



Touch Not the Cat

Mary Stewart

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Bryony Ashley knows that Ashley Court, the grand estate, is both hell and paradise -- once elegant and beautiful, yet shrouded in shadow. After the tragic death of her father, Bryony returns from abroad to find that his estate is to become the responsibility of her cousin Emory. Her family's estate with its load of debt is no longer her worry. Still, her father's final, dire warning about a terrible family curse haunts her days and her dreams. And there is something odd about her father's sudden death...

Bryony has inherited the Ashley 'Sight' and so has one of the Ashleys. Since childhood the two have communicated through thought patterns, though Bryony has no idea of his identity. Devastated, she believes, that the mysterious stranger is her destiny... the lover-to-be who waits for her now at Ashley Court. Now she is determined to find him. But passion is not all that will greet Bryony upon her return -- for the crumbling walls of the old mansion guard dark secrets, tragic memories... and inescapable peril.

Touch Not the Cat Details

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Author : Mary Stewart

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From Reader Review Touch Not the Cat for online ebook

Candi says

"It's barely a year since the things happened that I am writing about, but I find that I am already thinking of my father as if he were long gone, part of the past. As he is now; but on that warm April night in Madeira when my love told me to go and see him, Daddy was alive, just."

In 2016, I added Mary Stewart to my list of treasured authors. This was done with much enthusiasm following a several-month love affair with her Merlin and King Arthur series. I gushed about those books and was determined to eventually read everything MS had ever written. **Touch Not the Cat** was one of those books on my list, and the opportunity arose to read this with my reading buddies Debbie and Julie. It's always so much fun to read with like-minded friends and this book was highly entertaining!

Starting out, I knew there was a telepathic component to this gothic suspense novel, so I was a tad bit skeptical what with paranormal elements not exactly being 'my thing' and all. Needless to say, I shouldn't have worried as Mary Stewart manages to work this into the plot in a very clever way. Our heroine Bryony Ashley communicates with her mysterious 'lover' throughout, while at the same time trying to interpret the cryptic message her father left for her on his death bed. She returns to her home, Ashley Court, which will now be handed down to her male cousins. I adored reading about the old house, the apple orchard, and the little gardener's cottage. Stewart paints such a vivid picture of the scenery and makes a dreamy-eyed reader feel like she is right there, transported to another time and place. The estate has a very intriguing history. We learn bits of this through Bryony's conversations with others as well as from short diary-like entries penned by a nameless Ashley ancestor at the end of each chapter. Short and relevant quotes from **Romeo and Juliet** are also included at the start of each chapter, delighting any Shakespeare fans.

Touch Not the Cat is a slow-building and quiet sort of mystery in the beginning. Pieces are uncovered at a gradual pace and it's not full of 'edge of your seat' action for quite some time. However, there's an underlying feeling of suspense throughout as the reader wonders about the identity of Bryony's secret 'lover' and worries about her safety given the warning of danger she received upon her father's death. There's a complicated maze on the property, complete with a pavilion in the center with its own curious and provocative history! The pace increases towards the end of the novel, secrets are revealed, and there is a very tense scene that left the adventure-craving reader in me quite satisfied! A delightful blend of suspense and romance, **Touch Not the Cat** has several twists and turns that kept me completely engaged. Mary Stewart is a wonderful storyteller, and this one did not disappoint. 4.5 stars

Hannah says

A re-read from several decades ago, the suspense novels of Mary Stewart never fail to please. In this offering, penned during the *groovy* 1970's, Stewart was no doubt making *Touch Not the Cat* more relevant for the time period by adding the gift of telepathy to her heroine Bryony Ashley, and Bryony's mysterious telepathic lover.

Who is this mind-melding hero? Is it one of her cousins: Emory, James or Francis Ashley? Admittedly, for most American readers, this is a pretty icky coupling, but apparently Brits are/were ok with it, so I tried my darnest to get over the revulsion by placing myself in any perilous situation where romantic attraction to my own obnoxious cousin Scott would ever cause my heart to palpitate with love....uh, nope, can't do it...

But anyway, if you can get past this concept, the plot is pretty good, and has all the suspense you've come to expect if you're a Mary Stewart fan. In fact, *Touch Not the Cat* really kept me mystified as to the identity of the telepathic lover right up until the reveal...and even then, Stewart didn't make it any easier for the reader to breathe a sigh of relief and mutter, "so *that's* who it was!".

Not quite as strong IMO as some of her earlier suspense books, *Touch Not the Cat* is still a fun read, and well worth the time. I shouldn't have waited 30 years for a re-read :)

Carol ?? says

3.5★

I've finished & pondering my review.

This tale of Bryony & her cousins was not a comfortable read for me.

This isn't one of my favourites. Part of it might be my modern ideas about property. Maybe in the 1970's Ashley Court would have been a giant white elephant, but Bryony's willingness to walk away from valuable possessions is baffling to me.

