both the day and night.

The book twists and turns with fervor creating angst in the reader as much as the characters. Clutching my chest at times, I was compelled to advise Alison in her lonely pursuit of favor with the Queen in order to win back the castle her family had lost a generation before.

Have you, or someone you know, ever wanted anything so badly that you would give completely of yourself to have it? Though in this day and age we don't long to always restore our honor, or reclaim family property, I think we all can understand what it's like to have something taken from us. And probably we all can relate to succumbing to material goods as a way to define our lives. In the 16th century, when times were very harsh, people had only their honor and their family property. Their whole identity, and that of their children, depended on this ownership and reputation.

The descriptions by Blackadder made me feel as if I was in the surroundings of the story myself. Though I could generally picture the scenes in my head, it was actually more like I could FEEL them. Her writing used all my senses and plucked at my emotions. The prose carried me along with ease and enveloped me. Whether I was rocking over the waves of the sea on a boat, feeling the stone ice-cold in the lower regions of the castles, or being scorched by the hot heat from a raging fire set in the Queen's bedchamber, it was Blackadder's style of writing and word choice that lends to me being immersed in the story.

Blackadder's creation of Alison was finely crafted, with each calculated movement and precise action. However, in the moments Alison's character 'let go' and felt true emotions I could feel her anxious release, was on edge for every emotion that she felt, sensed and understood her loneliness and confusion, and even felt loss when Alison was had to be unemotional. The rollercoaster ride of emotions from characters in this book are not unlike most I might have felt from characters created from these time periods, which lent to anyone and everyone losing their head very easily! However, something about the way Blackadder presented Alison made me feel sympathetic to her at times while also wanting to scream at her to feel more at other times, even when I knew that in her life she couldn't risk the chance of one wrong breath or facial expression.

Though actions in this book are sometimes vile, they are true to the time period and watered down more than many other books I have read. Fact is, this time period was rude and violent in both actions of torture, treatment, and sexual perversion. People's actions were atrocious. I could feel the author's disdain for the actions and felt the fear she wrote into her characters as well as how her characters learned to "put up walls" so to speak, show no emotion (as to giveaway any feelings that might make them lose their heads), and keep moving minute to minute in the fast-paced drama life was at that time. I don't even know how anyone slept back then!

I felt she painted a more personal picture of Mary, Queen of Scots, as well. Leaning on her emotional side and showcasing her in way most historians might not. She was a woman in a man's world who needed to be extra strong to gain respect, but also was selfish and lonely and demanded the attention of others the only way monarchs sometimes know how. Blackadder painted a gentler side of this woman and how she managed to make everyone around her love her with loyalty, how forgiving she actually was for varying ends, and it really propelled the story and made Alison's character come to life.

By the end of the book, I felt Blackadder as an author helped her characters come to grips with all the hidden emotional turmoil and to be able to find some peace. I could tell she asked some of the same questions as an author as I do as a reader of literature and facts from this time period. For instance, how do they treat others

so badly without the blink of an eye? How do they watch the torture? Manipulate others for their own gain? With her cast of characters, she truly tried to answer some of these questions and offer reasoning as to why it's all so unnecessary.

I enjoyed for the most part how she wrapped up the story at the end, though I was overcome with grief and used a whole box of tissues. It all comes down to the question of if material goods or structures are worth so much death and drama or if we as human beings can find love and peace within ourselves? Finding that eternal peace and happiness is something no one can put a price on.

I really enjoyed how Jesse Blackadder took something from her family history, traveled and researched the story, and then wrote how it might have happened. I'm glad she took us all along on this ride of words. It's a fabulous woven tale of how truth can become legend.

She's an amazing new writer that will continue to make a splash on the international scene. Her writing is phenomenally good and I can't wait to read her next book. She had me hooked from the very start with her dramatic writing.

