



# The Owl Killers

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## **The Owl Killers** Karen Maitland

From the author of **Company of Liars**, hailed as “a jewel of a medieval mystery”\* and “an atmospheric tale of treachery and magic,”\*\* comes a magnificent new novel of an embattled village and a group of courageous women who are set on a collision course—in an unforgettable storm of secrets, lust, and rage.

England, 1321. The tiny village of Ulewic teeters between survival and destruction, faith and doubt, God and demons. For shadowing the villagers’ lives are men cloaked in masks and secrecy, ruling with violence, intimidation, and terrifying fiery rites: the Owl Masters.

But another force is touching Ulewic—a newly formed community built and served only by women. Called a *beguinage*, it is a safe harbor of service and faith in defiance of the all-powerful Church.

Behind the walls of this sanctuary, women have gathered from all walks of life: a skilled physician, a towering former prostitute, a cook, a local convert. But life in Ulewic is growing more dangerous with each passing day. The women are the subject of rumors, envy, scorn, and fury...until the daughter of Ulewic’s most powerful man is cast out of her home and accepted into the beguinage—and battle lines are drawn.

Into this drama are swept innocents and conspirators: a parish priest trying to save himself from his own sins...a village teenager, pregnant and terrified...a woman once on the verge of sainthood, now cast out of the Church...With Ulewic ravaged by flood and disease, and with villagers driven by fear, a secret inside the beguinage will draw the desperate and the depraved—until masks are dropped, faith is tested...and every lie is exposed.

\**New York Times Book Review*

\*\**Marie Claire*

## **The Owl Killers Details**

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Author : Karen Maitland

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## From Reader Review The Owl Killers for online ebook

### **Bondama says**

This is one of those rare books that truly stand out from the crowd. Having originally majored in medieval history, I have always been extremely impressed by those rare books set in the dark ages, or shortly thereafter, simply because of the reams of research that have to be done to make a book of this sort even halfway believable. Not a lot of people realize just how VERY different life was at that time.

This book is set in 1321 in England. At that time, in Flanders, France and parts of Belgium, there existed a lay order of women called the beguines. They took no vows, other than celibacy, and dedicated themselves to charity and good works. None of the women were bound to stay there, should they wish to return to their father's houses, or their husbands. But very, very few did. In a way, these beguinages were the predecessors of battered womens' shelters. They fed and nursed any of the sick or hungry, including lepers that had been declared dead to the world. The last beguinage continued to operate until 1927.

"The Owl Killers" is about a small village in England, where a beguinage has been bequeathed some property. There is really only small evidence of a beguinage ever being in England - primarily there were chased out as witches, any other false charge the Church or the ruling aristocracy could trump up to get rid of them. They were dedicated to the Church, but the priests saw them only as their competition.

Remember, this was a time when demons were thought to roam the land, and children were beaten almost to death if their parents could not come up with their tithes, either to the Church or to their "landlord." After all, if the parents were beaten, they couldn't work to come up with the money, so they beat the children. The Church also taught that any sins of the parents were passed directly to their children, so if a child was born mute, or crippled, they were usually abandoned to die. The beguinages took in these poor souls. In their way, they followed Christ's word far more than did any of the Priests or Churches.

The action in this book truly begins when the third daughter of the ruling Lord D'Acaster is driven to the beguinage. She made the mistake of being out in the forest after hours, and witnessed a pagan ritual. She was raped, and when she showed up in the morning, her father disinherited her, so she was taken in by the beguines. But this girl reads, unlike any of the village occupants, and she does begin to question the need for priests or sacraments as the only way to reach God, much as Martin Luther did the next century. The beguines allow the doubt of priests -- they doubt them as well -- but to doubt the sacraments is true heresy.

This is a truly remarkable book, very solid in its history -- when one reads of children collecting dog dung for the local tanner, a modern person doubts that that might actually have occurred. Not only did it occur, but these people quite literally lived in filth, at the complete mercy of the elements and their Church, who would as soon bleed them dead and dry for their tithes.

