



# **The Deadly Sisterhood: Eight Princesses of the Italian Renaissance**

*Leonie Frieda*

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The Deadly Sisterhood An epic saga of the Italian Renaissance from the author of CATHERINE DE MEDICI Full description

## The Deadly Sisterhood: Eight Princesses of the Italian Renaissance Details

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**Leonie Frieda**

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# From Reader Review **The Deadly Sisterhood: Eight Princesses of the Italian Renaissance** for online ebook

## Hester says

I really, really wanted to like this book. I pushed through the purple prose of the prologue because the stories are just fascinating. But after page 159, I had to stop. Pages 151 -153, Frieda writes about the Italians were prejudiced against the Spaniards, especially the Catalans. Then she refers to the Catalans as *marranos*. on pages 153 and 155. She wrote in the footnote that "*Marrano* was the highly derogatory, largely anti-Semitic term used to describe the Valencian people." NO. *Marrano* referred to Iberian Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism, but still secretly practiced Judaism. When people said the Borgias were Marranos, they were calling them either crypto-Jews or descendants of Jews. This was an explicit call to anti-Semitism. Writing otherwise is either ignorant or mealy-mouthed. I will give the author the benefit of the doubt, and assume she was ill-informed. Unfortunately, that means there is no reason for me to finish the book.

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## Christy B says

There is nothing I like better than reading about empowered women who fought against the restrictions of their time. So, when I heard about **The Deadly Sisterhood** more than a year ago, I immediately put it on my wish list. And I was thrilled when I was able to read an advance copy.

**The Deadly Sisterhood** is mainly about eight women from the Italian Renaissance. And while the focus is on these eight women, we do hear about others.

The main point of this book was to see the lasting legacies the women of this time left: whether it was from their own extreme or lesser actions, or through their descendants.

The boldness of these women showed. When the last of the eight women featured here died - Isabella d'Este - with her died an end of an era. An era where women where able to take control, and even manipulate to gain power and status. After the death of Isabella, the world in which she lived changed, and became a place she and her contemporary women would have felt stifled in.

One of the women featured in this book is Caterina Sforza. I had read a fantastic biography about her last year, but was still thrilled that she was included here. I actually learned a bit more about her, not surprisingly considering the depths of this woman's amazingness could not all be included in one book.

**The Deadly Sisterhood** is highly recommended to those interested in the Italian Renaissance and women's history. How appropriate that I finish it during Women's History Month.

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## Carolynn says

Oh dear: this should have been such a treat - a group biography of Isabella and Beatrice d'Este, Caterina Sforza, Lucrezia Borgia, Contessina de'Bardi, Clarice Orsini and Lucrezia Tornabuoni - but it was let down by a total lack of copy-editing and sloppy judgemental writing [Joffre Borgia in Naples 'reverting to the

superficial ways of a nincompoop']. I've only listed seven names - for the life of me I can't think of the eighth, and none of them were princesses, either :-0

I can't see who this is for - anyone with knowledge of the period will laugh out loud [one of my favourite passages was Frieda's assumption of the posthumous consolation the families of the Pazzi conspirators would take from having their dead relatives painted in disgrace on the walls of the Bargello by Botticelli pg81], and for anyone new to late Quattrocentro Italy the narrative of marriages, alliances, affairs, wars is too complicated to follow easily.

I think this must have been pitched in the middle of 'Borgia'-fever [you think the series is great? the truth is even better!], and has then been rushed out post-cancellation as a kind of 'this is what happened next' resolution to the story lines. Otherwise I cannot see why something so sloppy has been published e.g Caterina Sforza's second husband is introduced and dismissed in the space of a sentence. Also Frieda is unapologetically pro-Alexander Borgia [pg 269] which does suggest some link to the series. If this was a novel she would have got away with it, almost.

Like other readers, I'm not entirely sure what Isabella d'Este ever did to Leonie Frieda to merit the criticism flung in her direction e.g 'Isabella, though grievously struck by her mother's death, typically met it as a fashion challenge' pg 164 and other numerous, frankly bitchy, comments about her weight? What kind of crazy world are we living in when it becomes okay to judge long dead historical figures on their looks??