Part of it is my lack of interest in the paranormal. I know there are things that can't be explained - I have had brief snatches of conversation turn up where it feels like I have had them before. It feels like a book that has had too many pages turned. So while not a total sceptic, neither am I a blind believer & so a lot of this book was too woo-woo for me.

The cousinly relationships don't usually worry me too much in 20th century books (another place, another time) but this time it did because Bryony had been brought up with them so much. (view spoiler) In particular any time James entered the story it felt weird & uncomfortable.

In spite of this the beginning hooked me in, but a lot of the middle story dragged. I was really tempted to start skimming.

Maybe 3.5★? I doubt I'll be rereading this one, but I may tidy this review up when I return from holiday.

Khanh, first of her name, mother of bunnies says

We often don't realize the comparative idiocy of youth until we're older. Awhile ago, we had a new employee in my company. Newly graduated from college, she's only 22. The rest of us, being old, wise, ancient creatures of mid-20 to 30-somethings, looked upon her with contempt.

"She's a baby!" we howled. "I was so stupid when I just graduated from college and I thought I knew everything!" To be sure, 10 years from now, we will reflect and look back at our relative stupidity now and say "I was so stupid when I was ___ and I didn't even realize it!"

So youth. Youth and the idiocy with which it brings is the fault of this book. Yet I could not stop reading it.

The main character, frankly speaking, is a moron. She's 22, and it's not just her age that's to blame for the fact that she's bloody insane.

This is a girl who has spent her entire life. Her entire fucking life talking to an imaginary "lover." One whose identity she doesn't know, one who might not even exist. One who is, I shit you not, one of her three cousins.

Ok. Let's just overlook the incest for a moment. She comes from a long line of blue-blooded Anglo ancestors whose interbreeding probably make Jamie and Cersei and the state of Alabama (and most of Mississippi) look downright normal. It's also the 70s. I wasn't even born then, so what do I know? Maybe falling in love with ones' cousin was totally the rage then. So let's just pretend we can overlook the whole cousin thing.

No. My biggest issue was that she's been talking telepathically with an imaginary friend whom she calls "Lover" (again. Cousin. Ick) for her entire life.

"You can't, out of the blue, ask a second cousin who has given no hint of it: 'Are you the Ashley who talks to me privately?'"

And she never once considers that this is abnormal.

Again, this is the 70s. Maybe back then that was totally ok, too. Maybe back then you weren't possibly diagnosed with schizophrenia and committed to a comfy padded cell and a lifetime of colorful pills if you had dreamt of an imaginary friend long past childhood.

So yes. Being the modern woman that I am. Being the wise old woman that I am, I think she's a bloody fucking moron. Allow me to also mention the fact that this idiot spends the entire book deliberating which of the cousins this lover could be, and then ignores the fact that:

1. He could have killed her daddy

"[He] had driven the hit-and-run car that had knocked Daddy down. [He] had killed my father."

2. He could be *gasp* a complete figment of her imagination

"But what are you suggesting?" I demanded. "That it could be some fantasy thing I made up as a child, and now can't get rid of? I mean, I know that children do invent imaginary friends, but for heaven's sake, they grow out of that, and it isn't that, or anything like it! It's a real relationship, Vicar, I promise you!"

No. I didn't accidentally give this book a 4. I liked it a lot. I don't know what to say. It's one of those devastating train wrecks from which you can't tear your eyes. It is an old-school, old-fashioned romance. Gothic. Wildly atmospheric. Keeps you guessing until the end.

Mary Stewart writes in the vein of Daphne du Maurier. You have to make excuses for the time and the place. You have to forgive it the faults of its characters because they're not out of place for the day. The love interests in her books are not sensitive types, they are the bad boy sweep-you-off-your-feet type. They are the maddeningly macho types who whisper possessive words to you and somehow make you believe it type.

Yeah. I liked it. Despite the heroine's idiocy. Despite her youth. Despite itself.

Warning, there is the use (not from the main character) of the n---r word.

Tadiana ☆Night Owl? says

3.5 stars. Like most Mary Stewart mystery/romances, this book is a little dated: usually it's the massive smoking, nylon nightgowns and alpha heroes in MS novels; this time it's the ESP. Also, my paperback's 1970's cover didn't help:

Still, I thought it was an enjoyable read. Mary Stewart really knows how to evoke the scenery, whether it's exotic locations or the English countryside. The telepathic link that the heroine, Bryony, shares with an unknown relative started out as a little bit of an eye-roller for me, but in that inimitable Mary Stewart style she manages to weave it inextricably into the plotline.

The general direction from which the danger is coming is fairly apparent pretty early in the book, but just how dangerous is it to Bryony? and who all is involved in the plotting? A possible murder (or was it an accident?) and some attempted murders add spice to the plot. And who doesn't like Roman mosaics? And cats? And cat mosaics?

