



The Red Lily Crown: A Novel of Medici Florence

Elizabeth Loupas

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Elizabeth Loupas returns with her most ambitious historical novel yet, a story of intrigue, passion, and murder in the Medici Court...

April, 1574, Florence, Italy. Grand Duke Cosimo de' Medici lies dying. The city is paralyzed with dread, for the next man to wear the red lily crown will be Prince Francesco: despotic, dangerous, and obsessed with alchemy.

Chiara Nerini, the troubled daughter of an anti-Medici bookseller, sets out to save her starving family by selling her dead father's rare alchemical equipment to the prince. Instead she is trapped in his household—imprisoned and forcibly initiated as a virgin acolyte in Francesco's quest for power and immortality. Undaunted, she seizes her chance to pursue undreamed-of power of her own.

Witness to sensuous intrigues and brutal murder plots, Chiara seeks a safe path through the labyrinth of Medici tyranny and deception. Beside her walks the prince's mysterious English alchemist Ruanno, her friend and teacher, driven by his own dark goals. Can Chiara trust him to keep her secrets...-even to love her...-or will he prove to be her most treacherous enemy of all?

The Red Lily Crown: A Novel of Medici Florence Details

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From Reader Review The Red Lily Crown: A Novel of Medici Florence for online ebook

Amanda says

Wow what a fascinating story. The Red Lily Crown is filled with secrecy, betrayal, affairs, murders and a touch of science. This book had everything I could possibly want and so much more. I kept putting this book off because I didn't think it would grab me the way that it did, but boy was I mistaken. Before I had read this book I knew absolutely nothing about the Medici, I learned a lot, but this book was in no way a dull history lesson. I think that the characters were rather three dimensional and Elizabeth Loupas did a great job giving them depth.

Full review can be found here:

<http://romancejunkiesreviews.com/artm...>

Dani Marescotti says

You know what books are supposed to save you from? The drudgeries of life. Spanning fifteen years, *The Red Lily Crown*, unfortunately, contains a lot of drudgery.

After reading the Author's Note, however, the unseemly time span of the novel makes sense--Loupas was aligning the events of the story with history.

At the novel's inception, Chiara, the orphaned daughter of a bookseller involved in alchemy, is driven by desperation to seek out the son of the Duke of Tuscany. Her plan is simple: as all the Florentine denizens are aware, the prince is obsessed with alchemy (and women). She offers to sell some of her father's old equipment in exchange for money to provide for her younger sisters and grandmother. Unexpectedly, Prince Francesco and his alchemist/metallurgist, Ruanno, take an interest in Chiara in their quest to create the Philosopher's Stone due to her father's equipment. And with the heir of the red lily crown's favor resting on her, Chiara soon finds herself transported from a world of squalor and impoverishment to the deadly grandeur of the court of the Medici.

I loved that Loupas was not afraid to give her characters the ax, thus honoring history while simultaneously implicating real dangers for her protagonists. You see the deaths coming, but you still have to appreciate the messes they create for Chiara and her love interest Ruan. Another point of appreciation--it is quite evident that Loupas is extremely well read on her history and alchemy, both of which lend *Red Lily Crown* a very realistic, tangible mien.

However...

The story bored me. As previously stated, this novel spanned fifteen years, from the time Chiara was fifteen to her days as a thirty-year-old woman. Consequently, many of the dangers she faced seemed to lack urgency. What was the point? One chapter would leap two years ahead into the future and the next another three. Additionally, I felt like Chiara and Ruan faced the same dangers over and over in slightly varying

forms and reacted the same way. Someone would die, the pair would simmer in hot water, wondering at the Grand Duke's imbalances (Prince Francesco became the Grand Duke of Tuscany upon his father's death towards the beginning of the novel), lie about what the witnessed, swear their vengeance and then do nothing. Every time--they promised to mete out their revenge in a few years time and then masked their hatred in obeisance. True, playing the subservient role is prudent in the fatal world of the Medici court, but it made for tiresome reading as the characters seemed to mostly react to the environment around them. Nearing 450 pages, the *Red Lily Crown* was made a lot more redundant than need be by the cyclic nature of the plot.

