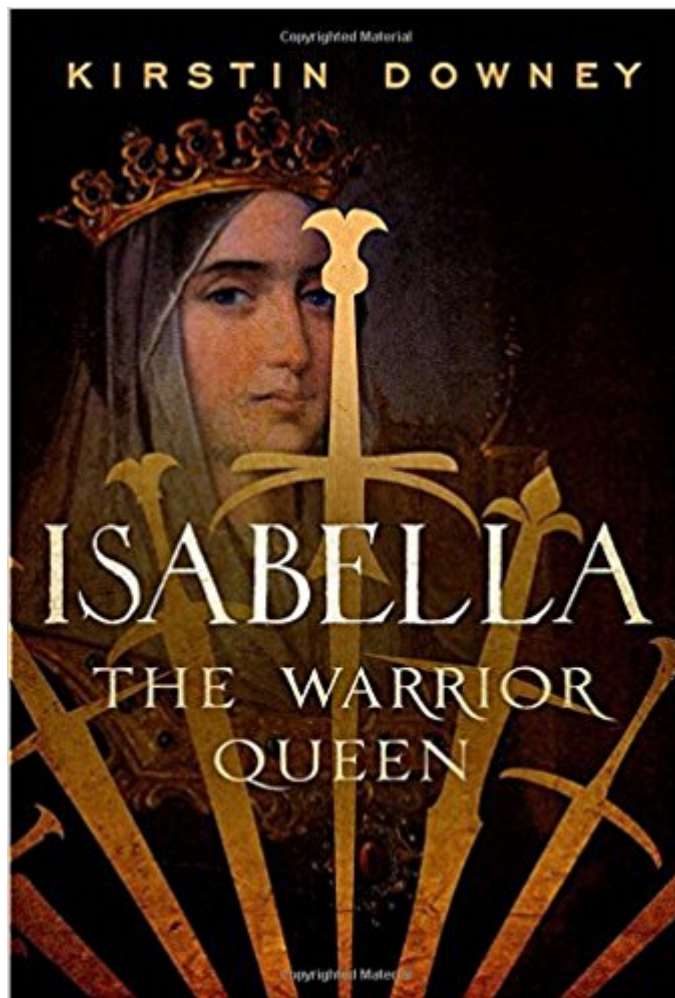


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# Isabella: The Warrior Queen



## Synopsis

An engrossing and revolutionary biography of Isabella of Castile, the controversial Queen of Spain who sponsored Christopher Columbus's journey to the New World, established the Spanish Inquisition, and became one of the most influential female rulers in history. Born at a time when Christianity was dying out and the Ottoman Empire was aggressively expanding, Isabella was inspired in her youth by tales of Joan of Arc, a devout young woman who unified her people and led them to victory against foreign invaders. In 1474, when most women were almost powerless, twenty-three-year-old Isabella defied a hostile brother and a mercurial husband to seize control of Castile and León. Her subsequent feats were legendary. She ended a twenty-four-generation struggle between Muslims and Christians, forcing North African invaders back over the Mediterranean Sea. She laid the foundation for a unified Spain. She sponsored Columbus's trip to the Indies and negotiated Spanish control over much of the New World with the help of Rodrigo Borgia, the infamous Pope Alexander VI. She also annihilated all who stood against her by establishing a bloody religious Inquisition that would darken Spain's reputation for centuries. Whether saintly or satanic, no female leader has done more to shape our modern world, in which millions of people in two hemispheres speak Spanish and practice Catholicism. Yet history has all but forgotten Isabella's influence, due to hundreds of years of misreporting that often attributed her accomplishments to Ferdinand, the bold and philandering husband she adored. Using new scholarship, Downey's luminous biography tells the story of this brilliant, fervent, forgotten woman, the faith that propelled her through life, and the land of ancient conflicts and intrigue she brought under her command.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

A finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize! Longlisted for the 2015 PEN/Jacqueline Bograd Weld Award for Biography! A Kirkus Best Biography of 2014! "A tale of feminist ambition that reads like a pulpy novel. (Don't be a snob— that's a good thing.)" —TIME "[An] immensely provocative figure... [who] successfully maneuvered in an almost exclusively male world of politics." —Kathryn Harrison, The New York Times Book Review "In a fascinating revisionist portrait, Downey sketches a monarch both adored and demonised, and makes the case that Isabella laid the foundation for the first global superpower." —BBC.com "From Game of Thrones to Pillars of the Earth, popular culture offers up medieval stories where royal blood grabs for power, where crucial alliances are built between church and state, where important people suddenly fall over dead after a sumptuous meal, poisoned by a hidden rival. But this world did, in fact, exist, and the subject of Kristen Downey's new biography, Queen Isabella of Castile, maneuvered through it with unlikely and thrilling success... Downey writes with eloquence and intensity about Isabella's life." —BookPage "A strong, fascinating woman, Isabella helped to usher in the modern age, and this rich, clearly written biography is a worthy chronicle of her impressive yet controversial life." —Kirkus Reviews, starred review "Kirstin Downey triumphantly restores Isabella to her rightful place in history. This is an engrossing new portrait of one of the most fascinating and controversial women who ever lived." —Amanda Foreman, author of the New York Times bestseller *Georgiana: Duchess of Devonshire* "Kirstin Downey makes medieval history read like a modern day thriller. Queen Isabella's life unfolded at the pivotal moment when the old world was astonished by the discovery of the new, and this graceful and insightful biography reveals her crucial role in making it happen." —Deirdre Bair, National Book Award-winning author of *Samuel Beckett* "In this astonishing biography, Kirstin Downey brings to life the most powerful queen in history, whose extraordinary impact on the world—for good and ill—continues to this day. Downey is particularly good at showing the human side of Isabella, whose life was an unending struggle to assert herself while navigating the countless intrigues and treachery of men who wanted to bring her down, including her own faithless and jealous husband, Ferdinand. It's a fascinating story with great resonance for today." —Lynne Olson, author of the New York Times bestseller *Those Angry Days: Roosevelt, Lindbergh and America's Fight Over World War II* "Queen Isabella was the most important woman in the history of Europe, and more than any person of her era she set the stage for modern Europe and America.

Using Muslim, Jewish, and Christian sources, Kirstin Downey's gripping biography reveals how Isabella acquired such importance and vividly narrates the incredible drama of her life."

—Jack Weatherford, author of the New York Times bestseller *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World* "Perfect for both historical novices and experts in European history, this solidly-researched, engaging description of Isabella's achievements also humanizes her through discussion of her intricate relationships with combative family members and allows readers to see Isabella's fingerprints on Renaissance culture and religion." —Publishers Weekly

KIRSTIN DOWNEY is the author of *The Woman Behind the New Deal*, which was a finalist for the 2009 Los Angeles Times Book Prize. She was one of the writers of the New York Times bestselling *Report of the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission*, and was previously a staff writer at the *Washington Post*, where she shared in the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for its coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings. She was a Neiman fellow at Harvard University in 2001. She is married to Neil Warner Averitt, and together they have five children.

The advantage a reader unfamiliar with the subject of a biography has is that he/she can approach the subject with few, if any, preconceived notions. I knew that Isabella was the mother of Catherine of Aragon, the first wife of the famously non-uxorious King Henry VIII of England; and that she launched Columbus sailing 'the ocean blue in 1492'. Given the characterization of the book elsewhere, I had suspected that Kirstin Downey's book might be something of a feminist screed (not that there's anything wrong with that), but this was not the case. Downey has written a fascinating book that is feminist, but only insofar as the life of Isabella was female. She was, in fact, one of the pivotal characters of world history. The world of Isabella was dangerous, complex, and violent. She led a somewhat unsettled childhood and grew up in the shadow of her elder half-brother King Enrique of Castile. At his death, the succession was unclear but Isabella seized the throne in her own right. Marrying Ferdinand of Aragon, Isabella and her husband completed the reconquest of the Iberian peninsula, an accomplishment that threw light on Isabella's supreme worth as a ruler. While Ferdinand commanded the Spanish army, Isabella worked tirelessly to supply her husband with troops, armaments, food, and medical supplies. What is starkly clear, and what is proved by Ferdinand's sorry record as sole ruler after Isabella's death, was that the military successes of Ferdinand were only made possible by the efforts of his queen. No need for feminist special pleading here -- the facts speak for themselves. It is readily apparent that a biography of Isabella

could easily turn into a multi-volume monument. The European discovery of the Americas, the Inquisition, the continual threat from the Ottoman Turks, Castile-Aragon's relationship with the Portuguese, and European politics in general -- particularly the predations of the French; each of these topics would require at least one book to explicate. Downey's singular triumph is to distill all this into an easy read. Not easy to plumb, but easy in the sense that the book flows quite nicely. It reads like a novel. The chapter dealing with the first voyages of Columbus is very lucid and Downey makes it clear that the impetus for exploration came from Isabella as Queen of Castile. This was her enterprise, she funded it, and Ferdinand just wasn't that interested. And here it is important to emphasize that Isabella was, first and foremost, Queen of Castile. Ferdinand was not allowed to interfere in her rule in Castile. She and her husband single-mindedly fought the Muslim rulers in southern Iberia, but it was Isabella who controlled everything else when it came to the interests of HER kingdom. This is a point that has been glossed over for 500 years and it bears re-emphasizing. Downey handles the Inquisition with kid gloves. She finds Isabella culpable for its genesis and subsequent horrors of its execution but she tempers her criticism with something like the standard device of pointing out the dangers of anachronistic finger-pointing. Still Downey does not shy away from describing the injustices served to Muslims, Jews, and Conversos. Downey also does not refrain from telling the sorry tale of Isabella and Ferdinand reneging on their promises to let the Muslims and Jews practice their religions in perpetuity, and that the Conversos would not be subjected to the prying eyes of the inquisitors. Downey's feminist slant is rightly deployed to prove convincingly that her daughter Juana (later dubbed La Loca) was the victim of bad press. Isabella worked tirelessly to find suitable and advantageous marriages for her children. She married off her daughter Juana to Philip of Austria and, in a sort of two for one deal, acquired Philip's sister Margaret for Prince Juan, heir to the throne of Castile. Philip and Margaret were the children of Maximilian who became the Holy Roman Emperor. Excellent matches, politically, but Juan died young and Juana's husband turned out to be a classic example of spousal abuse toward Juana. It is too complicated to go into detail here, but it appears more than likely that the abuse heaped on Juana led to her being sequestered and being declared insane (after Isabella's death). Downey's evidence to the contrary is persuasive but the clincher for me was that when Juana and Philip were forced to land in England on their way to claim the throne of Castile, no less a personage than King Henry VII of England (future father-in-law of Isabella's daughter Catherine) deemed Juana to be quite sane and self-possessed. If anyone could read people it was Henry VII, who had spent his life reading people and their motives. There is so much more to this fascinating book. Isabella's ups and downs with Rodrigo Borgia, who became Pope Alexander VI (and father of the even more infamous