I would recommend this book completely to anyone interested in the history of women, in particular. A wonderful, engrossing read.

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### **Jennifer (JC-S) says**

‘... a legend can only die if no one speaks its name’

The setting for this novel is a fictional English village named Ulewic. During 1321-22, the village is

struggling with a number of natural and supernatural forces. The villagers' lives are shadowed by the Owl Masters and haunted by the Owlman who leaves death and destruction in his wake. The novel centres on a beguinage, a religious community of women, originally from Bruges and newly established outside the village. The tensions between the beguinage, the village priest and the townspeople themselves build through ignorance, fear, envy and are fuelled by illness, natural disaster and manipulation.

The narrators include a number of different characters, alternating throughout the story and each with their own perspective of events.

For this novel, this works particularly well because of the combination of pagan and Christian beliefs, of belief in the supernatural and superstition. The narrators include: the Servant Martha (the leader of the beguins), the teenaged Agatha/Osmanna (the cast out daughter of Ulewic's most powerful man who is accepted into the beguinage); Father Ulfrid (the village priest) and a village child.

I enjoyed this novel. I liked some characters, detested others and was fascinated by the concept of beguinage. This novel is of the Dark Ages in both time and setting, but some aspects transcend the passage of time.

Jennifer Cameron-Smith

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### **Diane S ? says**

Loved her first book and this one was also very good. Dark and atmospheric, Paganism vs. Christianity in the Dark ages. Compelling characters, quite a bit of terror and I am just so glad we are not living during that time period.

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### **Nikki says**

I think this might be my favourite of Karen Maitland's books so far -- I definitely liked it more than *The Gallows Curse*, although it didn't grip me as tightly as *Company of Liars*. I have nothing really to nitpick about here, though: the five POVs were well done and cast interesting lights on each other, and I love the research Maitland clearly put into it. The very concept of a beguinage is pretty fascinating, so that helps, but the way Maitland brought this one to life -- and tried to explain a real historical event through it -- is even more so. I've always loved historical novels that take something we know (a wingless Roman Eagle was found buried in Silchester, and Rosemary Sutcliff wrote *The Eagle of the Ninth* to explain it, for example) and try to puzzle out *why*. Karen Maitland explores why the beguinages failed to take root in Britain, despite some evidence of them existing here, and despite their longevity and appeal on the continent.

As with her other books, she evokes the Middle Ages well -- the smells, the sounds, the sights. Perhaps a little predictably, I suppose: she gives us the vision of the Middle Ages we expect, dirt and plagues and superstition, but still. She does her work well.

I suppose I do have one nitpick, and that's the POV of Pisspuddle, which doesn't add much. It does add a villagers-eye view, so there's that, but mostly she's just a small child who doesn't matter that much to the events happening around her.

The characters are all intriguing: I really felt for Osmanna, and for Servant Martha, particularly. I felt very sorry for Beatrice, even though I knew she was seeing things from a very biased point of view. And Healer Martha deserved better.

Oh yes, and trigger warning: rape, abusive parents, sickness. More or less what you might expect, but just in case.

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### **Linda Bakker-Zwakhals says**

DNF at 55%. This book was just not for me. Nothing happend and pages were filled with people threatening and arguing about God. Really not my thing...

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### **catzkc says**

(another stay up to midnight to finish book!). There was a sense of dread threaded throughout this story. I was worried this novel would be just one long, hopeless tragedy. I'm very happy that was not to be the case.

It's hard to tell which I like better, *The Company of Liars* or this (I'm leaning towards this one). They are both five starers, but each brings something different to the table.

I think this is more of an atmospheric novel, and it certainly delivers on that account. I felt completely immersed into the fourteenth-century East-Anglian fenlands. The action doesn't really get going until you're about 60% into the book. That's something I don't mind - when it's well written - and that's certainly the case here. But I know some people may be put off by that. Even though things didn't get hopping until later, the story still held me in a strong grip of suspense. I just knew something horrible and sinister was brewing up.