My only other issue with this novel was the characterization. Actually, the characterization was fine. Rather, the lack of development as these fifteen years passed, is what I have an issue with. Chiara as a fifteen-year-old was far too similar to her adult self. Sure, through internal dialogue she reflected on how much she had changed since the day she first offered to sell her father's equipment to Francesco, but that was more of a statement, or wishful thinking than actuality. Simply put, as a narrator Chiara had the voice of a woman around twenty-one through the duration of the novel. Ruan, too, did not really show the signs of aging aside from some physical indicators.

(view spoiler)

The *Red Lily Crown* will probably appeal to those who enjoy intrigue, the history of Florence, and characters who do more thinking than acting.

As for me...

Rio (Lynne) says

No one has Loupas' imagination. She writes about lesser known, but very prominent historical figures. She takes on subject matters that would scare most authors away. In her third novel, it's alchemy. Not trendy, fantasy alchemy, but highly researched and interesting alchemy. I mean come on, Loupas took on Floromancy in her last book! She used her distinctive imagination this time to weave the story of Francesco de Medici (The Grand Duke of Tuscany), his historically gossip fueled mistress Bianca with fictional characters Chiara and Ruan (his alchemists.) Chiara, a bookseller's daughter finds herself in the court of the Medicis. Ruan, an Englishman ran out of his home in England during Edward VI's religious wars...find themselves part of Francesco's lust for the Lapis Philosophorum (an alchemist's ultimate dream.) If you're familiar with Francesco's reign and even if you're not, you will be hooked. The Medici's, like most Renaissance rulers were cruel. Doing whatever they had to do keep power and produce that all mighty heir. Another great book from Loupas. 3 in a row. She's here to stay!

Erin says

Find this and other reviews at: <http://flashlightcommentary.blogspot....>

Note to self: When Kate Quinn recommends a book, don't wait to read it.

It sounds like a sales pitch, but I'm not exaggerating. Kate told me I'd love *The Red Lily Crown* when I first received it, but I took time to finish six other titles before really delving into Elizabeth Loupas' third release. Looking back I could kick myself for the delay because Kate was right. I absolutely loved this book.

Loupas' depiction of sixteenth century Tuscany is radiantly atmospheric. Jumping from the page, the city comes to life with as much character and personality as the people who walk her streets.

Loupas' portrait of the Medici court is another noteworthy aspect of her work. Not to gush, but Loupas' depiction is treacherous, duplicitous, and refreshingly original. Intrigue among the ruling class is a popular backdrop for historic fiction, but few authors put this much effort into recreating the rhythms and idiosyncrasies of the political climate under any particular ruler.

Chiara's relationship with Ruan added nice contrast to the story. Developing over several years, the reader is able to see it mature in unique ways despite the differences in their age, motivations and perception of alchemical arts.

I was also struck by Loupas' characterization of the Medici family. Joanna's genuine earnestness and gentle grace make the Grand Duchess of Tuscany a welcome source of compassion in her husband's notoriously lethal household and a poignant foil for Francesco's disturbingly malevolent mistress. Ambitious, jealous and self-serving, Bianca Capello's evil nature is matched only by her blind devotion to her brutally apathetic, manipulative, and ruthless lover.

My only quibble with the piece is Loupas' tendency to repeat phrasing. In context, the decision makes perfect sense, but as a reader I found the reiteration of remembered conversations slightly irritating.

That said, I can't recommend the book highly enough. Loupas' labyrinthine plot twists kept me guessing, creating a deliciously addicting sense of uncertainty and a desperate desire to see how Chiara's story would unfold. Chock full of political power struggles, violence and romance, *The Red Lily Crown* was thoroughly enjoyable cover to cover.