On the back Kathryn Hughes is quoted, from the 'Mail on Sunday', as saying 'this is a 'Girl's Own' version of the Italian Renaissance, full of bright, brash women, quite a lot of killing...and some really serious statement jewellery'. I have a lot of time for Hughes [she wrote a fabulous biography of George Eliot] and tbh this quote drew me in. Now I'm left wondering if it's been doctored or massaged a touch, and oddly, this review is not on the 'Mail's' website...

So to sum up: for me, entertaining in a so bad it's laughable way, but worse than useless as a source of unbiased reliable information.

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## Nikki says

I've been wanting to read this one for a while, given how epic Caterina Sforza is in the Assassin's Creed games. I have read a biography of Caterina herself (Tigress of Forli, by Elizabeth Lev), so I didn't read this so much for her as for the other women in its pages. I found it a little disorganised, really; it isn't neatly divided into eight sections, and it's sometimes hard to see exactly which woman is the key player. And Frieda is claiming to deal with women as key players in Renaissance Italy, and yet Clarice Orsini is exactly what the back blurb says these women are not, a "passive bystander".

In fact, there's a whole section that's primarily about Lorenzo de' Medici and the Pazzi Conspiracy. Which, shrug. Not what I'm here for, actually.

It's a readable enough book, but there's oddly judgemental bits about the women's weight or appearance, or indeed intelligence if they're not one of the precious women we're supposed to view as a sisterhood, and it's not very well proofread at all. Without looking for it, I found four typos in casual reading. Gah.

Originally posted here.

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### **Jaylia3 says**

Note--My copy of this book is actually titled *The Deadly Sisterhood: A Story Women, Power and Intrigue in the Italian Renaissance*.

An unwieldy cast of characters drifts in and out of this book's chapters making it hard to keep track of them all, but that didn't stop me from enjoying the book once I adopted a more relaxed attitude. It's packed with 100 years of turbulent history told through up close and personal accounts of several prominent families, making the book as entertaining as a well written gossip magazine. I didn't know much about the Italian Renaissance before so the book was an eye opener for me. Italy at this time was a collection of independent kingdoms each with its own distinct culture and set of wealthy nobles who schemed among themselves for power.

Women are the focus of the book and though they didn't officially have a lot of political clout they managed to influence events anyway. One of the most dramatic examples came near the beginning of the book when Caterina Sforza, Countess of Forli, tricked her husband's assassins into allowing her to take refuge in a strategically placed fortress, giving her the means to run them off. When the mob threatened to kill her son if she didn't surrender Caterina stood on a high balcony and lifted her skirts to show them in the most graphic way that murdering her older children would be futile because she already had another on the way. The mob that hoped to overthrow her family fled. While all the women profiled had fascinating lives, that story stuck in my mind and every time Caterina came back into the narrative I sat up and paid special attention.

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### **Joan says**

In the Italian Renaissance 1427 - 1527

Women in the Italian Renaissance

This is an excellent read for anyone desiring to learn more about this period, understanding that most books on this era have the same problems. There are over one hundred fifty papal states; there is continuous warring and attempting to take over another's kingdom; and there is continual strife over and with each Pope. Although this book is entitled to bring a new facet of the women who played important parts during these times, there is less about the women and more about the men who affect their lives. Although the author probably historically chronicled the events, it still becomes a little difficult to keep everything straight and the names are particularly confusing. As the chapters flow, I couldn't be sure I was reading about the same person or someone new, and I don't attribute that to the author. I think it is just a fact for those who are just educating self about this age. I think the book is well written and I recommend it to all those who enjoy historical genre.

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## Amy Bruno says

Just got approved for a digital review copy of this book - Woo Hoo!!!

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## Meghan Emery says

I've always loved history, but I've never really gotten into Italian History after Christianity entered the picture. Frieda helped me learn to appreciate the Italian Renaissance and the smart conniving women who shaped it. The information is pretty straight forward with no hedging or "interpretations" or guessing games. There is definitely no tweaking history here. The only thing that brought down the rating for me was the inconsistency. At times it felt like I was being told a story, and at others it felt like I was being led past a line of really boring men spouting off facts whenever I passed. All in all it was a great look at history and I would recommend it to anyone who is interested in this time.