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### **Julie says**

Blackadder was in a unique position to extract material from her own heritage to recreate the complexities of Scotland during Mary Stuart's reign. When Mary returns to Scotland from France, Alison Blackadder accompanies her retinue, quickly becoming one of the Queen's favorites. But Alison's motives for gaining Mary's favor are not selfless. She is determined to regain her birthright, Blackadder Castle, which was taken by force from her family three generations previously by the Hume family. Because her father was the only rightful heir of Blackadder, he was forced to flee, and thus disguised his only child, Alison, as a nephew. So from the age of six, Alison has been living as Robert, eluding the ruthless Hume clan.

Once in the Queen's service, Alison often alternated between lady and waiting and courtier Robert, showing Mary how to dress and act like a man so they could roam the streets of Edinburgh undetected. Because of Alison/Robert's closeness to Mary, she witnessed all the pitfalls of life at court and the unsavory aspects of politics. But I was not entirely captivated by Alison's perspective. She was driven by revenge and anger, which clouded her judgment. She had a wavering love and hatred for her queen, and I could not trust her loyalty. Because of her upbringing as a boy, her sexuality was very confused and her dalliances with both genders seemed arbitrary.

Blackadder does succeed in developing amazing atmosphere, from the chilly fog of Scotland to the warm confines of the Queen's chambers. I really appreciated her portrayal of the historical characters. Mary was a woman who knew how to charm, but was uncertain about her role as ruler of her realm. Bothwell was initially a gallant and loyal subject, but the temptation of power turns him into a brute. This novel was a solid portrayal of Mary's years in Scotland before her exile with Blackadder's ancestors as a vehicle to tell the story.

I received a complimentary copy of this book via Historical Fiction Virtual Book Tours.

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### **Jane says**

I decided to read *The Raven's Heart* for two reasons. The first was that it was recommended at a meeting I was at earlier this year by a colleague who couldn't stop raving about it and the second was that I was at a seminar where Jesse Blackadder was talking about what led her to write the book. I don't usually read historical fiction and I was pleasantly surprised at how good this story was, I couldn't put it down! It is full of everything you want in a good book; adventure, love, mystery, intrigue, plots, murder, pagentry, an insight into history and characters that you care about.

Thoroughly recommended!

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### **Audra (Unabridged Chick) says**

I loved everything about this book. The plot, the places, the people (oh, the people!), the mood, the drama -- *everything*. I'm not even sure where to start with this gush-fest!

Blackadder's novel grew out of her research into her surname, and while normally family-inspired novels give me the gibblies, in this case, we all win. The historical Blackadders have a story straight out of an opera or Gothic tale: widow violently married off to a vicious noble, evil stepfather marries her daughters to his brothers, and subsequent Blackadders are all murdered before they can foment rebellion against him. In this climate, surviving Blackadder William is re-invented as a merchant sea captain and his daughter Alison -- the Blackadder heir -- is transformed into his nephew, Robert Blackadder.

The novel opens in 1561, with Alison-as-Robert on the ship that is bringing Mary Stuart aka Mary, Queen of Scots, to Scotland. Although Alison has grown used to living life as a boy, her father believes they can better push their cause if Alison becomes one of Mary's ladies-in-waiting, and Alison finds herself away from the comfortable identity (and clothes) she's familiar with and struggling to embody a sophisticated lady at court.

What could be a simple story of a girl-who-dresses-like-a-boy shenanigans -- a little sapphic longing, lots of court drama -- is actually a rather meaty, dense, and evocative historical novel of Mary Stuart's court and a woman's confusing place in it. When Alison's skill at passing for a boy is discovered, it becomes her greatest asset and one that grants her unusual access and power -- and of course, increased danger. While Alison's father is driven to reclaim Blackadder Castle, Alison finds herself more drawn to her Robert persona and all it entails -- right down to romance with women.

Blackadder (the author) created a fantastic main character in Alison/Robert -- I was there, from the first page to the last -- and I fell in love with the world she evoked. Royal court hist fic is not a favorite of mine, but through Alison/Robert, the reader sees a more robust view of 16th century Scotland -- the court and the life of the non-nobles. Being unfamiliar with this era, I can't say how accurate the events are represented, but in terms of pacing, narrative arc, and character development, I was immersed. I didn't want this book to end.

