



Hugh and Bess: A Love Story

Susan Higginbotham

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Forced to marry Hugh le Despenser, the son and grandson of disgraced traitors, Bess de Montacute, just 13 years old, is appalled at his less-than-desirable past. Meanwhile, Hugh must give up the woman he really loves in order to marry the reluctant Bess. Far apart in age and haunted by the past, can Hugh and Bess somehow make their marriage work?

Just as walls break down and love begins to grow, the merciless plague endangers all whom the couple holds dear, threatening the life and love they have built.

Award-winning author Susan Higginbotham's impeccable research will delight avid historical fiction readers, and her enchanting characters will surely capture every reader's heart. Fans of her first novel, *The Traitor's Wife*, will be thrilled to find that this story follows the next generation of the Despenser family.

Hugh and Bess: A Love Story Details

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Regina Lindsey says

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3-1/2 stars

In what could be seen as a sequel to The Traitor's Wife, Higgenbotham follows the next generation of Hugh le Despenser's family. His son, by the same name, is desperately trying to right his family's name by showing loyalty to the king and averting the court's intrigue. Receiving blessing from the king to marry young Elizabeth de Montecute (Bess), who reluctantly acquiesces to her parents' demands, he tries to forge a new life by gaining respect from his contemporaries and maybe even the love of his new wife.

I would label this more fiction set in an historical setting than historical fiction work, which was fine because it was a bit refreshing and a sweet love story. Most historical fiction work set in this period focuses on the posturing of various families, often using daughters to inch closer and closer and to the throne until, ultimately, it causes the demise of one. However, Hugh as learned lessons from his forefathers and, rather, works to be the best man he can. He is an endearing character. The reader is privy to a young girl coming of age and growing into her expected role. To her surprise, she also gets to experience love from someone she least expected.

It is not a word that will blow you away. But, Higginbotham is adept at character development and it was an enjoyable, yet quick, read.

Amy Bruno says

Elizabeth de Montecute (Bess) is not a happy camper when she learns she is to be married to the son of the notorious Hugh le Despenser, lover to King Edward II. The fact that the son is nothing like the father does nothing to assuage her displeasure.

Now, Hugh is no more thrilled about the arrangement than Bess, but he's a realist and when the king offers you an heiress and daughter of his closest advisors, you take it!

After the grisly execution of his father, the third Hugh le Despenser was imprisoned for a few years and then granted a release from King Edward III, whom he serves loyally. Hugh made a name for himself as a great fighter and led troops in some of England's greatest victories, never once deviating from his lifelong mission of bringing back honor to the family name. His efforts are rewarded with the return of family land and the young and beautiful Bess for wife.

Hugh & Bess is a story of two people coming to terms with their fate and the journey along the way. One thing that really sets Susan Higginbotham apart as an author for me is her ability to bring her sense of humor to each character. And characters that can poke fun at themselves are my kinda people! If you've ever read her blog, you'll know what I'm talking about. Another thing Susan is also brilliant at is dialogue, which seems to me the hardest part of writing a novel.

Hugh & Bess is a great historical fiction novel for pro or amateur and at 320 pages it's an easy one-sit read!

ladywallingford says

I had meant to read this one right after I read The Traitor's Wife by the same author but alas, here I am over a year later and just now finishing it.

Hugh and Bess is a sequel to The Traitor's Wife (with a few flashbacks from the point of view of Hugh le Despenser the son) and tells the story of the marriage between Hugh and Elizabeth de Montacute.

What I didn't like: I didn't always know the emotion of the scene. The biggest example coming to mind is the morning after Bess gets drunk and flirts with the king (Edward III of England). She is summoned to the queen mother's chamber and Hugh escorts her, meanwhile "teasing" her about her conduct from the night before...except apparently he wasn't teasing as we learn later. The tone of the writing seemed as if he was teasing and not angry with her.

