

Books Worth Revisiting: Traveling Back to the Middle Ages

When we think of the “Middle Ages,” we usually think of knights and tournaments, the building of the great cathedrals, and interesting people such as Joan of Arc, Geoffrey Chaucer, or those Plantagenet kings. The period, broadly reckoned as beginning with the Norman Conquest in 1066 and ending with the death of Richard III of England at the Battle of Bosworth Field in 1485, also saw major events such as the signing of Magna Carta, the Crusades, the Black Death, and the splitting of the Papacy between Rome and Avignon in France. The Kremlin was built in 1156, Marco Polo published his “travels” in 1295, and John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English in the 1380s. Here are three famous books that take us back to that busy and interesting time.

A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century by Barbara W. Tuchman **RC 13579 (male narrator); RC 59644 (female narrator); BARD download (female narrator).** Barbara W. Tuchman (1912-1989) is one of the United States’ most brilliant historians. She was known as a “popular” historian, meaning that she wrote on scholarly topics in such a way that the average reader would be able to find the history very accessible and enjoyable. Unlike most historical scholars, she did not focus on one particular period or place but instead wrote on a multitude of topics that interested her. Two of her works won Pulitzer Prizes for General Non-Fiction: The Guns of August (1963), about events leading up to World War I, and Stilwell and the American Experience in China (1972), a biography of General Joseph Stilwell. Her history of one century during the Middle Ages was published in 1978, spent many weeks on the best seller lists, and provides helpful background to understanding any detailed historical novel set in the Middle Ages. She surveys all the momentous events that took place during the 1300s—including the Black Death and the papal schism—while anchoring her history around the life of one prominent French nobleman, Enguerrand de Coucy VII. To order this book, call 1-800-252-9605 and ask for **RC 13579 (male narrator) / RC 59644 (female narrator) or download it from the BARD site.**

Ivanhoe by Sir Walter Scott **BR 06805; RC 25304; LB 00260; BARD download.** Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) was a Scottish writer best known for his historical novels and poetry. In his time, he was wildly popular and had an international following. By the time he published Ivanhoe in 1819, his career

as a novelist of romantic historical fiction was already well-established, but Ivanhoe became his most enduring novel and remains a popular subject for movies and television. While set in the 1190s during the reign of England's Richard the Lionheart and thus predating the material covered in Tuchman's history, the themes that run through the novel repeat themselves over and over again throughout the Middle Ages. Knights and chivalry, the convoluted politics of England and France, social and religious unrest, and the precarious situation of Jewish people all echo between the two books. While the title character is Ivanhoe, the novel really belongs to the beautiful Jewish maiden Rebecca, who nourishes a forbidden love for Ivanhoe while finding herself the unwilling object of passionate desire on the part of Brian de Bois-Guilbert, a powerful Knight Templar. Readers should keep in mind that having been written in the early 19th century, the narrative flow of Ivanhoe takes some getting used to, but if readers will be patient, the story takes hold and provides a rousing adventure tale. The recorded version also has some end materials that may be difficult to get through, but the glossary at the very end does provide useful background notes and definitions for some terms in the story. To order this book, call 1-800-252-9605 and ask for **BR 06805 / RC 25304 / LB 00260** or download it from the **BARD** site.

The Name of the Rose by Umberto Eco RC 19739; LB 03146; BARD download. "Novelist" is just one small aspect of Umberto Eco's prodigious accomplishments. Born in Italy in 1932, his first claim to fame is as a world-renowned medievalist, but he also has established international reputations in the fields of anthropology, semiotics, literary criticism, architecture, and the list goes on. His most famous novel, published in English in 1983, created a literary sensation. An elderly German monk breaks his lifelong silence and recounts seven days of terror in the year 1327. As a teenage novice, Adso of Melk is sent on a diplomatic mission as an assistant to a prominent English Franciscan, Brother William of Baskerville. They journey to a northern Italian monastery, where an important theological debate is to take place. When they arrive, they find that one monk already has been murdered, and with each passing day, the bodies begin to pile up, each murdered in a hideous way. As William and Adso struggle to solve the crimes, the source of the mystery seems to be located in the monastery's library and the method of murder tied to a common habit. This novel also contains the best description of a word without actually using the word. To order this book, call 1-800-252-9605 and ask for **RC 19739 / LB 03146** or download it from the **BARD** site.