Every chapter begins with an appropriate quote from *Romeo and Juliet* (although usually I have to go back when I've finished reading the chapter to figure out just why MS used that particular quote) and ends with a vignette from the life of one of Bryony's ancestors, for reasons that become apparent as you get near to the end of the book. There are a few surprising (and maybe a few not-so-surprising) plot twists along the way. I thought Bryony's mysterious telepathic "lover" could have manned up and disclosed himself to Bryony much earlier in the story (except for the fact that keeping him secret prolongs some of the mystery for the reader) but the disclosure was very satisfying to me when it finally came.

Touch Not the Cat is still not my favorite Mary Stewart novel - that would be *Nine Coaches Waiting* - but I liked it better this time than I did when I first read it, maybe 25 years ago. And for my money, nobody does romantic suspense novels quite like Mary Stewart. She's just in a class by herself.

Sheila says

Crossposted to Gothic Book Reviews. 2 stars--it was okay.

First, a warning: a character in this book uses the n-word, which shocked me in a Mary Stewart novel.

I liked the telepathy elements of this book, and the setting (a crumbling manor house) is always a favorite. However, not a lot happened here. Mostly the heroine drifts from conversation to conversation and things happen around her--she's not very proactive. The ending is fast, and I'm not sure justice was done.

Not her best, in my opinion.

Nikki says

A reread for me, since I felt the need for something familiar during the readathon. It was one of the first Mary Stewart books I read, and it's one of the more openly fantastical ones. It's got the usual set up of the plucky young heroine, a landscape that's important to her or exotic or otherwise worth describing lovingly, and the man she eventually marries. The fantastical part is the telepathy between them, the bond; Stewart uses it well, creating interesting dilemmas and confrontations.

The story of the twins is a little disappointing, because so obvious; we don't see enough of James' struggle against his twin to see him as any kind of victim in the situation, and his reaction to Rob and Bryony's marriage seals that. It gets a little cartoon villain-ish.

Rob and Bryony's relationship is sweet; I suppose that's a spoiler, but it'd be hard to review this without mentioning that James is not Bryony's 'secret friend'. I really didn't need all the stuff about how Rob is really an Ashley; it makes the plot that much more convoluted, but ends up reinforcing that whole snobbery about the lady of the family not marrying the kitchen boy.

Originally posted here.

Dawn says

++Spoilers++

WTF did I just read? Ever have one of those momments? I never have until now.

This is not your typical romance by far. The writing is so very different than what I'm use to that it took me a while to get into it.

The author spends far too much time describing in very flowery ways, the scenery, in nauseating detail in fact. I usually love when the author is so descriptive, but here it just angered me, and I ended up skimming through those parts. Perhaps I wouldn't have minded it so much if she spent the same amount of dedication to the acutal love story. It was odd to me that the author TOLD most of the action and SHOWED only the scenery. It was awkward and unbalanced.

This story takes place in the 1970's and has bits of a story that occurred in the 1800's as well. So IMHO I consider this a HR.

Had I known that the hero was such a mystery and not to be revealed until about 80%, and that it was a clean read, I most likely would have put this donwn as a DNF, AND since no one on friggin GR or Amazon gave the "lover" away in their reviews, I just had to keep reading to find out who it was.

IT'S ROB!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

There. Save youreself the grief. I kinda suspected it anyway, but thought for awhile it was Nick, then James.

Well now that's done let me try to sort this mess out for you.

I gave 3 stars because I did like it in general. It WAS different, but just plain odd.

It's 1st person POV, which I don't usually care for unless the author switches it to show multiple POV's like

AR does, but here we only get inside the heroine's head and that of Nick Ashley the rakish ancestor from the 1800's.

Right, so the heroine, hmm. not quite sure I liked her, not quite sure I hated her. I did hate that she was too forgiving, and a bit spineless. I don't understand how she just let her cousins walk all over her, but I suppose she's just a better person than I.

The whole telepathy thing with her mysterious lover confused me as well. AT first I thought the "lover" was the rakish Nick who is dead, thank God it wasn't. To be honest The idea was a little hokey, and I still don't get why Rob never just out and out told her who he was. Why did he hide it? This is the one part that lacked the most logic.

Anyway, when they do finally come together in real life, I'm thinking FINALLY now they can "get busy" but NOPE! Nothing! All this time suffering through this read and nothing!

I also didn't care for the rushed ending where in the last chapter Francis shows up and all is neatly explained away. What a jip!

I know this review sounds like a disheveled mess, but maybe that's due to the fact the book seemed that way as well. It is just very difficult to explain.

We have the heroine, who's father died in an accident, but it could have been a murder. We have cousins who are greedy and need fast cash and want the heroine's trust. We have glimpses into the past of an ancestor of the heroine and a lot of lines from Shakespeare and Romeo and Juliet references.

Perhaps it's because I am not a very intelligent person that I did not enjoy this as much as others. IDK. I mean I DID like it in some ways, but I think it mostly frustrated me because it wasn't what I was expecting.

Enough said. This type of read is just not my thing.

Safety- Nothing unsafe. Except if you get weirded out by the thought of cousins being attracted to each other.