What I liked: Nothing in particular is standing out as I write this but I did really enjoy the story. There were points where I just had to keep reading but the whole book wasn't like that. Quite honestly, I found it particularly enjoyable as a book to read while exercising or I can even see it as a "light" summer read since I didn't find it as meaty as other books that I have read from this author. Therefore, if you want something that you can sink your teeth into for a while, wait for this one. However, if you want something light, this is a good read. I would highly recommend reading The Traitor's Wife beforehand but it's not necessary.

Amanda says

In the novel Hugh and Bess, historical author Susan Higginbotham returns to fourteenth century England. In what is more of a continuation or sequel to The Traitor's Wife than a stand-alone novel, Higginbotham explores the life of Eleanor le Despenser's oldest son Hugh, heir to the Despenser family. As the son of a convicted traitor, Hugh must rebuild his family's reputation and take care of his younger siblings while navigating court games and ever-changing intrigues.

In particular, Higginbotham focuses her novel Hugh and Bess (okay, maybe it's more of a novella) on a love story between Hugh le Despenser and young Elizabeth "Bess," a well-to-do earl's daughter. After being widowed at the age of eleven, young Bess has been living with her family, waiting for her next husband. When the king suggests the match between Bess and Hugh le Despenser, her parents could hardly resist - even though the Despenser family is regarded as traitors and have a horrid past with the crown. Reluctantly, Bess marries Hugh, and finds that Hugh still has feelings for another woman. As Bess matures, she finds that marrying Hugh wasn't as detestable as she thought...

While the backbone of this story is a semi-steamy romance, Higginbotham also made sure there was plenty of room for history and oh-so-exciting court intrigue, as well as character development. Though young Bess starts out as a frivolous young girl, she grows in a mature and fascinating woman by the story's end. I became so interested in Bess, in fact, that I didn't want the story to end. She was still very young at the end

and, as mentioned in the after word, Bess went on to do other things in her life, which could have been absolutely fascinating to explore. I really would have liked to see the story expanded into a heftier novel so it could stand apart from *The Traitor's Wife* more and give Bess more attention -though, of course, this would change the "love story" approach suggested by the novel's title, but it could be done and probably make the book even better.

It was also interesting to see a few flashbacks to events that took place during those documented in *The Traitor's Wife* to Hugh, though I thought it was just a tiny bit conceited -almost fit too perfectly together.

But I can't complain -*Hugh and Bess* is another lovely historical novel from Higginbotham!

Orsolya says

Many women have been forced to marry men with dubious pasts. Bess de Montacute had to marry one with a disgraced father and grandfather: Hugh le Despenser. Susan Higginbotham brings the relationship to life in "Hugh and Bess".

Similar to "*The Traitor's Wife*" which precedes "*Hugh and Bess*"; the novel begins with a slightly slow and uneventful pace. Not only does it seem as though Higginbotham is unsure of her initial writing (this was my same complaint in "*The Traitor's Wife*") but the text is overridden with dialogue which merely recaps history. Not to mention, much of the speaking dialogue sounds too modern. So much so, that there are jarring moments which can snap the reader away from the historical world (such as the overuse of stating that men are 'single' versus 'unmarried'). Also initially unstable is the alternating narration of Hugh, Hugh's memories, and Bess. This back and forth, plus chronology jumps, can become confusing.

As "*Hugh and Bess*" proceeds, Higginbotham's writing becomes much more confident concerning the actual written language and the plot, itself (this also happened in "*The Traitor's Wife*"). Once this occurs, the reader is more engaged and the story is more 'lived' versus 'told'. Furthermore, Higginbotham strongly focuses on history instead of dramatic, flowery descriptions making "*Hugh and Bess*" a delight to those readers who prefer their historical fiction novels to be more history than fiction and therefore more 'real'.

Commonly in historical fiction novels, authors tend to overpopulate the text with foreshadowing and rush the storyline in order to create excitement. Higginbotham avoids foreshadowing, encouraging the reader to want to know what happens next. This adds multiple levels and folds to "*Hugh and Bess*".

The characterizations are strong with Higginbotham creating stories around either lesser-known figures or those who aren't generally given their own voices. Although the entire Despenser family has a poor reputation, Higginbotham cultivates a rounded view of Hugh, crushing stereotypes and even making him likable instead of just a man from a villainous family. In fact, Hugh is even witty and romantic!

