



The Vizard Mask

Diana Norman

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Penitence Hurd and the Plague arrived in London on the same day...

Bound up in righteousness as tight as a parcel, she journeys from Puritan America to find her aunt, and steps into a city full of rogues, hell-fire and fleshly pleasures. When she discovers her aunt is running a brothel in St Giles-in-the-Fields, Penitence has no option but to point out the wickedness.

The Plague releases its horror over London's stress and rookeries and, one by one, the inhabitants of Dog Yard die - many with a wild, rollicking bravery - forcing Penitence to acknowledge that courage and a paradoxical decency are to be found among the wicked as much as the saintly. Her former morality shaken, she meets Aphra Behn, playwright and spy for Charles II, who introduces her to the wicked Restoration stage, where nearly all England's first actresses are somebody's mistress, and Penitence is changed forever.

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The Vizard Mask Details

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Author : Diana Norman

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From Reader Review The Vizard Mask for online ebook

Sandra Pearson says

Having read Mistress of the Art of Death by Ariana Franklin, a nom du plume of this author, and loved it. A friend loaned me this book. Wow! The detail is phenomenal, her research must have taken years. I live in the area where much of the second half of the book takes place, particularly the Monmouth Rebellion so it held special interest for me. For any lover of historical fiction this is a must

Sandra says

Well written, seems well researched (I'm honestly not super familiar with details of the 17th century), and kept me interested. Felt much more like a viewer watching Penitence's life play out rather than going through her life with her? Some parts do drag and I'll never understand the "romance" -he was a dick and they just had sexual attraction no real relationship.

It was mostly interesting for the historical bits; plague, great fire, the court of Charles II, the Monmouth Rebellion, the Bloody Assizes, William and Mary, etc., etc.

Alicia says

This author also wrote the wonderful medieval Mistress of the Art of Death series, as Ariana Franklin. Since she died a couple of years ago, I've been reading her historical novels under the Diana Norman pen name. I always enjoy the historical detail: real people wander through the plot and you do get a good feel for the Restoration period and the court of the Merry Monarch contrasted with Puritan early America. Although the main character is based on real person, I didn't become fully invested in the plot and mostly just enjoyed the historical details of life during the 17th c. With Plague and the Great Fire of London, and cavaliers vs roundheads.

Shannon says

A bit overly long in that so much happens over so many years, some of it interesting and some of it not, but still a good read. A great example of this time in history and all the cool things that happened in London.

Kristen McDermott says

Very very glad that the much-missed Diana Norman's earlier out-of-print novels are making their way into e-format, but sad that this particular one is apparently a scanned version -- many many typos. But it's entirely worth it for this huge, satisfying novel that captures the romance, squalor, creativity, and chaos of the Restoration era, with an unblinking depiction of the horrors of London life for the poor and for women of ill

repute. Penitence is a carefully drawn character based on the almost nonexistent biography of a real actress, and Norman gives her a resume that puts her in the middle of nearly every level of Restoration society, from the gutters to the throne room. Norman has also delighted me here by bringing the great Aphra Behn to life as Penitence's confidant and savior. Few historical fiction writers have managed to balance lush description with witty dialogue the way Norman has here and in her other novels. She was a master at presenting heroines and stories formulaic enough to be satisfying, but boundary-breaking enough to stay with you after you finish them.

Joanna Fraser says

I did really enjoy this book although I felt it was too long and the story really dragged on towards the end. The first two parts were brilliant (5*) however, especially descriptions of living through the plague in the rough parts of London. Really well written and just horrifying! Aphra Behn was an inspirational 'character'. I hadn't realised she actually existed until I checked Wikipedia after..

Sally Cook says

Excellent writing

A great story told in wondrous detail, perfect for the historic fiction fan. Norman is a master of colorful storytelling.

Catherine says

A very interesting book, within which during a riveting plot, substantiates possible meanings of the surname, Vizard. Vizard is thought to be a French Huguenot name and records have it as a family name in England in the early 1700s. The actual vizard mask is written about in Dr Johnson's diary as a mask for ladies to hide behind when laughing (or crying) at the theatre. The name can be pronounced as v-eye-zard. Famous Vizard's: Steve Vizard, Australian comic and republican campaigner. Well known wizards, Maurice Vizard, painter and cabaret artist, Julian Vizard, businessman.

Rosina Lippi says

Norman's historical novels aren't very well known in the US, but they should be. This is a great story, well written. Penitence Hurd is a Puritan from America who makes the journey back to Charles II's London, and finds herself very out of place. She struggles through, makes a place for herself and friends, and is caught up in the plague panic. Highly recommended.

Vibeke says

I really liked this book. I'll write more about that shortly, but first a word about the ebook edition, which I bought for \$4.99 on Amazon. It's clearly a book created from a scan of the printed book, and IT HAS NOT BEEN FORMATTED OR PROOFREAD. The text is littered with errors. There are no scene breaks, which was really confusing at times. This ebook version is so poorly done that I feel the \$4.99 is a ripoff. It's shameful--disrespectful to readers and to the author, who's passed away and had no say in how her work is presented here.