Cesare), her relations with the Portuguese monarchy and, above all, her constant fretting about the aims of the Ottoman sultan du jour would all make for further books. If anything, though, Downey's book is a model of concision and an excellent launching pad for further reading. There are extensive end notes, a good bibliography, and a useful index. The only things missing are genealogies of the Castilian and Aragonese monarchies (and one of the concurrent Portuguese monarchy would have been welcome). Isabella's reign echoes down the centuries. Except for Brazil and the Guianas, Spanish is the dominant language of South America and Central America, the Roman Catholic Church paid dearly for its excesses during the Spanish Civil War, and far away in the Middle East some would-be caliph dreams of regaining Al Andalus for the Prophet. A great read.

Wow, this book finally makes some historical facts make sense. It is incredibly well written and sourced, it was a pleasure to read. I hope it's translated to Spanish and they get a chance to see this version of Isabella, although they may know it all, it's just here we fail to see the big picture. This book was full of Ah-Ha! Moments. The Ottomans were conquering the world! Having a Muslim state in Spain (Granada) was a very dangerous thing... all those ports where the Ottomans would be welcomed! By both Muslims and Jews as happened 700 years earlier. The Ottomans were not an idle threat. It was their goal to conquer Europe, as they were doing in Constantinople, Albania and Greece! And most of the Western Monarchies were too far away to understand the threat. I didn't say the Inquisition is excused, but the "why" is clearer. The Ottomans were a real threat, and I am really glad Isabella and her descendants stopped them. I doubt we would live in a free country if there had been no Isabella. So take her out from behind Ferdinand's undeserved shadow, and show us the real leader to whom we owe so much! I owe the fact that I don't have to wear a burka to Isabella.

This biography had as much color, intrigue and conflict as the best novel you can imagine. Downey succeeds in capturing the essence of Queen Isabella and all the characters that surrounded her including philandering King Ferdinand. Downey's journalistic writing style ensures an action-packed read, a real page turner, which is rare for a biography. The author shows sides of Isabella readers would have never imagined, and then just as readers feel that empathy and understanding for Isabella, Downey reminds us of Isabella's darker side including the Inquisition. This is truly a haunting biography that only gets better and better. The last chapter is the crowning glory of this remarkable biography.

This is one of my favourite biographies. Kirstin Downey has managed to capture Isabella as a complex person and leader while making her story read like a novel. This is a real page turner, an unbelievable story filled with fascinating characters. It is difficult to hear anyone outside of Spain speak Spanish and not think this is because of Isabella. Every character from Ferdinand, to Isabella's trusted supporter Gonzalo, her children and even Christopher Columbus come alive like no other biography I have ever read.

If you ever wondered how Columbus got his ships to go to America, this book gives lots of background. How did the Spanish Inquisition get its start, that is here too, and why did the Pope divide the world so favorably for Spain, that question is answered also. A wonderful well written book with plenty of background material that filled in my missing knowledge of the late 15th and early 16th century Spanish / American / Italian history. Truly one of the best historic books I have read in while.

A fascinating history by really the only female European ruler until England's Elizabeth- a very unlikely childhood, but clearly a remarkable woman in any age, but for her time quite remarkable. Ferdinand turns out to be mostly window dressing. Most interesting after having been to Spain and having stood in the Alhambra room where she negotiated terms with Columbus, and then later that year threw the Jews out of Spain. She was both visionary and tyrant, administrator par excellence and mother.

Great book. I thought I knew everything there was to know about Isabella but I couldn't have been more wrong. Very informative on the politics and motivations surrounding the Inquisition, Reconquista, New World voyages, naval battles against the Turks, Spanish relations with other Catholic kingdoms etc. And interestingly enough this book gave me a new appreciation of what could be considered early feminism. Read the book...worth every penny.

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