Tara Chevrestt says

I'd love to see this turned into a TV mini-series. It'd knock whatever charts *The White Queen* is on right off the list. It's sex, lies, secrets, cruel royalty, affairs, spies, alchemy, and enough excitement to having you gasping in surprise in nearly every chapter. But yet, it's not a cheesy drama. It has real history in it. As I set this down for good, I am walking away with a lot more knowledge of the Medicis than ever before. I knew next to nothing about them before.

It's exciting, interesting, and intense, especially with all the cat fights. There's a lot of royal women duking it out and their fights/staring matches get really intense. I could actually imagine I was Chiara, caught the middle--to curtsy or not to curtsy?--and her conflicted emotions flew right off the page and into myself.

There's a very paranoid grand duke and a vile mistress, husbands killing wives, brothers turning on sisters. There's a lot of vileness, actually, but for every vile thing, there's something nice, such as Chiara and Ruanno's love, her Nanno, the kind lady in the nunnery, the grand duchess's dogs... In the end, besides all the history, I also took away from this that true love can conquer ALL.

I feel the story was lacking in one thing, however. Chiara grew to care for each one of her mistresses, from Isabella to Diadora (I don't think I spelled that right), to the grand duchess...but why? There was very little of her relationship and communication with these ladies and why she cared so much about them was continuously lost on me. I feel like some scenes were missing, scenes in which we could have had a chance to watch these relationships between the women develop and strengthen.

Full review is here: <http://wwwbookbabe.blogspot.com/2014/...>

Donna says

Halle-freakin-lujah! I finally finished this. It seemed like it took a long time to finish this, but it felt even longer. But it was one of those, that needed to be done in small doses. It felt like such a chore even though it was a GR group read.

I didn't enjoy this one all that much, but I did care enough to want to see the ending. It wasn't so much the story that I had a problem with, but the writing. This was historical fiction, which is one of my favorite genres. So I always love when the author can bring the time period to life with the characters in tow. However, this book was short on details (ie: adjectives, etc.) of every kind. I just wasn't pulled in. I have read a lot of wonderful books recently, so maybe this one suffered by comparison.

Sandi *~The Pirate Wench~* says

Setting: 16th Century Florence

Steam Factor: Mild

3 1/2 Stars

As one duke dies and another prepares to take his place (his son) Florence is in a state of fear and confusion. Young Chiara Nerini would gladly sell her body to the new duke Francesco, if it meant keeping her grandmother and sister safe. Since she can't and won't do that she decides to lure the new duke in by showing him a token from her late father's alchemy collection. Being addicted to secret alchemy equipment and all the mystic behind it, Francesco wants not only Chiara's father's hidden treasures but her as well as his virgin accolade. For trying to sell a piece of the equipment to the duke as well as a promise for others if she is paid well for them Chiara becomes Francesco's prisoner for fourteen years, navigating the halls of the Plaza and myriad intrigues. As we read we watch Chiara grow from a young girl to a woman working alongside the duke's alchemist Ruanno. And just who is this man who seems to carry his own secrets and burdens? Can she trust him? It certainly becomes easy for her to fall in love with him as they become pawns in Francesco's treachery. Great historical detail was taken here in the writing of this story that's for sure.

The author did a great job painting a vivid portrait of the time, which will give the reader an in-depth picture of the beauty, cruelty and madness as well as the superstitious nature of powerful men and women. While this was a well crafted story I have to be honest that many times I felt lost as well as confused. It was great that at the back of the book there is a list of the characters and who is who and what they do/whether fictional or not. But for me, it would have worked a little better if at the back there had been a glossary of what certain words/terms meant. On my part I don't know much about what a alchemist is nor what they did and I found myself having to google a lot to find certain things out, or meanings such as "metallurgist" or what "Lapis Philosophorum" meant(excuse the spelling if it is wrong) and many other such words that I

didn't understand when being used in a situation or in a conversation. So I admit to skipping a tad..but alas then the story got confusing more because of that and I found the period of Chiara's time with Francesco as well (because it is over many years) to really drag. This is my first book by Elizabeth Loupas, and while it didn't quite work out totally for me as I had hoped I lay the fault as mine as the subject of "alchemy" just didn't interest me. I do have her two other books which I look forward to reading as they may be more of my kinda "backdrop" But all and all as I said it was a very well crafted story with added mystery and suspense to keep me in.