This book also has a few more elements of fantasy/mysticism. While I usually don't like that in my historical fiction, the way it's written here, it just works. I think it really complements and adds something to the whole story, rather than being a distraction or seeming to be tacked on as an afterthought. Of course a big party of this novel is about examining the conflict between Christianity and the early pagan beliefs of the people. So it makes sense that we are experiencing what the people themselves see and experience.

This book addresses a fascinating moment in the history of the middle ages. Not that the town, people and events described actually happened, but the environmental and resulting social upheaval going on at that time was certainly real enough. And it was fascinating to learn of the lady-religious, female-collective movement of the Beguinage Communities during these times.

I'm starting to think the most moving historical fiction novels are those about fictional people living thru real times/events, rather than those about real people.

(p.s. - quite an excellent chapter of historical notes, and glossary!)

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### **Jeremy Zerbe says**

I picked up Karen Maitland's third novel, *The Owl Killers*, at my local library, on not much else than an interest in the cover artwork. Add to that my intrigue in a story about the dark, religious goings-on of medieval England (and to all of those who thought it was "too dark"... what in the world have you been reading all your life? I mean, it's about the goddamn Middle Ages), and I thought I'd really discovered a winner.

What I found was, indeed, a rather interesting story of battle lines drawn amongst warring factions of religion: from the old pagan cunning women to the stodgy old Catholic church to a new breed of Christian women teaching and healing to the tribalistic Owl Masters, the mafia-like old world clan that give the book its title. And that twisting, flipping story was enough to get me through to the book's end--a feat I could not have otherwise achieved on the rest of the novel's laurels.

Maitland's prose is heavy-handed in its attempt to sound Olde Englishy, but her use of successive first-person cripples any attempt at distinct voice anyway. Each section is told from the point of view of a different main character, but despite their differences (a stoic old beguine, a shamed priest, a fat little serf girl), each has the exact same voice. At times, it is difficult to even glean a difference at all when the sections start to change often, and it is needed to look back to figure out who you are even listening to bitch at that particular moment. And bitch do they ever, in their pseudo-medieval speak. No less than half the book seems like a bunch of catty little girls pulling punches on each other.

It's a shame, because Maitland so badly wants to make a feminist statement with her novel. The other half of the book that isn't made up with people clawing each other's eyes out for no reason is populated with overzealous, way-too-obvious You Go Girl!s. I'm as much a feminist myself as a white male can be, but this kind of hammer-to-the-head preaching really doesn't do much to help the movement forward. Rather, it is the kind of self-aggrandizing grandstanding that makes no one want to listen in the first place. Oh women! You rock! You are so much smarter than the traditions of the Catholic church! Well, yeah... but that's not saying much, is it?

And that's the only reason I'd pass this book along to anyone else: in place of one of my other numerous pieces of anti-religion literature. The best part of this book was just how stupid Maitland makes every single different type of doctrine and dogma look. I'm not sure if she was aiming for that (because, frankly, she seemed to trying to be siding with the beguines and their liberal views of Christianity), but she succeeds beyond all doubt in making everyone involved look like a complete fool. But again... that's not saying much, is it?

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## **Liza Perrat says**

Having loved *Company of Liars*, I was excited to read Karen Maitland's next novel, *The Owl Killers*, set in Ulewic, a 14th century village near Norfolk.

For centuries, Ulewic has been ruled by both the lord of the manor and by the Owl Masters - a predatory, pagan group empowered by fear, blackmail and superstition to dispense a harsh form of law and order. A group of religious women settles in a beguinage outside the village and when their crops succeed and their animals survive diseases, jealousy and conflict are brought to a head in Ulewic.

The author uses a multiple narrative voice flawlessly, each voice distinct and compelling. I engaged with every one of the characters, whose lives are drawn out smoothly and interwoven into the main story in an unobtrusive and enjoyable way.

Pagan and Christian ways intermingle and clash, the story steeped in witchcraft, heresy, mystery, suspense and tragedy. At times very dark and bleak, it also evokes human nature at its best, and explores the power of faith.