Pamela Shropshire says

I read a whole bunch of gothic romances back when I was in high school, but after I discovered historical romance, I never looked back. Now, having become disenchanted with most of what is published as "historical" romance these days, I've been expanding to other genres, including reexamining genres I enjoyed in the past. Mary Stewart and Victoria Holt were pretty much the queen of gothics back in the day and when a number of MS's books were released on Kindle at \$1.99, I bought several. *Touch Not the Cat* is the one I chose to read first and it didn't disappoint.

The main plot centers on a young woman, named Bryony (never heard that name before) who is a member of the old, but now nearly impoverished, Ashley family. She grew up on an ancient yet dilapidated estate. She has a paranormal gift: she can communicate telepathically with a person that she calls "Lover" and "Ashley" and whom she assumes to be one of her cousins that she grew up with. She describes this as an intimate relationship and expects that once they are made known to each other, they will have a physical relationship as well.

Her father has just died in Germany; she goes there, picks up his ashes and returns them to Ashley Court. But mysterious things begin occurring and she learns that two of her cousins have been up to some shady stuff, including the cousin that she thought she was able to communicate with. So she's confused and anxious and a little bit frightened, especially when she finds evidence that one of her cousins may have actually killed her father - maybe by accident or maybe not.

This storyline is layered with events of the 16th century along with allusions and references to Romeo and Juliet. It is this complexity of plot, along with the lush English garden setting that actually makes the book still worth reading - that and the discovery of an ancient Roman mosaic of a leopard (hence the family crest/motto and the title of the book).

3.5 stars.

Misfit says

Bryony Ashley's father is critically injured by a hit and run driver, and he's only able to live long enough to leave a cryptic warning that she's in danger, the rest of his words seem to make no sense at all. Or do they? Devastated, she returns to her cottage near Ashley Court, the family's ancient estate in England, which cannot be sold or broken up without the approval of all members of the Ashley family. As she tries to sort the puzzle left by her father, Bryony also has a secret of her own to resolve - longer than she can remember she's had a telepathic connection with an unknown "lover" who she believes will reveal himself in the flesh to her when the time is right, and she's always felt it was her cousin James. Or is it James' younger brother Francis? I promise, you will never guess.

Ashley soon finds things amiss at the Court. Small, but valuable items are missing. A mysterious stranger spotted shuffling through church records, and a book of ancient records turns up missing. Who is the Cat her fathered referred to in his last words - the family emblem of the Scottish Wildcat and their motto Touch not the cat? Or is Cat for Cathy, the Underhill's daughter? How is it that the long neglected garden maze is the same design as the family emblem? Is there a secret tied into the pavilion at the center of the maze, and the Ashley ancestor who built it for his lovers? What secret does the book found in the old library with the same family emblem hold?

Need the answers? Read it for yourself. Although this one started off a bit slow and it took me forever to see where Stewart was taking the story, once she gets all the loose ends wrapped up they all came together in a spectacular nail-biting finish in the midst of a whopper of a storm with deadly consequences. There are plentiful twists, turns and surprises that will keep you guessing and turning the pages. A definite must for Stewart fans.

Alyson says

I just adore this book. I love the way it unwinds, I love the characters, I love the peril—which seems so real, and ties into the past so well—and the story-within-the-story at the end of each chapter. Mary Stewart doesn't always allude to another story to tell the current one, but this is one of the books in which she does that, in which the tale of Romeo and Juliet—already familiar to the reader—serves as framework and comparison and contrast to what is taking place on the page. The heroine is likeable and believable, and it all comes together perfectly with a swoonworthy hero. So, so very worth the read. This was, if I'm counting correctly,

my fourth time through the book, and still I couldn't put it down.

Debbie Zapata says

I've recently re-discovered Mary Stewart and even though I read this book many years ago, more than enough time has passed for me to feel it was a brand new read. The only Mary Stewart title I have read often in the last 30 years or so was *Airs Above the Ground* (there are horses in it, it HAD to get read over and over) but I did not know if *Touch Not The Cat* would be as fast-paced as *Airs*. I tried not to expect anything, tried to read it with the fresh eyes that my long absence gave it.

I liked the story, the setting, and the gentle sort of mystery. It is more of a mental mystery throughout most of the book, rather than one with a lot of action. Bryony spends plenty of time thinking about what is happening around her, discussing with everyone, and wondering just who is the mysterious 'fantasy lover' she has had a telepathic connection to practically her entire life.

There are hints throughout the book to guide her (and the reader) but I only guessed one thing correctly, and even after that I changed my mind later, just like I was supposed to do. As in *Airs Above The Ground*, I appreciate Stewart's craftsmanship, her nice way with phrases....she describes an antiques dealer that Bryony talks with as "impulsive as a two-toed sloth"....that tickled me.

I did not really like Bryony herself though, I wanted her to DO something, but she muddled through and everything came out fine in the end. Plus I learned the reason for the beautiful illustration on the cover of the edition I was reading.