Jenny Q says

Another winner from Elizabeth Loupas! *The Red Lily Crown* is an exciting and dangerous novel of Florence under Francesco de Medici's rule, and if you're not familiar with Francesco and his family, prepare to be shocked! Our story begins when Chiara Nerini, a young woman desperate to feed her starving family, attempts to sell her late father's alchemical equipment to Francesco de Medici, the regent and soon-to-be Grand Duke of Florence. Chiara ends up helping her family survive, but not in the way she imagined. She is given a position in Francesco's court as his soror mystica, a feminine counterpart to himself and his assistant, Englishman Ruan dell'Inghilterra, in his ultimate quest to create the mythical Philosopher's Stone.

Motivated by her own reasons for seeking to harness the power of the famed stone, she embarks on a path of alchemical education and enlightenment, pampered for the first time in her life and privy to some of the inner secrets of the court. But she quickly learns that Francesco's favor never comes without a price, and as his quest for power grows and his wrath turns on those she cares about, Chiara soon finds herself trapped in his court, fighting for her own life, attempting to stay one step ahead of a madman while vowing vengeance for those he betrayed. She is eventually aided in this effort by Ruan, who has his own reasons for hating Francesco, but in a court full of deception and betrayal, considering his dark background and even darker secrets, she'll have to decide if she can afford to trust him with her own secrets, with her heart . . . and with her very life.

I really liked this story. Chiara is the best kind of heroine: smart, bold, and ambitious yet also loving, loyal, and all-too innocent in the beginning. I also really liked the way Ms. Loupas handled the portrayal of Francesco de Medici. Yes, he's twisted, but he's also very human, yearning for the same things most of us yearn for: love, respect, knowledge. However, unlike most of us, when he doesn't get his way, people tend to die. And they do even when he does get his way, actually. I have to admit, I found it hard to dislike him, even as he did some pretty vile things. It may have had something to do with the fact that he doesn't actually get his own hands dirty, and so there was a sort of distance between him and his crimes. As the story progresses he grows more and more monstrous, but he's a refined monster, the most dangerous kind, the kind that always keeps you guessing, as Chiara soon finds out for herself.

I also found the alchemy and political turmoil of the time to be very interesting and great backdrops for the story. It also provides an interesting view into the art of poisoning, which the medieval Italians seem to have perfected. Much time is spent in the laboratory, but the trio of alchemists are surrounded by a good cast of supporting characters, from Francesco's poor wife Giovanna to his vindictive mistress Bianca to Chiara's feisty grandmother Nonna, they flesh out the canvas, presenting a very nuanced and evocative portrayal of the Florentine court and its subjects. I really only had one issue, and that was that I wasn't as impressed by the romance between Chiara and Ruan. It's not the focal point of the story until the end draws near, but I think it could have been a bit more developed. It was easy to see what Ruan saw in Chiara, but I found him a bit harder to like, and after so much indifference and single-mindedness on his part, his declarations were not

as easy for me to buy as they were for Chiara. But I am a hopeless romantic, and I usually need to get caught up in a good love story for me to be wholly satisfied with a book. Other readers may have no complaints.

All in all, *The Red Lily Crown* is a well-written, suspenseful historical thriller featuring an engaging young heroine, providing a fascinating glimpse into an immoral and sociopathic family and the effects they had on those they ruled. It should please fans of historical fiction, particularly those interested in Italy's medieval ruling families.