"*Hugh and Bess*" has the flaw of feeling pointless at times, as though nothing will happen. This is counteracted, however, by the delicious storytelling, characters, and mere life in the plot. Higginbotham sculpts vivid nuances which thrill with escapism.

Although some reviews stated an issue with character development; I had no problems with this finding the arcs to be suitable. Bess, in particular, steadily matured and grew making her realistic. There were some small annoyances though such as Queen Isabella being called a "She-Wolf" when she wasn't dubbed this

until after her death, characters “shrugging” on almost EVERY page, and long chapters which are more like sections.

A small note, but Higginbotham’s addition of sarcasm and humor really supplements the story. It’s a bit of the author coming through in her work and it is achieved perfectly!

The conclusion of “Hugh and Bess” felt somewhat rushed and unrelated to the story but nonetheless is passionate and memorable. An “Author’s Note” answers some reader questions regarding historical accuracy although the absence of a genealogical table is noted and could have been helpful.

“Hugh and Bess” is a lighter read (it only took me two days) but not because it is fluffy or airy on the history but because the story is very engrossing and captivating. I would say I enjoyed this more than “The Traitor’s Wife”. “Hugh and Bess” is recommended for historical fiction fans, especially during the reign of Edward III.

Tara Chevrestt says

Hugh is the son and grandson both of traitors who have been executed. Bess is much dismayed at being told that she is to marry him and at the mere age of thirteen. Thankfully, he must wait one year to bed her. But when that year is up...

This is not an exciting, pulse pouding tale. There is no great mystery. Nor is there scandal to make one gasp in shock or dismay. Rather, it is a love story. It is about marriage and how if nurtured properly and with an open mind, a seed can become a flower. It is up to Hugh and Bess to make a flower grow out of the seed of their arranged marriage. Or will their antics cause a weed to grow instead? And there are antics aplenty what with Bess being a sassy tho naive young girl and Hugh a seasoned soldier who is bound to take "no" for an answer for only so long. Tensions build and arguments ensue.

In the end, it may not be up to Hugh and Bess. Fate may play a big role in determining the outcome of their marriage with Hugh fighting the king's wars against Scotland, participating in a siege in Calais, and then there is the pestilence..

This is a sequel to The Traitor's Wife, but thanks to a very informative prologue, one does not necessarily need to read The Traitor's Wife to understand and enjoy this one. I personally liked this one more. I enjoyed both Hugh's and Bess's characters and I also liked the issues brought up within the story: A virgin's fear of sex, arranged marriage, adultery, and forgiveness.

I actually sat and read this in one evening and it is a good 271 pages of pure story. I was that entertained. 5 stars.

Iset says

Hugh and Bess, sequel to *The Traitor's Wife*, felt to me more like an extra treat for readers who loved the

Despensers in the latter novel and want to know what happened to them next, rather than a standalone novel in its own right, let me just say that straight off the bat. It's a good book with a sweet story at its heart, but those expecting the same type of novel as *The Traitor's Wife* won't get it. *Hugh and Bess* is not the sweeping epic that *The Traitor's Wife* is and is instead a cosy character tale of personal relationships. Whether or not you like that flavour of story is really up to your individual tastes as a reader.

I'm not sure whether the historical context contributes anything to this - after the rollercoaster of a ride through the history of Edward II's reign in *The Traitor's Wife* things are a little bit quieter for the Despenser family in the aftermath - or whether this focus on personal relationships in the novel is more the active choice of Higginbotham as an author. And because of the way the novel ends, there is a different feel to *Hugh and Bess*. The characters feel swept up in the tide of history, taking them where it will, rather than the history in *The Traitor's Wife* which felt shaped and created by conflicting and competing human agency.

Still, it's impossible to deny that I liked this book. There are some pretty big gaps in the historical record that Higginbotham has to tackle here, and it feels like she does so sensitively and plausibly. *Hugh and Bess* is marked by the same excellent story-weaving, character-building, and nuanced attention to the details and the setting as ever before, and the human voices that emerge are sympathetic, identifiable, and entertaining.