Enchantress debbicat ? says

4.5 Stars. I loved it! It's a great mystery with twins, an old family estate, a pretty large inheritance, paranormal elements, possible murder, a side mystery about two lovers, a moat, the coast, a strong female lead, a maze, and the word "cat" in the title. Works well for me! I am beginning to get to reading or re-reads of all of Mary Stewart's books as I am having a fairly easy time collecting them (good hard backs) at used bookstores and thrift stores. This is one of my favorites! So much I liked about it. An amazing writer of gothic mystery and suspense.

I enjoyed this with 2 buddies, Candi and Julie, in the Reading For Pleasure Book Club. Highly recommended! I will likely read this again in a few years. Sheer escapism.

Lori says

Touch Not The Cat is a unique offering from author Mary Stewart and it did not disappoint! I loved the heroine, the descriptions of the ancestral home of the Ashleys, and the way Stewart wove a bit of history and Shakespeare throughout. I was swept along as the mystery and the romance unfolded and I was absolutely intrigued by this story. But once again, it's the walk down memory lane that stirred all sorts of nostalgic emotions for me and made me hesitate to put it down for even a moment.

I was still quite young in 1976 but I was old enough to take in the covers of magazines and read lots of

articles about topics that fascinated Americans at that time. I mention the date because I want to draw attention to the year this book was published so that I can put this story in historical perspective. How well I remember reading those think pieces of the day that explored telepathy, the Loch Ness Monster, UFO's, and even Big Foot sightings. Not surprisingly, most of those claims turned out to be hoaxes. However, telepathy had some interesting merit and to this day, still piques my curiosity. At any rate, this captivating tale by Mary Stewart has brought back some fond memories of lazy summer afternoons my sister and I spent trying to read each other's thoughts. What can I say - except that in the absence of video games and cable television - we entertained ourselves with an inventiveness not often found in young kids today.

Lori, circa 1976, would have loved this book had she only discovered this wonderful author at the library. Sigh. At least Lori, circa 2017, has not only discovered Mary Stewart but is often found happily curled up with one of her books. :D

Angelica Bentley says

This is one of those books that I enjoy re-reading from time to time, in fact I have just bought it again in hard cover as my old paperback was in pieces.

In this era of portable phones and ever-present electronic communication, the concept of “thought transference” may sound tame and obsolete, but if one is prepared to be transported back to a simpler time (and, let's face it, for most of us fiction represents escapism), entering this novel's atmosphere will plunge the reader into a world at once disconcerting and curiously comforting.

The “gift” of the Ashleys provides an eerie recurring theme which runs through the story like a golden thread, and there is plenty of intrigue, dark deeds and greed-fuelled violence, however, the dominating element is romance. In this novel, Mary Stewart gives us an unashamedly romantic love story, in fact more than one, as there is a parallel subplot running alongside the main one. In fact, we are immediately made aware of the author's intent as the literary quotes that introduce each chapter are all taken from that quintessential celebration of love, “Romeo and Juliet”. Several clichés are used to define some of the characters but the main players are richly nuanced and, as usual, we are never sure of who's who until the very end. The mystery here revolves around the last words of a dying man which seem to make no sense but, in time, provide the solution to many old secrets and also point the way forward for the heroine.

Lady Stewart really is a powerful narrator and many of the scenes, especially those taking place at night, stay with me as if I had watched a film, instead of reading a book. It's difficult to explain why but this story always leaves me with a warm glow.

Jane Jago says

How can you not love a book that mixes the mundane with the paranormal, the present with the past, and a love story with a mystery. And all with effortless ease...

Sara says

There is a reason why I have always loved Mary Stewart. She can grab me and keep me and not release me

until the last word is down on the last page. I love her mix of mystery and romance, and having read this so long ago that I had zero memory of it, it was like a new mystery and a new romance...What Joy!

I know others will always argue with me that she isn't a "serious" writer, but I don't care. All of life doesn't have to be serious or studious, some of it should be fun and enthralling and naughty. Reading this took me right back to my youth in the most pleasant of ways.

Bionic Jean says

“Bryony. Tell Bryony. Tell her. Howard. James. Would have told. The paper, it’s in William’s brook. In the library. Emerson, the keys. The cat, it’s the cat on the pavement. The map. The letter. In the brook ... Tell Bryony. My little Bryony be careful. Danger ... Perhaps the boy knows. Tell the boy. Trust. Depend. Do what’s right. Blessing.”

An incomprehensible cryptic message. Words written down verbatim from the ramblings of a dying man. But was he really a victim of an accident ... or a victim of murder?

This is the hook. And as romantic suspense fiction goes Mary Stewart’s 1976 novel **Touch Not the Cat** is a classic of the genre. It is one of her best-known works: escapist, melodramatic and beautifully descriptive. In common with many of Mary Stewart’s novels, the story has a supernatural element; in this case there are many mysterious gothic overtones.