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

4.5 stars. "The Red Lily Crown" is the latest release by Elizabeth Loupas, who is beginning to become one of my historical fiction must-read authors. I have enjoyed her other books and this one was no different. "The Red Lily Crown" is a story of an alchemist named Chiara and the infamous Medici family. It is a good blend of historical fiction and magical realism and I ate it up! If you're looking for a good book to get lost in, this is a great choice!

Chiara is a really amazing character. I loved reading about her in this book. I loved the aspect of her being an alchemist in this book. The Medici duke that Chiara works for (Francesco) is wild about alchemy and invites Chiara to practice in his household even when others frown upon putting so much faith into that practice. Loupas was really able to make the things that Chiara do feel really real. She is also just a really fantastic character. She's strong and as she doesn't have much family support, it is up to her to really make her own way and she does to the best of her ability.

And who doesn't like reading about the Medici's? I am utterly fascinated by them and the way that they ran things. Loupas uses a lot of good detail in order to bring the personalities and the reign of this family to life. I loved reading about all of their exploits!

Overall, I know my fellow historical fiction fans are really going to enjoy this book!

Allison says

There are some parts of this that I enjoyed - the alchemy, the dogs, the relationship between the two main characters. But, it's a very brutal book. So many deaths. The sadistic prince's viewpoint was especially disturbing, and any revenge or happiness that is achieved comes at a very high cost. I'm afraid the brutality overshadows the book for me.

Kelly says

"The Red Lily Crown" is WONDERFUL - the author's best yet (and I loved her other two books). I was lucky enough to get an ARC and read this novel obsessively for 3 days. It's a novel of the Medici, set in Florence, a few generations removed from Lorenzo the Great and other more familiar historical figures. I didn't know much about this generation of the Medici and fortunately I didn't wiki the historical names in advance - because some of the things which happen to some of the characters were absolutely shocking - yet true.

The main character is Chiara, a 15-year-old would-be alchemist. She begins the book as a damaged, defiant child and over about a 15 year period becomes a brave, thoughtful and resourceful woman. The hero is from Cornwall and a real hunk (Loupas always writes great heroes). There is a creepy Medici grand duke and his nasty mistress, a couple so disgusting you keep thinking they can't get any worse - but they do. Another character, the duke's sad, persecuted wife, is historically the sister of Duchess Barbara of Ferrara, the central character from Loupas's "The Second Duchess."

Anyway, no spoilers here. These characters occupy a fast-moving yet thoughtful story with a lot of twists and turns, and some real shockers. I can't wait for Loupas's next!

Aoi says

Elizabeth Loupas hits it out of the ball park again! Her latest tale of intrigue and betrayal is set in the court of the Grand Duke Francesco de Medici. The historical detailing of the Florentine court adds layers, rather than detracting from the narrative.

Chiara Nerini, daughter of a bookseller, is desperate to sell her late father's alchemical artifacts to the Duke. The money would buy the very next meal for her, her Nonna and two sisters. When she literally holds up his entourage in the town square, the Duke is as interested in Chiara as he is in her wares.

She gets whisked off to his palace, and gets ordained to be his soror mystica- the female element required in the synthesis of the Philosophers' Stone. Duke Francesco is obsessed with alchemy, and would do anything to get his hands on the fabled Stone. Guiding them on the process is Master Ruanno, the Duke's Cornish alchemist.

Francesco acts as the cog in the narrative in this story. Newly come into the Ducal position, he prefers the simple life over all the responsibilities. He hates his parents for all the harshness of his childhood training, and his Imperial wife- preferring to play-act a labourer with his mistress. But he will not tolerate anybody unseating him nor disobeying his wishes. He must play the fine line between his private desires, his duty to sire heirs and keep a close watch of his family- many of whom are plotting his downfall.

The wheel of fate keeps turning for all the Florentine courtiers- leading to years of upheaval, betrayal within the family and heartache. Over the years, Chiara transforms into a wide-eyed girl to a master of navigating the court, with its intrigues and poisonous friendships. When one misstep would mean the death of her family, she cannot trust anyone- not even Ruanno who seems to have her best interests at heart.