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## Lolly's Library says

*1.5 stars*

Nope, couldn't do it. After reading the enlightening *The Borgias: The Hidden History*, I can no longer respect another book in which the same old salacious stories about the Borgia family are repeated. Oh, Leonie Frieda qualifies a few of the worst rumors with a "perhaps" or "possibly not", but only in a very reluctant way; all other stories about the Borgias, and Lucrezia specifically, are eagerly related in an almost cackling, "look at how awful these people were" sort of way. She does much the same thing when relating the history of Caterina Sforza. (Frieda repeats the most famous tale about Caterina, in which Caterina supposedly lifts up her skirts and shows her genitals to Orsi rebels while under siege at Ravaldino in response to the rebels threatening her son with death, shouting that she has the capability of making more sons. The origin of this tale is one Galeotto Manfredi, taken from a letter he wrote to Lorenzo de' Medici, but the funny thing is, no other witness to the Ravaldino siege included this vulgar story in their description of the proceedings. Even so, Niccolo Machiavelli decided to repeat this version of events in his *Discourses* because it suited the general opinion of Caterina's character.) This sort of sordid rumor-mongering only makes the more excellent book about Caterina, *The Tigress of Forlì: Renaissance Italy's Most Courageous and Notorious Countess*, Caterina Riario Sforza de Medici, shine that much brighter.

The goal of the book, to describe the lives of eight of the most powerful and influential women of the Italian peninsula in the fifteenth century, was a grand one. Its execution, however, fell quite short of the mark. In trying to define these women by describing the world around them, their families, their lineage and history, the geography in which they lived and the events which shaped them, the women themselves disappeared into simplistic and roughly-sketched caricatures of who they truly were. Going into the book, I was already familiar with Lucrezia Borgia, Giulia Farnese, and Caterina Sforza, thanks to the more-comprehensive and better-written books I mentioned above, but had less familiarity with Lucrezia Tornabuoni, a savvy and influential politician, Clarice Orsini, the wife of Lorenzo de' Medici who was overshadowed by her mother-in-law Lucrezia Tornabuoni, Isabella and Beatrice d'Este, sisters, rivals, and fashion plates as well as cultural and political icons, and Isabella d'Aragona, the unhappy and unfortunate Duchess of Milan. Sadly, I can't say I'm any more familiar with them now than I was before reading the book as the biographies of these women were so broadly-drawn as to be nearly useless; I think I could've learned as much from Wikipedia. Not to

mention, to judge by her treatment of Lucrezia Borgia and Caterina Sforza, I have a hard time believing that the histories of the other women in this book were objectively written; I doubted and took with a grain of salt nearly every sentence I read. From what I can see, there has been no new research done to write this book--it's simply a rehash of what other chroniclers have written over the centuries with no attempt to either verify or refute any of the information given by those sources--and while I can say that the writing itself is very engaging and lively (which is why I tacked on that half star to the rating), I can't say that I'm impressed with what the writing is saying.

In the end, I found the overall mocking, gossipy, biased tone to be extremely off-putting and I wouldn't recommend this book to any serious student of history, nor would I recommend it as an introductory text to the era as I believe it would do more harm than good and simply continue to spread misinformation.

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### **Linda says**

Ehhh. This was more "these women lived at the same time as a bunch of men who did much more interesting things". If I pick up a book on the women of the Italian Renaissance, I want to read about THEM. Tell me more about Clarice Orsini Medici instead of spending 30 pages on the Pazzi conspiracy. If I wanted to learn more about that I'd pick up a book on the subject. Likewise with Lucrezia Borgia, who regularly gets shoved aside to make place for her brother Cesare. Poor Clarice Orsini fares even worse: she basically gets introduced as "the boring one who just kept popping out children". Why even include her then?

Another thing that bothered me was the downright catty tone the author employed. We get bashed over the head with the fact that Isabella D'Este was fat and not as pretty as her sister in law Lucrezia Borgia. Did she really need to be called "rotund" and whatnot every time she is mentioned? Other people also get judged on how they looked. It's just weird.