For Mary Stewart fans, reading one of her novels promises a reading experience redolent with passion and intrigue. Mary Stewart knew a thing or two about writing page-turners. In the United States, **Touch Not the Cat** was the ninth best-selling book of that year. Its author had a writing career of more than 40 years, producing over twenty hugely popular novels which sold in excess of 5 million copies. She was, and remains, an international household name, arguably inspiring the deluge of bestselling romantic fiction which has flooded the market in recent decades.

So what was her secret? Why do so many even now return to her fiction?

Mary Stewart had the knack of appealing to the post-war generation she was writing for, introducing a different kind of heroine for a newly emerging type of woman. She called it her “*anti-namby-pamby*” reaction, to conventional contemporary thrillers of the time, which featured a “*silly heroine who is told not to open the door to anybody and immediately opens it to the first person who comes along*”. Mary Stewart’s heroines were tough and confident. They were poised, smart, middle class and highly educated young women, who drove fast cars and could think for themselves. The novels are narrated by the sort of person whom a typical reader would choose as their friend: a sensitive kind person with a strong moral sense.

Mary Stewart herself did not crave fame, and fiercely guarded her privacy, detesting the unwelcome intrusions her fame as a bestselling author brought in its wake. Even as late as 1997, she was so apprehensive about a press interview, that she was unable to write for six weeks. The conclusion is inevitable. This shy retiring woman was writing herself into these characters. Apart from her trilogy (plus one further spin-off) about Merlin, three children’s novels and a little poetry, all Mary Stewart’s novels feature this type; a smart, adventurous heroine who could hold her own in dangerous situations.

Mary Stewart herself described **Touch Not the Cat** as “*a modern adventure story spiced with romance (or romance spiced with adventure; it depends whether you are advertising it for men or for women)*”. Some

have also called her books “*adventure thrillers*”, but to me, with their strong female leads and attractive hunky young men, most seem firmly set in the “*women’s fiction*” genre. All the characters seem well able to talk about their feelings, and there is a heightened sense of emotion right from the start. It is melodrama in every sense, but a slick sophisticated sort of melodrama, spiced up with historical mystery and tragedy, underpinned by her classical education and dotted about with literary references.

All the chapter headings in **Touch Not the Cat** are quotations from Shakespeare’s play “*Romeo and Juliet*”, and the story-line also mirrors the play in several ways. Also key to the story is a 1562 work by Arthur Brooke called “*Romeus and Juliet*”, a work which partly inspired Shakespeare’s “*Romeo and Juliet*”. This work is also quoted from, and becomes essential to the plot of the novel. There are references to the poets Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Thomas Lovell Beddoes and Walter de la Mare at various points in the story. Even Jane Austen’s gothic parody “*Northanger Abbey*” is alluded to. This is not a typical romantic novel.

Our sophisticated, spunky young heroine is the narrator, Bryony Ashley. At the start of the story, Bryony is working in Madeira, as a hotel receptionist. Instantly we are drenched in descriptive passages of Funchal, and only right at the end of the novel do we realise that (view spoiler) We are instantly aware of Mary Stewart’s ability to thrust us into a sense of time and place. We are immersed in mentally experiencing Madeira, just as we then switch briefly to Bavaria where Bryony’s father was hopefully recuperating from his illness. We finally settle at the fictional Ashley Court in the Malvern Hills, Worcestershire in England, where the rest of the novel will be set.

Here we have a gothic feel, with a detailed description of the ancient ancestral home, surrounding buildings and outlying areas which make up the Ashley estate. The unnerving feeling is emphasised by an unquestioned supernatural element. From the very start we learn that Bryony Ashley has the gift of telepathy, inherited from a distant ancestor, Bess, who had been burned as a witch in the 17th century. She is able to communicate subliminally with a man whom she now regards as her lover. She is not sure of his identity but knows that he must be an “*Ashley*” to also have this gift, and spends time trying to decide which of her cousins once removed it is; one of the twins Emory and James, or the younger Francis. She constantly quizzes her telepathic lover about this, but he always puts her off, saying the time isn’t right yet.

Bryony and her father, Jonathan, live at Ashley Court, but since money is short and the family fortunes have diminished, they now live in a cottage on the estate, renting out the house itself to a rich American tycoon and his family. Ashley Estate is bound by a Trust, and there are several restrictions which had been put in place by William Ashley, the 19th century owner, to protect it and ensure its proper inheritance. One was that only male heirs could inherit, and another that every member of the family must agree to any sale of land or property.

One of the telepathic messages hits Bryony who rushes to Bavaria, where her father was staying as a patient in his old friend Walther Gothard’s sanatorium in Bad Tölz, in the Isar valley. She has a feeling that something terrible has happened. In fact she learns that (view spoiler)

The history of the Ashley family provides an intriguing mystery, and we follow Bryony’s thinking as she gradually solves her father’s puzzles. There is a pavilion in which “*Wicked Nick*” the black sheep of the family, was reputed to have got up to his infamous philandering with the local female population, and this is set in the centre of a formal hedge maze, which is depicted on the family’s coat of arms. This detail is

actually authentic. The book's title, **Touch not the Cat** refers to the motto of the clan chief of Clan Chattan, a community of twelve clans including Clan Mackintosh, Clan Macpherson and Clan MacBean. The motto in full is "*Touch not the cat bot (without) a glove*". Mary Stewart has lifted this factual element to apply as the motto of her fictional Ashley family, originally from a Scottish ancestor.