8 out of 10

Gaile says

An easy and dreamy read, written against the background of the reign of Edward III.

Young Elizabeth De Montacute is first married while still a child. The groom being old, the marriage was never consummated and on his death Bess returned to her home only to find herself betrothed to another, Hugh Le Despenser, whom father and grandfather had been executed for treason. Bess is defiant, Hugh reluctant being in love with another. The marriage contract is hammered out with all the vigilance of a mortgage or bank loan today. Bess is only twelve. Today she would be considered an underage minor.

Although Bess and Hugh never had children, through the intervening years we see how they fall in love and come to be happy together. Then the Black Death arrives in England. After Hugh's death, Bess is allowed little time to grieve, The King gives her to understand she must choose a groom or he will. The novel ends with her agreeing to marry again.

There is an afterword stating she had four children from her third husband but did not live long enough to see them grow up.

Life was harsh then. Death never far away. Noble women were often left to manage lands and households while their husbands and sons old enough were off to serve the King. Many of these women were below the age of eighteen.

I enjoyed this book for its historical background but wish it had been longer.

Nattie says

This was a good quick read. Only a drag or two here and there. The same cannot be said about Susan's *The Traitor's Wife*, I read that one a couple days before this and I still have an ache in my head.

As good as this book is, it got on my nerves something awful. Bess is still 12 when set to marry Hugh, and

13 when they wed. Her father asks Hugh not to "take" his little Bess until she is 14. No matter how many times I come across such doings in historical fiction, my lip still curls. Children, usually girls, being married off to fully grown men will never set well I suppose. There are a couple boys about 11 or 13 in this book who wed, but they at least wed girls their own age and it seems that boys are quite expected to wait until they are "ready" to roll in the marriage bed, while girls are expected to start up as soon as their "monthly courses" start; even if they are 12. Sigh.

Just about everybody is obsessed with young girls' breasts and rumps. The author makes sure to tell you about the nice round rump and set on Joan of Kent when she is practically a tween. There is too much talk of maidenheads and putting babies in bellies for my taste.

The sexism is another downer, as with most historical fiction I have read, but this book is one that nearly takes the cake and the cupcakes too. Even the females are mostly sexist against their own gender.

In one part, Bess sends Hugh away when their one year of waiting is up. She is not ready to be "taken" and is scared. Keep in mind that Bess is just past 13, not that you could forget because the author harps on it. Later, Bess says that she had no right to turn Hugh away, and that he has every right to "take" her whenever he wants, as does every husband. Legally, this was true, and even in some states in America I think that law is still on the books. It really bothered me deeply that Bess was written as saying that.

Still an entertaining story, but I think I might need a break from royal fiction after this.

Lisa says

Not to be over dramatic, but this book came at the PERFECT time in my life. I literally JUST finished "Three Day Road" by Joseph Boyden, and while not being a BAD book, it was not an overly HAPPY one. And from the first sentence of Hugh and Bess I knew that it was going to be a delightful read. Which it totally WAS. I LOVED IT.

I really do not know much about Edward II, but interestingly enough I DID know about the standoff at Calais so parts of the book were very cool for that reason. What I LOVED about the novel is that each of the characters had a very distinctive VOICE. And Bess's voice is so endearing, I liked her immediately. She is only 13 when we meet her, and she is a widow (thaaaaat's right.. I said WIDOW) and her parents have figured she had been widowing around long enough and it was high time for her to be married off.. again. Bess is not impressed, to say the least, especially when she finds out that her dear friend Joan is marrying her brother Will who is around their age, and Bess has to marry this old guy who is a whole 32 years old for heaven's sake!

Eventhough this novel is set in the 14th century Bess's character is, in many ways, very typical of a any thirteen year old girl. For example how she is secretly annoyed at the fact the Joan has developed breasts long before she has.

"So why didn't you tell me? Don't you want to marry Will?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I have my reasons."

This had become Joan's favourite saying since she had started her monthly courses and developed those breasts of hers.