On to my opinion. A friend asked if I'd read it. I said no and asked what it was. She said, "It's a Bekke book." And she was right.

This is an epic tome of a novel, and it took some getting used to the writing style, but pretty soon I got caught up in the story, the immersive history, and the depth of the characters and the plot. It's vivid, gritty, and with just enough romance to satisfy the romance reader in me. I'm only knocking off a star because it really was a bit too long (I skimmed a good deal of the second half).

I hated the errors in the ebook so much that I'm hesitant to buy more of these on Kindle, but I loved the book enough that I'll probably just suck it up. But seriously, to whoever is responsible for publishing this ebook in such a terrible shape....shame on you!

Karen Brooks says

When I first started reading this long book, *The Vizard Mask* by Diana Norman, I didn't think I'd be able to finish it. By the time I reached the 20% mark on my Kindle, I didn't want it to end - so captivating was the story. The reason for my initial reaction was a combination of the style of writing (which is rich if not dense in detail) and the heroine, a Puritan named Penitence Hurd who, frankly, I couldn't warm to at all. Not at first. Then she gripped my heart and didn't let go...

Forced to leave her home in a fledgling colony in America and travel to London to find her Aunt, a woman whose existence her devout family denies, Penitence arrives on English soil the same day as the plague. Discovering her Aunt lives in St-Giles-in-the-Fields, a den of inequity and poverty outside the city walls, Penitence manages to find her house only to learn not only is her Aunt likely dead, but her abode is actually a whore house. The woman in charge, a formidable and harsh woman known as "her Ladyship" takes in the shocked and confused Penitence, protecting her from the usual work of the women under her roof. Much to the other women's chagrin, Pen is given other duties, and proceeds to cast dire judgements and disapproval on all who come her way as she desperately tries to reconcile her Puritan beliefs with this shocking, disgusting and inappropriate place she has come to.

When the plague attacks in force, Pen finds not only her beliefs challenged, but also her faith in humanity restored and broken over and over. Humbled by what she witnesses, devastated by the losses the disease wreaks, Pen finds allies and enemies in unlikely places. But this is just the beginning of the incredible transformation this young woman must undergo if she is to survive, not just illness, disease, the unwanted attention of lecherous men, and the injustices heaped upon women, but Restoration London.

The days of the Republic are over; Cromwell is dead and Charles II is back on the throne and determined not to waste a day or a woman if he can help it. Theatre is alive and well, women are on stage, and the arts generally are flourishing. The seeking of pleasure is the goal of the classes that can and the envy of those who cannot. Religious dissent bubbles away and gossip and politics are never far from anyone's minds or lips. If it's not true, then it will be made up and, as she rises up the ranks of London Society, Pen finds how hurtful and damaging this type of talk and the scandal in its wake can be.

I don't want to say too much more about this book for fear of spoiling it or not doing it justice. It is stunning.

An epic in every sense, it slowly and carefully introduces the reader to this uptight and devout young woman and with flashbacks to her past in the Americas, allows us to come to get to know, accept and finally love Pen and who she becomes. Valiant, loyal, smart and with a difficulty she overcomes with help, Pen is a heroine for any age.

Against a backdrop of Charles II's reign and beyond; the plague, Great Fire, death of a king, terrible war, religious discord and the rise of another king, his fall and the final reclamation of the throne by William and Mary, we follow Pen's life and that of those who enter her orbit throughout one of the most fascinating and tumultuous periods of English history.

Norman, once a journalist and renowned for her historical accuracy has done an amazing job of weaving fiction and fact. Attributing actions and words to her (based on real-life) characters that were actually said by them, recreating known events but also humanising them, this book is so hard to put down. Not only that, but the character of Pen is based on a real life figure as well (I won't reveal), whose early years are unknown, allowing Norman to colour them in fantastical and vivid detail. Pen is brought to life in spectacular and heart-breaking ways, as is the city she finds herself in and the other places she dwells in as well.

As always with this type of female-centred historical fiction, it's hard for modern readers to stomach what happened to women in these eras. The notion of women being objects and chattels are lived and shocking experiences for which the women had no recourse. Norman does a terrific job of relaying not only how the women coped with this, but exploring those who were complicit in their subordination and those who learned ways to rise above it. She also portrays how men were also confined but empowered by the rigid gender roles and how both sexes suffered (and some thrived) as a consequence. Norman also offers an unforgiving portrait of class differences as well as prejudices.

But it's not all suffering and there are some fabulous moments in this book that allow your heart to soar, while others make your pulse quicken with anxiety. Likewise, the language I at first found a bit intense (mainly because Pen has a habit of quoting the Bible so much) became one of the joys of the book. Norman's turn of phrase, her ability to capture a sensation, a thought, a feeling as well as physical descriptions are just magical and poetical.