Lastly, I had trouble keeping track of who was who. The sequence of the book is semi-chronological but it hops forwards and backwards in time depending on who is the focus. The problem is that these women lived roughly at the same time, making the 'storylines' blend together and ending with a confusing jumble. It would have been better if the author had just focused much more clearly on one woman at the time, without going off on a tangent about what another woman was doing at the same time.

Oh, and also they were not "princesses". Geez.

In summary: pick up individual biographies of these women but stay clear of this one. It's an introduction to the subject but it's way too confusing to recommend.

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### **Alexandra says**

Not a lady-assassins novel, but a history book about the role of eight significant women in Unknown.jpegthe Italian peninsula during the Renaissance.

I scored this at a school market for about \$2, which was very cool.

Firstly, two problems:

1. There were a number of egregious editing issues, which really annoyed me. A major publisher should not be putting out books with mistakes that \*I\* can pick up as I read it - it's not like I read with the attention of a copy editor.

2. More significantly, the book falls into the trap that many such history books do. They're trying to write a book about the women, who have largely been ignored by contemporary and modern historians... but there's so much else! being done by the lads! and honest, it's needed for context! ... that there are large slabs of text that really don't seem to be connected to the women who are in theory at the heart of the book. Even if there are occasional mentions of "oh, and he was Duchess Blah's son". It was frustrating to have the women seem to be ignored in their own book.

Anyway. Frieda focusses on eight women, some of whom I'd heard of - Lucrezia Borgia, of course - and others I hadn't heard of - of course. It covers the height of the Italian Renaissance, from 1471 to 1527. She discusses their births and marriages and deaths, their children and (often multiple) husbands, as well as the roles they played in politics - both consciously and as marital pawns - and in the artistic and cultural milieu. Actually that last was the bit that, surprisingly, got least attention; I would have thought that the women would have played greater roles as patrons. Perhaps Frieda was more interested in discussing the political aspect, which is definitely at the forefront of her interests here.

Despite the problems mentioned above - and that sometimes the language was a bit too snarky; I don't need to be reminded that one of the Isabellas apparently got quite fat, unless that contributed to how people treated her - I did enjoy reading this, and I am very pleased to know more about these women of important families who themselves managed to do important and significant things.

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## **Bmeyer says**

I really wanted this book to be great, and as long as you go in to it looking for an admirable historical retelling of these women's fathers, brothers, husbands, and lovers then you have a gem on your hands, but it's not what I was looking for. I had hoped Frieda would have more information about the 8 women the book purports to be about as Caterina Sforza's life always sounds so fascinating. A warrior, alchemist, scholar who is also a woman that lived during the Italian Renaissance? I want to know more! But honestly there just wasn't enough historical meat on these women to dedicate a book to them and it leaves me wondering why the author attempted it.

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## **Nancy says**

### **The Pageantry and Brutality of the Renaissance**

The Renaissance was a time of contradictions: sumptuous courts, exquisite art and architecture, classical works of literature, but also greed, malice and murder. It was a time when political disputes were often solved by the dagger. Women as well as men played a significant role in this turbulent time: Lucrezia Burnabuoni, who helped her son Lorenzo d'Medici rule Florence; Caterina Sforza, who tricked her husband's assassins into letting into the fortress of Ravaldino where she held them off and overcame the rebels; the sisters, Isabella and Beatrice d'Este, first ladies of the rival kingdoms of Mantua and Milan; Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander VI; and more. A colorful cast of characters skilfully brought to life.



This well-researched book reads almost like a historical novel. The setting has all the elements of romance and intrigue, and the ladies who ruled the Italian peninsula were strong women whose lives were full of political intrigue, violence, and romance. The author does an excellent job of showing them to us as real people with loves, hates, and fears.

It does take concentration to read the book. I found the Italian names confusing in the beginning, but I gradually got used to them. There are a great many characters with the same or almost identical names. However, it's worth the trouble to sort them out.

I highly recommend this book if you enjoy history, or even if you love a good story. This is not an easy, light book, but it is well worth reading.

I reviewed this book for the Amazon Vine Program.