The author has vividly brought to life a medieval community where the mind was ruled by religion and superstition. Through simple, lyrical prose, she builds the plot to a conclusion that provides both resolution and the expectation of what might have happened next.

Karen Maitland truly knows how to write about what interests her, and I would highly recommend *The Owl Killers* to fans of historical fiction and the supernatural.

## Fiona says

Was it over a year ago that I read this? It must be - I remember where I was. I was working at a temporary job that involved predominantly photocopying, possibly the most dismal office I have ever encountered and, crucially, a half-hour commute that took my bus straight past Edinburgh Castle. I remember reading this book with a growing feeling of dread, looking out of the window and wondering how I could feel so grateful to be here and so dispirited about my day at the same time.

Since then, this has become one of my secret recommendation weapons - I've recommended it to a good three or four people, and they all seem to have enjoyed it as much as I have. I was recommended it myself, actually, by one of those readers who seems to be able to do no wrong and always points me at things I end up adoring. And I did adore this. It was great. Karen Maitland writes fantastic characters, fascinating situations, and almost suffocating levels of darkness and trepidation. She can write atmosphere like no other writer I know. It was exactly what was great about *The Company of Liars*, only where that didn't pay off, this delivered in spadefuls right to the very end.

I wonder, if I read it again, whether I would give it five stars this time around. I certainly remember it favourably, and at the time I was reading it, I was feeling suffocated enough. This was hardly a light in the darkness. But I tell you what, it was bloody good.

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## Anne Slater says

(From my Letter to the author)

My complaint is that Owl Killers kept me up until 3 am this morning.  
At nearly 69, I am not accustomed to keeping such late hours, but I simply could not put it down!

I feel quite fortunate to have come to Owl Killers (albeit by accident) with 30+ years' work as an academic librarian, a life time of voracious reading centered on historical fiction and autobiography, a quality education, and a friend who is a medievalist. I suppose, I was just waiting for your books to find their way to me.

After I read the front flap of Owl Killers I laughed and thought of my friend in San Francisco who is a béguine! [Lillian Kaiser '53, BMC folks]

I appreciate the historical accuracy, the attention to detail (character and location), the pre-chapter snippets referring to the customs and celebrations of the period, the vivid ethnographic quality of the mass of Owl Killers that is not story line. I was truly engrossed: skimming was not possible. The way you have written it, with numerous narrators, keeps the reader engaged and attentive to detail (e. g., " 'sauvegarde', a place of refuge" in the first 75 pages, and Healing Martha's "gar... gar"[don;t want to give anything away here] much later on).

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## Daren says

Firstly let me reassure that even at 600 pages, this is a fairly quick, manageable read. It is not overly complicated, and there are not too many complexities with the number of characters or details that need to be kept track of by the reader - it is all pretty straightforward, and it is spelled out.

It is entertaining historical fiction with some interesting gruesomeness, some atmospheric settings and some legitimate-sounding history. There is even a section at the end of the book explaining the history and the background to the story (which I take from ruthlessly for the below).

There are loads of reviews which describe the plot, and while I am not going to be drawn to explain it all... but...

Set in 1321, a particularly interesting period of time in England and Europe. Climatic change is causing widespread droughts, flooding and crop failure. Livestock were subject to new diseases spreading throughout the countryside (thought to be anthrax), and fear and suspicion were rampant. The pope ordered special prayers to be said in church five times a day, and likely tithes were increased at a time where they were least affordable.

People began revolting against the church, and in some cases throwing priests out of their churches and engaged in bizarre cults, and reverting to pagan beliefs.

Against this background a remarkable movement emerged in Europe, which came to be known as the Beguinage communities. Thousands of women who did not wish to marry or take the veil as nuns began to set themselves up in female collectives. The women farmed, engaged in crafts such as weaving, established hospitals, and educated girls. They preached in the streets and translated the bible into the local vernacular, therefore challenging the role of the church. They also challenged the male guilds (often undercutting their prices).