There are parts that are slow, but these are the times when Norman allows us breathing space and the opportunity to get to know not just the fascinating and flawed people populating her novel and the period – from kings to playwrights to printers and farmers and soldiers, but the places as well; her descriptions are magnificent and place you firmly in the moment.

So, far from casting the book aside, I immersed myself in it. Read concurrently with Antonia Fraser's biography of King Charles II, I can attest to the level of research (as well as other books I am reading on the period) and am in awe of Norman's ability to weave fact and fiction so seamlessly and entertainingly. I confess, like so many others, I fell in love with the unlikely heroine with the debilitating stutter. She captured my heart, as has Norman's writing. I cannot wait to explore her other books, including those she wrote under a different pen name. That she died in 2011 was a great loss to literature and lovers of history and historical fiction. I hope someone penned her a deserving epitaph and I am so grateful we continue to gain pleasure from her wonderful imagination and research.

Rodreyes says

Una lejana lectura. Sólo me queda en la mente un leve vaho de lupanares y miserias de la vieja Europa. Es un cuadro menor en un galería de obras maestras, que igual hay que visitar.

Beadyjan says

Wow, the thinking womans bodice ripper! What a really great and wide ranging historical novel this was.

This lusty tale tells us about the life of Penitence Hurd brought up as a Puritan in Massachusetts, who arrives in England alone and virtually penniless to search for an aunt she's never met.

There is so much depth to this story which transcends it above the run of the mill poverty to passion tales.

Her journey begins in a poverty ridden rookery in London where her Aunt turns out to be a Madam running a brothel in Dog yard called the Cock and Pie.

Hot on Penitences heels is Plague which strikes the rookery with devastating effect.

This book is written in 4 books, each telling a different period of Penitences life and covers diverse topics including her time in debtors prison, her friendship with the female playwright Aphra Benn, how she ends up on the stage with Nell Gwynn, is lusted after by princes and a famous judge, yet her heart remains with the actor she remembers from her rookery days who turns out not to be what he at first appears.

It reminded me of a grown up version of "At the sign of the sugared Plum" by Mary Hooper as it's set in the same time, similar setting and events. Yet it reads more like The Crimson Petal and the White" by Michel Faber.

A cracking good read for anyone who likes a historical romance which educates and makes you think as well as entertaining every step of the way.

Misfit says

It's 1664 and Puritan Penitence Hurd arrives from America armed with nothing but her faith, a bag filled with wampum and tobacco and the address of her long lost aunt. The address takes her to the Cock and Pie on Dog Street, a brothel with a Madam who goes by the moniker of "Her Ladyship". Told that her aunt is long gone and most likely dead and with no where else to go Penitence accepts a position as seamstress as Her Ladyship is surprisingly reluctant to allow her to whore like the others. Plague soon breaks out and all on Dog Street are quarantined in their homes to catch it and die or survive the forty days and be freed. Penitence's room is across the way from room rented by the mysterious Henry King and they strike up a strange friendship as Henry teaches her to use The Vizard Mask to become someone else and thus lose her terrible stutter As the plague loosens its hold Henry and Penitence share one night of passion before he gains his freedom and disappears from her life.

Fate has a few unfortunate surprises for Penitence (pregnancy, Newgate, illegal pamphlet printing to name a few) and many times the only way to get past it is the oldest way in the world, but she will do anything to keep her independence. Once she sees the glitter and magic of the King's Theater she is determined to beat the odds and make it - although when she crosses one of King Charles' rowdy noblemen and he strikes back she's willing to give up her freedom for royal protection (no it's not who you are thinking it is). As she settles into a safe, albeit boring life with her royal protector, Penitence gets a shock when Henry King once again drops into her life and his name is not Henry King.....

That's as far as I'm going, if you want to know more then read it for yourself. Penitence's story begins just before the Great Plague of London through to the Duke of Monmouth's rebellion and it's aftermath to the coronation of William and Mary. Fans of Charles Stuart be warned, he does not come off looking too pretty in this one, he's portrayed at his rutting, double dealing worst here.

At times very witty and bawdy with lots of laugh out loud moments makes this a fast fun read, but there are some very difficult moments as well - keeping her son hidden and to safety after the failed Monmouth rebellion will have you on the edge of your seat, as well as the descriptions of the Bloody Assizes after the failed rebellion. That said there are times when the pace dropped off and got a bit tedious (the plague went on waaaaaay too long, as well as that last bit at the end trying to get _____ buried in Poet's corner *yawn*). Even with the flaws I enjoyed it a lot, and most especially when Penitence and Henry were in the same room – some of the best banter I've come across in a long time. Four stars.

Denise Bainbridge says

Quite enjoyable

Found out by accident this author and Arianna Franklin are the same person and I like the Franklin books which are better than this. This has a very slow start and I almost gave up reading it. It's worth a read and I will now read more Norman books but this is not as good as the Franklin novels I have to say.