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## Jess says

I was so excited to get my hands on this book. It seemed to be right up my alley: a study of eight aristocratic women and how their actions impacted on the political schemes and upheavals of Renaissance Italy. And Frieda's chosen as her subjects some truly fascinating women: Lucrezia Tornabuoni, the politically savvy mother of Lorenzo de' Medici; Clarice Orsini, Lorenzo's oft-ignored wife; Caterina Sforza, the notorious "Tiger of Forlì"; sisters Isabella and Beatrice d'Este, both great patrons of culture; Isabella d'Aragona, the ill-fortuned Duchess of Milan; Lucrezia Borgia, daughter of Pope Alexander VI; and Giulia Farnese, the Pope's mistress. Some of these women I already knew about, others I didn't, but I was eager to learn more.

Here's the problem, though: Despite the promises of the book's introduction, these women don't really end up being the focal point of the text.

Frieda's intentions are good: seeking to demonstrate the impact these eight women's lives had on the politics and culture of Renaissance Italy, she attempts to weave their stories through the broader picture of alliances, rivalries, wars, diplomacy, power-plays and scheming. She takes a chronological approach, visiting and revisiting each woman at various key points in her life and frequently stepping back to survey the broader political landscape. It's a lot of balls to keep in the air, and unfortunately it just doesn't work. With so much of the book consumed by explaining the events of the day, Frieda is unable to give adequate time to any of her eight subjects. As a result, each woman's story is diluted, simplified and ultimately dwarfed by the big picture happenings, and I never got to know any of them as well as I would have liked to.

It bothers me how uncritically Frieda approaches many of her sources. Legends are presented as fact, as are pejorative accusations of insanity and sexual deviancy. She tells us that Caterina Sforza flashed her vag at Ravaldino (she didn't), that Gian Galeazzo Sforza and Isabella d'Aragona were both "mad" (a lazy and extremely unfair oversimplification), and that Anna Sforza was so unimpressed by her husband's sexual performance that she took to cross dressing and sleeping with women (are you fucking kidding me). As a history graduate, this is the kind of thing that drives me crazy, and I find it inexcusable that a history writer would repeat such obviously problematic claims without even bothering to unpack them. The lack of a complete bibliography or endnotes also makes it harder to easily follow up on some of Frieda's more questionable claims.

There *is* some decent material in there -- going into the book, I knew nothing about the Medici women, and I found Frieda's discussion of them and the roles they played in Lorenzo's regime quite fascinating -- but there's a lot more that either isn't satisfactorily fleshed out or is flat-out questionable. None of the women are explored in the depth they deserve, and more often what we see are one-dimensional characters -- and in a few cases, outright caricatures. Isabella d'Este is done the greatest disservice; Frieda delights in mocking her acquisitiveness, her petty rivalries, her pride and (most irritatingly) her weight, which barely even sparing a mention for her cultural patronage, her regency in Mantua or her famed *studiolo* and *grotta*.

The poor standard of editing evident throughout the book unfortunately does nothing to help Frieda's case. The whole thing is in desperate need of a copyeditor to make sense of the atrocious number of misspellings, typos, grammatical errors, misused words, nonsensical sentence fragments, poor wording and difficult-to-follow run-on sentences. It's more than just a few simple proofreading oversights; the book is riddled with serious errors which ought to put any editor to shame.

In one instance the author mentions a letter "written ... following Lucrezia's marriage to Giovanni Sforza by her brother-in-law". The somewhat clumsy wording makes it appear that Frieda is referring to Lucrezia's brother-in-law; it's only five sentences later we discover that she's actually talking about the brother-in-law of Giulia Farnese.

We also get nonsensical, incomplete sentence fragments such as the following:

-- "There are grounds to suspect that her reaction was hysterical enough even the idea that Poliziano might be homosexual"

-- "The idea that the bastard daughter of the Borgia from Valencia, otherwise known as *marranos*, made the marriage a preposterous fancy."

And some downright awkward wording:

-- "His [Rodrigo's] mother never saw Rodrigo [again]" (should have been "Rodrigo never saw his mother again" or "Lucrezia never saw her son again")

-- "Alexander [wrote] to the Dieci di Balìa ... recommending Caterina to them, for whom he felt a paternal affection" (leaving ambiguity as to whether it's Caterina or the Dieci di Balìa for whom he feels a paternal affection)

Good copyediting removes ambiguities; it ensures that the author's meaning is clear and that the text flows smoothly, rather than juddering to a halt as the reader struggles to make sense of an ungrammatical sentence. I can excuse an accidental double-parenthesis, a "Farmese" in place of "Farnese" or a "forge" where the author evidently meant "ford", but for so many glaring mistakes to go to print is unforgivable.