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### **Jill Smith says**

William has a daughter Alison, who travels on the sea with her father dressed as a boy known as Robbie. They sail into port at Leith Scotland, with their Queen and her handmaidens, the four Mary's. The Queen has

only known a French court and this her home in Edinburgh is very different and ill prepared, as Robbie rides ahead to raise the town to prepare for their Queen, none know what the welcome will be. Lord Bothwell, the Queen's ally and supporter, and William's closest friend, both warriors for their Queen help the returning ruler take up residence.

The enemies of the Queen are hidden among the visiting court dignitaries. Only someone who can travel the streets unchallenged will be able to discover the feeling on the streets. Alison is set a task by her father, to get close to the Queen, becoming a necessary part of her life so that they can promote their own agenda, the return of Blackadder Castle that was so cruelly taken from their family when William was a small boy. Robbie is a perfect informant and soon becomes the Queen's ears in the town.

There is a lot of research into the history of Scotland, the real Blackadder Castle, the reason Jesse set out to write this book. It is an intriguing mix of fact and speculative fantasy. Would the Queen really have taken lessons from Alison in how to cross dress to go out into the streets to find the mood on the street? There is treachery and deception everywhere and Alison fears for her father's life while treading a dangerous path. She finds love and heartache and constantly seeks the return of the Blackadder Castle to restore the wrong done to her family.

The suspense is palpable and the whole book carries the reader through a Scottish landscape full of surprising people with aplomb. Jesse has written a masterful tale that is memorable.

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### **Jeanette says**

Australian author Jesse Blackadder's *The Raven's Heart* explores her own Scottish ancestors' history and the fortunes of Mary Queen of Scots in 17th century through the fictional adventures of Alison/Robbie and her father William Blackadder.

The story is intense, gripping and full of rich historical detail. Blackadder skillfully brings this period in Scottish history to life, artfully portraying the tall, beautiful and tragic Mary in her attempts to retain the love and loyalty of her Scottish Lords, her obsession with succession to the English throne and her unfortunate marriage and its consequences -- from the time she arrives from France until her Scottish Lords depose her in favour of her infant son, James.

Alison - who serves the Queen in a number of guises - is also a strong and sympathetic figure. Compelled by her father to live as a boy for most of her life, she changes between dashing young gentleman spy to lady in waiting as it suits the Queen. Alison also seems to fluctuate almost as often between her tempestuous and dangerous infatuations and loves - from a chaste admiration of the Queen to sensual liaisons with man or woman (at least five) as suits the plot. Mostly, she is driven by her father's desire to regain the castle and life stolen from him as a boy by the powerful Hume family. Alison must both escape the constant threat of danger, decide where her loyalty truly lies and what the Blackadder heritage truly means to her.

I enjoyed this rich, descriptive, fast-paced, long book. I think Blackadder covers stretches of time and recreates the period and people with finesse. The characters such as Alison, Queen Mary, Bothwell, William and others were believable and intriguing. The tale itself - and especially of the fate of Queen Mary - was moving as it careens towards seemingly inevitable tragedy.

I did feel, especially towards the end, that Alison switches almost willy nilly between her roles as Alison to Robbie or between her different passions and loyalties - almost to fit the current needs of the plot and to keep her at the heart of the action. That became a little annoying at times. Also, I'm not into reading long explicit sexual scenes whether male on female or female on female - so didn't find those occasional parts enjoyable. I also found the plot twist and Alison's quick acceptance of it unbelievable and was not surprised, after a number of twists and turns, at the final verdict of the validity of William's claim. But there was so much more happening in terms of adventure, emotional entanglements, and political manoeuvrings as to keep my interest in Alison and Mary's adventures right up to the end.

Overall, I did enjoy the book - its world, plot and characters as well as its historical depth and accuracy.

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