She is feisty, and outspoken, but also self conscious. All completely endearing qualities. Hugh, although relatively handsome, has a dark family history which horrifies Bess. But since she has no choice in the matter agrees to marry him.

Flashbacks to Hugh's past help us to understand his character and how it is vastly different to that of his distasteful and cruel father and Grandfather. He is a respectable and lovely man who is always trying to "do the right thing". We also learn of Emma, Hugh's first real love whom he will never be permitted to marry. A very respectable woman in her own right, who knows the rules of the court well enough to know she will never be married to Hugh, the only man she has ever really loved.

Throughout the story we are gently taken along as Hugh and Bess's feelings for one another grow, and we learn that their love is the stuff of fairy tales. That, which is to say, is not without its nightmares.

"Hugh and Bess" is a love story, and it is very well written and lovely to read. Personally, I could not put it down and read it in two days. And I will be ordering Higginbotham's other book "The Traitor's Wife" and then "The Stolen Crown" when it comes out. If this book is any indication of the story telling ability of the author than I know I will LOVE her other books as well. Historical fiction can be tricky. You need to have enough HISTORY to frame the story in it's place in time, but not TOO much and not TOO DRY to make it like a text book. Higginbotham's historical fiction blends the "historical" and the "fiction" perfectly. In fact, in my opinion, the mark of a great historical fiction novel is that you want to go on after you finish it and devour anything having to do with the family or historical persons portrayed in the book. Higginbotham's novel made me want to do that very thing. Also, the mark of ANY good book is at the very very end, when you finally close its cover , you actually sigh audibly as in "that was SUCH a great book."

Carolyn says

It was ok I guess. The ages of the characters didn't bother me, though I have read in the reviews that it did some. It wasn't really all that much about Hugh and Bess, more about what was going on at the time. The cover says "A novel following in the footsteps of Jean Plaidy..." and this is very true. Jean Plaidy's books were big on history, but she was not a good storyteller. (Among the most boring historical fiction I have ever read btw) SH is not nearly so bad, but the book did not pull me in as I would have liked. (view spoiler)

Sara says

After reading and loving The Traitor's Wife, I eagerly anticipated Higginbotham's sequel of sorts, Hugh and Bess. When it finally did arrive, I became so wrapped up in the soapy romantic drama that I dropped everything and finished it in a day. The story centers on a young Elizabeth de Montacute or Bess, the daughter of favored Earl and the much older, Hugh le Despenser, a wealthy (yet disgraced) Lord. Hugh's grandfather and father were executed as traitors, and Hugh's father was accused of adultery and sodomy with the former King. Hugh himself was imprisoned missing a near execution himself, but is now working hard to restore his family's honor. Bess is understandably horrified at marriage into a family with such a reputation, and Hugh is honored by the match in theory, but he is in love with another woman. Can they find happiness in a marriage that neither sought and both are entering with reluctance?

At the heart of Hugh and Bess is a love story. Higginbotham manages to give Hugh and Bess an electric chemistry that compels throughout the historical drama. What makes the plot successful is Higginbotham's tendency to ground the story in known facts then realistically elaborate the humanistic elements. For example, Bess begins the story at 13, and she reads and feels—13. This is a refreshing change from the tiny

calculating power hungry seven-year-old cliché that dominates the historical fiction genre. Those who have read The Traitor's Wife will be pleased as we get a few more glimpses of favorite characters. And this story takes care to fill in gaps in time, and show that story from different perspectives. You'll want to read the Traitor's Wife if you haven't not because it is necessary for Hugh and Bess, but because it's a great novel.

That said; the last few chapters seem to drag. We've moved on from a lot of the action, and not to spoil and plot lines, but the climatic challenges that face the couple, and the ensuing chapters read like and after thought. It was almost as if Higginbotham had fallen in love with her characters and was unwilling to let go. Also, having read The Traitor's Wife, and other historical works of the time, I still found it hard to place some of the minor characters. It doesn't help that the English nobility of the time only used a couple of family names repeatedly, ie, Elizabeth, Hugh, Edward, Isabella, Joan, William, etc... A little more guidance and more thorough introductions would have been helpful.