This story revolves around a group of such women who had come across from Flanders to England and established a Beguinage community in a Norfolk village. Here they are resisted by not only the church, but the wealthy landowner and the *Owl Masters* - anonymous pagan cult leaders who also challenge the church for control over the villagers.

The copy I have is an uncorrected proof, so the infrequent typos are forgiven, but as I said above, the writing style and the way the story plays out is simple - there are no leaps to make, no ambiguous occurrences to keep us guessing, just a linear timeline. I had hoped for a more engaging approach - although the straight forward made for easy, quick reading.

The other minor negative was the voice - each chapter is written in first person narrative. Unfortunately, across all of the characters, there is no variance - they all present in the same way, and there was nothing unique to each character.

Notwithstanding the criticisms above, this is still a good read. It is an engaging story, based in viable history, with interesting characters.

3.5 stars, rounded down.

## Annet says

*We do not know how strong we are until we are attacked by the evil of this world. - Mechthild of Magdeburg, beguine from 1230 to 1270.*

A great story, sort of a mix between history, religion and fantasy.

The writing of this author and the storytelling makes you feel and taste the Dark Ages....

My second Maitland, last year I read Company of Liars, both great reads. Thanks Caro for the tip!

This is the story: 1321. In the heart of the countryside in England lies an isolated village, where pagan Owl Masters rule through fear, superstition and murder. When a group of religious women, 'Beguines' called Marthas, ill-advisedly but determined, settles outside the village, they awaken dangerous jealousies, amongst others of the corrupt parish priest, Father Ulfrid. Why do their crops succeed? How do their cattle survive the plague and sickness? And why should they own the holy relic that protects them from harm? As torment and hellfire rain down, the women must take a stand to stop this darkness from spreading its evil across the land...

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## Jessika says

THIS BOOK, you guys.

I know I keep saying that, but seriously, I cannot gush enough about this book. It has been a while since I have completely fallen in love with a book like I did with The Owl Killers. And that's saying something because this book was DARK.

This was my work read of the moment, but despite reading this in an office breakroom, I gasped, I laughed, I fumed, I cried. A GOOD book (to me, anyway) is one that gets me to *feel*, to *react*. Let me tell you, The Owl Killers fit the bill.

And not only that, but it is very evident that Karen Maitland did her research, which is something that I very much appreciate when it comes to historical fiction. I was transported from my dreary office to the Dark Ages (although, thankfully, I don't mean that literally). Even down to the characters' mindsets & world views, everything felt accurate, which I loved.

I know everyone isn't a fan of multiple points-of-view stories, but I thought it worked exceptionally well here, and I found it so fascinating. You read from one person's point-of-view and hear their thoughts, and then you see how someone else perceives things, including that other person. I just thought Maitland handled that very well & created a cast of characters I loved (and loved to hate).

I know I will be thinking of this book for some time to come. It has made my list of favorites & I will be eager to check out Maitland's other books. The Owl Killers is going to be one of my go-to recommendations for outstanding historical fiction. If you are interested in reading about the Dark Ages, you NEED to read this if you haven't already.

This review can also be found on my blog: <https://tinyurl.com/y9cgy6et>

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## Jeanette says

She can truly write a story. Her tales are deep and filled with streams of consciousness to how people of an age or of this era think. Their "eyes" and worldview- just excellent in how she can portray with just a few words or derisive actions their myriads of tangential context. And she is terrific at the realities of the early middle ages. I loved her "Company of Liars" and this is much in the same excellence of writing.

But this book was not for me. I got to about the end of the first 1/3rd of this very long book and just didn't want to read about this cultural mindset any longer. I'm sure it was very real and probably exactly factual to have occurred. But to me its nugget of content was putrid. And not to my taste.

And I also felt it contained a strong to overwhelming (and nearly continual to various characters too) bias for the "eyes" belief that holds vast negativity of religion as a whole. Others would disagree, I'm sure. But to me it was like swallowing an entire shot glass of castor oil in one gulp. Not that I couldn't. But I just don't want to.

No rating. DNF Not for me.