I particularly enjoyed all the "cat" references in the book. A Scottish wildcat, a stone cat crumbled away, lying broken and submerged in a lake, a character whose nickname was "Cat", even the odd descriptive phrase to create tension, such as when "*it felt as if a cat had brushed against*" Bryony. Plus of course the (view spoiler)

Mary Stewart herself was Scots, married to Frederick Stewart, a professor of geology and mineralogy, and one of Britain's foremost scientists. He was knighted in 1974, hence she became "*Lady Stewart*". The meeting between the couple sounds like something out of one of her books. It was just after VE ("Victory in Europe") Day in 1945, and she was at an impromptu fancy-dress party at Durham Castle. There she met a young Scotsman who lectured in geology. She reported:

"He was wearing a girl's gym tunic, lilac socks, dance pumps ... a red ribbon round his head. He said 'May I have this dance, Miss Rainbow?' and I thought 'You're the one!'"

He certainly proved to be the one. Three months later they were married, and remained together all their lives until his death in 2001. The couple had divided their home life between Edinburgh and a Victorian house by Loch Awe in the Highlands. Having spent a holiday in a cottage by Loch Awe myself, I can attest to this being a stunningly beautiful setting in which to work, with the deep blue of the still loch on a summer's day, and views of snow-capped mountains:

They shared a love of nature, Greek and Roman history, music, theatre and art, and all of these are evident in Mary Stewart's books.

Interestingly, Mr. Bryanston, the vicar in the novel, "*is to some extent a portrait of my own father*" according to the author. Mary Stewart's father, Frederick Albert Rainbow (1886-1967), was an Anglican vicar in County Durham. Along with the vicar, a bookseller, and Jonathan Ashley's friend and doctor, Herr Walther Gothard, the book has a small "cast" of characters in the house itself, adding to the intimate feel. From the broad sweep of Europe we quickly narrow down to Ashley Court, the claustrophobic unsettling feel of Bryony's innermost thoughts, and those of her "*lover*". There are sections at the end of each chapter set in 1835, and as the novel proceeds, it becomes clear whose thoughts these are, and this fills in a little of the plot. The hedge maze from the 19th century with a pavilion at the centre used for lovers' meetings, the involved story of the family's crest, the subplot about burglaries of small but valuable objects from the house, and a missing church register, all add to the mystery and are crucial to the playing out of the story.

It is a breathtakingly fast read; the tone is high-octane. It feels both heart-stopping and spellbinding for those who love gothic or historical mysteries with a supernatural component.

It is at its heart a romantic novel. Be warned, there are torrid descriptions such a "*heart-twisting smile*", or "*his shirt was open and I could see the glint of a gold chain against the hairs of his chest and the pulse beating strongly in the hollow of his throat*". Occasionally the purple prose runs away with itself, such as here:

"I took another step towards him. He moved as fast as the collie had, and took hold of me, pulling me tightly against him. As he began to kiss me, the huge heap of trouble melted like snow, and above us in the pear tree a nightingale began to sing."

At this point I seriously began to wonder whether Mary Stewart was writing a parody of a romantic novel. Thankfully they are few.

The elements of romantic fiction are curiously old-fashioned, even for the mid 1970s. Forget the “permissive 60s”; they may never have happened. Mary Stewart’s heroines are chaste, and her male heroes equally sexually inexperienced. There is plenty of suggestion of eroticism, but that is as far as it goes. Marriage is the prelude to consummation, and the novel describes the courtship. There is nothing explicit, and nothing here to shock anyone’s great-aunt; the most extreme perhaps provoking a raised eyebrow. Mary Stewart was presumably being faithful to her considerable fan base, and never writing a heroine who did not conform to their expectations.

What lifts this out of the mass of romantic novels is the quality of Mary Stewart’s descriptive flow. She describes landscape and the countryside very evocatively, with a keen eye for the British countryside in all its seasons. The tension of the most dramatic moments in the story is mirrored and heightened by the savagery of the weather. The unsettling moments may occur in the stillness of the night; a sense of unease created by an animal’s eerie cry. Mary Stewart uses the natural world she is familiar with beautifully, and to great effect in evoking the English countryside in May. She conveys a great sense of place and atmosphere.

This tale of dark family secrets, **Touch Not the Cat** was one of the last of Mary Stewart’s classic mid-century gothic romances, redolent with danger and darkness, magic and suspense. We have all the tropes of gothic novels. There is an ancient grange, the tumbledown ancestral home of the Ashley family where danger lurks behind every shadow. There are missing parish registers and rightful heirs, twins and cousins. Thrillingly, there are churchyard scenes, shadowy figures, storms and floods, darkness ... and a very great deal of moonlight. And to cap it all of course there is the supernatural element.