However by focusing on the romance, Higginbotham delivers a relatable historical fiction piece that transcends generations. If you (like me) just can't get enough of these English court novels, I'm certain you'll love Hugh and Bess.

Alaine says

This book does have a link to Susan Higginbotham's previous release The Traitor's Wife but it is not necessary to read it first. I've got both books but decided to read Hugh and Bess first, primarily because it is smaller and I don't have a lot of time on my hands at the moment. It was very easy to slip into the 1300's and the difficulties of life during that time.

Hugh Le Despenser's father and grandfather were executed when Hugh was a young man. He spent months in prison but eventually was released and had to deal with life coming from a disgraced family. Hugh works hard to build up the trust of the King and ultimately becomes one of his most trusted knights. Hugh falls in love with a low born family friend and because of this is in no hurry to find a wife.

Bess de Montacute was 14 years old when her father told her that she was to be married to the son and grandson of disgraced traitors who was twice her age. Honestly, I found Bess to behave like a spoilt brat early in the book and she did annoy me at times. But as Bess warmed to Hugh I warmed to her as a character. By the end of the book she was a wonderful caring person who was changed by her marriage and the relationship she had with her husband and her best friend Emma and the way in which her life was touched by the black plague.

I really enjoyed this book and highly recommend it to readers of historical fiction. This is a book that should definitely be on your TBR list!

Steven Peterson says

I enjoy historical fiction, with the emphasis more on the history than the fiction. In this tale written by Susan Higginbotham, the emphasis is more on the story of an historical couple than the history itself. But it works nicely!

One of the key protagonists in this novel is Hugh le Despenser. Seldom could anyone have been so unlucky to have acquired a name! His father and grandfather had also had that name, and they died being tortured and disgraced because of their hold over the rather weak Edward II (If you watched the movie "Braveheart," he was the rather wimpy son of Edward Longshanks--played by Patrick McGoohan). The youngest Hugh ended up being held captive for some years before finally being released. He had some lands and he joined the king's army for war against France. His happiness was provided by a female friend (a fictional creation that works pretty well), Emma. They fell in love--but both understood that a better marriage would be arranged for Hugh.

This is also the story of Bess de Montacute. She was the one who was selected to become Hugh's wife. Much of the story revolves around their developing relationship, the challenges that they face, the sometimes anger with one another, and the eventual flowering of a deep relationship. Poignant, too, is the role that Emma plays in their lives.

Thus, if you want a deep piece of historical fiction with the emphasis on history, this might not work. If you are interested in a character study of two people placed within an historical context, then this might well enchant. The author does a nice job of developing believable characters; her writing style is felicitous.

Misfit says

Hugh and Bess are Hugh le Despenser, son of the infamous traitor "Hugh the Younger" and Bess, daughter of William de Montacute Earl of Salisbury. After Hugh's father is executed for treason (drawn and quartered) he is imprisoned for several years, and even when released he is still tainted with the "sins" of his father. Hugh must eventually marry, although the very young Bess is none too thrilled with her parent's choice of an older groom and a son of a traitor to boot.

The rest of the book details the relationship between the two, from a frosty beginning to one that culminates in a strong and loving marriage. I really enjoyed the relationship between the two, especially in the latter half of the book as Bess matures. I liked the banter between the two (ROFL when they went to court and she got a bit too tipsy), as well as getting glimpses of Joan of Kent and that old she-wolf Isabella. I also liked the way the author writes the dialogue, she doesn't throw in all those let's-try-and-make-this-sound-authentic words like "woe", "tis" and "certes", she just keeps it short and to the point. A refreshing change from some other books that I have recently sent flying.

While I did find the first half a bit slow paced (it might have been me, we did have just a tad bit of a record setting heat wave here), I was turning the pages at the very end to find out what happened next. I just wish it could have been longer with the secondary characters fleshed out more, but that's just me, I like big fat books. I would definitely recommend you read The Traitor's Wife first so that you have background knowledge of the period and Hugh's father and the relationship with Edward II. I am very much looking forward to Higginbotham's next book set during The Wars of the Roses, tentatively called The Stolen Crown.