Ruanno has his own agenda as well. He needs gold to influence Elizabeth Tudor to returning his birthright to him. Returning his estate in Cornwall and the surrounding mines to their former prosperous glory has been a quest that has taken him years of struggle. Working at the Florentine court since he was sixteen, he has formed close relationships to many within the Ducal household. When Francesco and his machinations lead to their deaths, he vows vengeance. Now that he has come to love Chiara, escaping with her to Cornwall becomes his aim. For that, he must somehow gain their freedom from the Duke and his plots.

The characters are three dimensional and even if it was hard to sympathize with a few, I pitied them and the circumstances they had created.

I can't recommend this book enough. The plot twists and turns, the readers taking nothing for granted in this tale of power struggles and betrayal- and I couldn't keep the book down- alternatively fearing for Chiara and

fascinated by what happens next!

Kate Quinn says

I've rarely been so happy to offer a cover quote for a novel. Elizabeth Loupas hit it out of the park with "The Second Duchess," and "The Flower Reader" proved she was no one-hit wonder. With "The Red Lily Crown" she establishes herself as a major talent in the world of historical fiction. Heroine Chiara is a scrappy tough-as-nails street urchin who would be happy to sell her body to a ruthless Medici Duke if it would support her family, but since the Duke is mad for alchemy and already has a far more beautiful mistress, Chiara sells him her father's alchemical equipment instead. Chiara ends up with a job as the Duke's virgin acolyte assistant, as well as a front-row seat to the world of Medici madness, murder, and blood-lust. The Duke is a first-rate creep who needs to die, his mistress is one of the nastiest villainesses I've ever read (and I've created a few nasty ones, myself), and a mysterious maze steals the show in a way I never thought a series of fictional hedges could. A subplot of poison and addiction gives everything the sheen of a dark fairy tale, the kind where the fair maiden might just get eaten instead of rescued. You'll cheer for Chiara to come out of everything as safely as her dogs do - Elizabeth Loupas never kills the dogs in her books, and thank goodness. This book comes out early April - pre-order it now. You won't be sorry.

Samantha says

Red Lily Crown is a unique, well-researched story of 16th century Medici court, where one could be in high favor one day and disappear the next. As history has proven, even having the Medici blood flowing through your veins would not necessarily keep it from being spilled. Loupas uses fictional main character Chiara to tell the story of the turbulent days of Francesco Medici's reign.

He is a man who made people wonder how God chose the birth order in royal families, as he is cruel, selfish, and completely ill-suited to rule. His obsession with Bianca Cappello and alchemy conjoin to create a vicious, cruel temperament and the belief that nothing and nobody could ever harm him. This is the Grand Duke Francesco who takes young Chiara into his household in order to have her serve as his alchemy assistant. It is not as though she could refuse.

The bright side of this dangerous liaison is that it brings Ruan into her life. He is an Englishman with as troubled of a past as Chiara's, though it takes them years to completely reveal themselves to one another. He was my favorite character in the story and the one who seemed to be the most admirable, which seems a

funny thing to say about a man who had more than once played the part of an assassin.

I enjoyed Chiara's character and story though it took a while to get off the ground and her character was not always what I wished it would be. She evolves from a bold, impetuous girl into an intelligent and independent woman, but she is at times more selfish and single-minded than she needs to be. This aspect of her personality leads to death and destruction before she learns her lesson.

The reader views the elegance and sensuality of those at court through Chiara's strange role as a close attendant of Francesco and his family without being a noblewoman, first as a wide-eyed innocent and later as a participant in the deepest intrigues. The scenes are vividly portrayed and history expertly retold, yet somehow I could not completely feel swept away in the story.