Oddly, Mary Stewart seems to want eat her cake and still have it. She was a canny author indeed, which makes me think again that there are times when she deliberately parodied the genre, whilst exploiting it. Within **Touch not the Cat** itself, her characters explicitly mention the Gothic conventions, and are disparaging of them. For instance, at one point Bryony says:

“A robed figure in a darkened church? Absurd. They had a word for the silly penny-dreadful, didn’t they? Gothic, that was it. Robed nuns and ancient houses and secret passages, the paraphernalia that Jane Austen had laughed at in Northanger Abbey”.

Another instance is when Mrs. Underhill, one of the American tenants of Ashley Court, says:

“All this time in a moated grange straight out of Tennyson, and not even the sniff of a ghost or a secret passage or any of the things you might expect!” Bryony replies:

“there is a secret stair, as a matter of fact; it’s a very tame affair but it may have been useful in its day. In a way it’s a sort of secret inside a secret – it goes down from the Priest’s Hole into the wine-cellars.”

So Mary Stewart has no compunctions about including such details for atmosphere, or even to poke fun at them, yet none of them play any part in the actual novel itself. There is no use made anywhere of these Gothic secret rooms and passages, nor are there any ghosts in Ashley Court. It is all hokum – except for the “gift” of telepathy. This clairaudience is never in question.

What Mary Stewart’s fans remark on most is her wonderful storytelling, her sharply depicted settings and the sympathetic and lively characters. She was one of the most prominent writers of the romantic suspense subgenre, effortlessly blending romance novels and mystery. She combined the two genres, maintaining the mystery whilst focusing on the relationship — or at this time a simple courtship — between two people. She devised the story so that by going through the process of solving the mystery, the hero’s personality is

“illuminated”— thereby helping the heroine to fall in love with him. One critic remarked:

“She built the bridge between classic literature and modern popular fiction. She did it first and she did it best.”

stating that her classical education served her well, enabling her to write intelligent novels full of literary allusions and involving a little research. Critically, her works are usually considered superior to those of other acclaimed romantic suspense novelists, such as Victoria Holt and Phyllis Whitney, and some have even said she was the natural successor to the Brontës. Her writing does seem to have been influenced by Emily Brontë.

But Mary Stewart’s own view was that:

“I am first and foremost a teller of tales”

And her massive book sales are testament to that.

Sally906 says

Not one of the best Mary Stewart’s I’ve read – The only thing that saved this book was the wonderful ‘come alive on the page’ setting descriptions. The derelict manor house, the overgrown maze the secret gazebo all became vivid in my mind.

Sadly the story just didn’t grab me. When Bryony’s father dies, his house and land will not go to her because she is a woman, but she does have a say in if or when it is sold. Her male cousins also have a stake in it. Bryony has a kind of telepathic connection with someone – she’s not sure who – but she calls him her lover (UGH!!!) She enjoys this man in her head and is positive it’s one of her cousins; she decides to find out for sure.

On his deathbed, her father makes some cryptic statements which are clues to lead to a hidden treasure. This wasn’t touched upon very much in the part I read, which would have made the story more

After the very slow start – there was a bit of excitement in the middle – and then got slow again until the climax at the end.

Marne Wilson says

I love this book far more than I probably should. I read it at such an early age that it imprinted itself upon me and become my image of what the perfect book should be. I know this, objectively speaking, and yet I love it all the same. What I keep telling myself is that it must have been a good book in order for me to fixate upon it the way I did, so I don’t feel too terribly guilty about my deep and abiding love for it, misplaced as it may seem to other people.

I first heard about this book when I was four or five years old. My college-age sister was reading it and talked about it all the time, so much so that I decided I was going to read it when I was old enough. Since I was a precocious reader, that time came when I was seven or eight. Although I don’t remember exactly, I’m

guessing that it was the first romance novel I ever tackled, the first of many in my grandma's set of Reader's Digest Condensed Books that I would devour.

I've read many articles in which women my age confess that Lloyd Dobler, the teenager from *Say Anything* who dramatically holds a radio over his head to profess his love, forever ruined any chances a normal boy had of sweeping them off their feet. I didn't actually see that movie until I was in my thirties, so Lloyd Dobler is innocent of wrongdoing in my book. Instead, it was Byrony's "lover" in this book who ruined me for all other men. I can't tell you the name of this man in my review, for it would be a terrible spoiler. You see, Byrony doesn't actually know who he is until midway through the book, since until that time, they only communicate telepathically, sometimes across vast distances. No wonder my actual boyfriends and husbands have often complained that I expected them to read my mind! Isn't that what a good lover does? Isn't that what I have the right to expect?

I'm always a little bit surprised that most of the reviews of this book here on Goodreads are so unenthusiastic. I guess to most people, this is just a typical Mary Stewart novel, interchangeable with many others that she has written. To me, though, it will always be the book that started it all for me.