So, my verdict? As an introduction to the politicking and the women of the Italian Renaissance, *The Deadly Sisterhood* isn't bad. Each of the eight women it deals with are fascinating individuals who are very much worth reading about, and if you're not familiar with Renaissance history you might well find it an interesting read. However, I'm not a fan of Frieda's framing choices; the continual jumping between eight people, and between the individual and the big picture, results in a rather disjointed narrative and requires some patience from the reader. What's more, her uncritical acceptance of biased primary sources can be frustrating and causes me to take some of the things she says with a grain of salt. For all of Frieda's good intentions, there's a lot about this book that's problematic, and it's not necessarily one for a serious student of history.

~~If you're looking to learn a little about some of the fantastic women of the Italian Renaissance, *The Deadly Sisterhood* is an okay starting point. However, I'd urge anybody who picks it up to be wary of Frieda's willingness to take primary sources at face value, and to consider picking up some other books on the subject~~

as well.

**29/4/13:** After some consideration, I'm actually going to amend this. **I do not recommend this book to anybody looking for an introduction to this time period or the women who inhabited it.** Unless you're at least somewhat familiar with the women of Italian Renaissance, or you're going into the book prepared to take things with a grain of salt, chances are you're going to be misled -- and some of the reviews that are emerging are reflective of this. There are people walking away from this book *believing* Frieda's bogus claims about Isabella d'Aragona's "madness", Caterina Sforza's vulgar retorts at Ravaldino, and so on, and it's really infuriating to see those kinds of falsehoods perpetuated.

If you *are* looking for an introduction to some of the women of the Italian Renaissance, I'd recommend starting with Elizabeth Lev's excellent *Tigress of Forlì*, a well-researched and readable biography of Caterina Sforza which picks apart the legends to examine the complex and fascinating woman behind them. Caroline Murphy's *The Pope's Daughter*, while imperfect, is also a good choice -- it tells the story of Felice della Rovere, the illegitimate daughter of Pope Julius II and another amazing woman, who managed to attain wealth, influence and independence in a world dominated by men.

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## Elena says

It is possible I had too high expectations going into *The Deadly Sisterhood*, but the premise was fantastic: a book about eight different women, often overlooked, living in one of the most tumultuous and fascinating time periods. *The Deadly Sisterhood* also has, honestly, one of the best and most promising introduction I've ever read; but, unfortunately, in the end it turned out to be quite a disappointment.

Let's start with the positive things first. The book doesn't follow each woman separately, but follows a chronological order instead, and I think this was a good choice. It was very interesting to see how many of their lives interweaved, how some of them interacted with each other, and how their actions and circumstances influenced the lives of the others.

It is also clear that Leonie Frieda did quite a lot of research on the time period, and, while I knew some of these women, others were almost completely unknown to me, and now I can definitely say I know more about them.

Unfortunately, the rest of the book did not convince me. My main problem was that, while there are some intriguing informations about the women, I had the feeling the focus was never entirely on them. It is likely this was due to the fact that there is very little known about some of these women: when Frieda was talking about Caterina Sforza, about whom there are more informations, I did not have that impression; but most of the time I did.

The author also spent too much time talking about Lorenzo il Magnifico and Cesare Borgia, and, while it is without a doubt that both are very interesting figures, having so many pages focused solely on them seemed out of place and useless.

I also found Frieda's partiality annoying sometimes. While it is understandable and even also inevitable that she should prefer some women, I think she exaggerated where Lucrezia Borgia and Isabella d'Este were concerned: she presented the first one as a saint, an example of all feminine virtues, and the other as a ugly, fat and annoying person. I can't imagine readers who admire Isabella will enjoy this portrayal of her.

For these reasons I can't give *The Deadly Sisterhood* more than 2 stars, but I am very sorry because I had

been really looking forward to this book. Frieda's biography of Catherine de Medici was much more enjoyable, so maybe try reading this one instead if you are interested in the subject.

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