Chiara hears voices due to a childhood accident. While this was at times a clever way to expose her thoughts, it was also a tool for repetition and giving away too much information. She at times appears caring, yet at others seems ready to give up anyone or anything for a goal that is nothing more than the same dream that led to her father's downfall. (view spoiler) I just couldn't connect with her.

Despite some lack of feeling captivated, *Red Lily Crown* is a well-written, ambitious introduction to 16th century Florence and the people who formed it.

I received this book from a Goodreads Giveaway (eventually!). Opinions expressed are my own.

Elena says

Intrigue, deception and deaths abound in Elizabeth Loupas's latest novel, *The Red Lily Crown*. Set in the florentine court during Francesco I de' Medici's reign, it will appeal to readers who like history, well-rounded characters and continuous twists and turns.

Chiara Nerini is a bookseller's daughter, and her family is poor and hungry. When it becomes clear that Cosimo de' Medici won't live long, Chiara decides to risk everything to gain the new duke's favour. She will appeal to Francesco's love for alchemy, and try selling him his father's equipment, who was also an alchemist. Francesco not only buys it, but also takes Chiara as his soror mystica – a female companion in the art of alchemy, who is bound to remain a virgin until the duke fulfills his ultimate goal: creating the Philosopher's Stone. At first Chiara is intrigued and mesmerized at the many wonders the court has to offer, but soon enough she discovers just how dangerous and painful her new life can be. Her only ally might be the mysterious English alchemist, Ruan Pencarrow; but he has secrets and objectives of his own.

The book is divided in five parts, each of them named after the women of the story. And indeed the novel features some truly formidable female characters, each of them more fascinating than the men (except maybe for Francesco).

Chiara is an uncommon heroine. She is troubled and haunted by an incident with horses that left her with terrible headaches and voices in her head, and also caused his brother's death. She starts the book as a weak, naive girl who is then dramatically forced to grow up just to survive the life at court. And she does indeed become a capable, smart and brave woman. I followed her story and her evolution with trepidation, truly feeling for her sometimes, and always hoping for a well deserved happy ending.

Isabella, Francesco's sister, is a charismatic character, but sadly not enough featured to become truly remarkable. Still, the scene of (view spoiler) is by far my favourite part of the entire book, and one of the most memorable (view spoiler)

Giovanna, Francesco's wife, is sister to *The Second Duchess*'s Barbara – awesome! She is pious, gentle and lonely, but has also a great deal of pride which Barbara showed too. She is a very strong woman, a character you can't help but admire. If you have a fondness for Katherine of Aragon, she will surely appeal to you.

Lastly, Bianca Cappello is Francesco's mistress and an ambitious, wicked and cunning figure. She does some truly awful things and of all the women she is the one I despised the most, and yet I could not hate her because she still is an intriguing and realistic character. She is not completely evil, and Francesco's behaviour towards her made me feel sorry for her. And as I said, (view spoiler)

As for the male characters, I did not warm to Ruan as much as I would have liked. Enigmatic and mysterious, he hides a painful past, but he is also brave and loyal. There was nothing I did not like about him, and yet I found him to pale a little in comparison to the other characters. He is still a very likeable hero, just not as memorable as Alfonso from *The Second Duchess*.

Francesco, instead, is truly remarkable: he is dangerous, ruthless and manipulative, and his point of views are always disturbing to read. He is not very fit to rule and never had any interest in it; and yet once he becomes duke of Florence he is determined in keeping his power, and does some truly horrifying things in order to maintain it. He does not seem to have any positive emotion or genuine interest in anything except alchemy and Bianca, but their relationship is a highly dysfunctional, complex one, and remains ambiguous for the whole book.

Apart from the characters, Loupas did an excellent job with the setting, which is rich and believable as in her previous novels. And, as in *The Flower Reader*, she chooses a very original topic which enriches the story: in this case it is alchemy. It is a strong point in the book, but not overly present, so that it can be appreciated both by readers who are interested in the subject and by those who aren't.

If you enjoy historical novels, especially those set in Italy, you definitely have to check out this one!