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## Lj says

I was beginning to wonder what I had picked up when I started to read this book because of the lack of clear structure owing to multiple characters telling their tales back and forth between each other. As I read on however it really began to work and I become more and more intrigued by the plot line and found it difficult to put the book down.

I loved the manner in which the plot had many twists and turns and really challenges your thoughts and assumptions/ stereotypes particularly when you meet the Character Hillary for the second time (those who have read it already will know what I mean). Although I really should have seen it coming.

The book also has a few surprises and ties the story lines together quite well. Characters do things in the book that you may or may not expect them to do which only adds to the riveting read that this book truly is. If you have an avid interest in historical, religious and human conflict stories then you will love this book just like I did.

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## Melki says

In 1321, there were a multitude of problems. Superstition ruled the day. Disease lurked around every corner and famine was an ever-present specter. And no matter how bad that year's harvest turned out to be, the church demanded to receive its tithe. Seems like that's enough suffering for one lifetime, yet the precarious lives lived by the characters in Maitland's excellent novel are made even crappier by the existence of the Owl Killers, a protection racket putting the squeeze on the village denizens to pay up...or ELSE!

Now, it's up to an elite fighting force of women to put a stop to these dastardly brutes.

Well, sort of...

Cloistered away in an enclave, these women keep to themselves and conduct their own society. They are feared and scorned by the villagers, unless, of course, the villagers need food, shelter or medical care. Then, when the owl pellets hit the fan, guess who they expect to clean up the mess?

These gals will battle demons, money-grubbing land barons, corrupt clergymen and the dreaded Owl Masters to restore peace and prosperity to the village.

Girl Power! Woo-hoo!

This is only the second book I've read by Maitland, but she is fast becoming a favorite. She provides a good mix of suspense, drama, history and oomph, and I'm looking forward to reading the rest of her work.

But don't just take my word for it...see the excellent and informative reviews by:

Jeffrey - <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Bettie - <http://bettie.booklikes.com/post/6128...>

and

Bondama - <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

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## **Wanda says**

Owls are among my favourite birds, mainly because they were important to my maternal grandmother Matilda and they will always be associated with her in my mind. Anyone who kills an owl is immediately persona non grata to me. My one disappointment with this book was that the followers of the pagan religion in this book turned out to be bad guys, killing owls to warn people that they were next if they didn't conform and murdering people just as readily. However, in this novel, there is plenty of bad behaviour to go around, no matter which religion a villager adheres to. Religion, whether nature-based or not, is used in this medieval society as a means of social control (as it still is in our century, let's be honest).

I had no idea there were Beguinages in the Middle Ages—communities built for and by women, to escape the male-dominated church and male-dominated society. In the beguinage, women could still engage with the world, unlike nuns, who were expected to withdraw from worldly pursuits (this is shown starkly by the comparison between Servant Martha and the Anchorite known as Andrew). Women in a beguinage could pursue their own economic interests and intellectual interests with fewer barriers and more personal independence.

The book is full of strong women—from the many Marthas who run the beguinage, to the old witch woman who is feared by all, to the village women who work like horses while raising children, to even the girl-children who are beaten and worked hard, even while half-starved. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, “A woman is like a tea bag; you never know how strong it is until it's in hot water.” I know that I derive encouragement from the stories of women in my family tree—the circumstances that they endured, the events that they participated in, and the toughness that they exhibited. Although we are gradually emerging from the societal mindset that says that history is made by men, it is important to acknowledge that the men were able to do the historical things only because they had a female support system at home. As a single (straight) working woman, I have often proclaimed that I do not need a husband, but I could sure as heck use a wife! However, my woman's wages would not support more than one person, so I am stuck doing all the support work as

well as the wage-earning—but after reading this book, I shall not be whining too often about this situation.

I also appreciated that medieval life is portrayed as I think it really was: medicine is next to nonexistent, crops fail, natural disasters happen, superstition is rampant, education is only for the rich, and life is difficult for everyone, but especially the average villager. If you escape plague or starvation, you still have to manoeuver through village and church politics. I know that as a teen, I had idealized visions of how people in earlier eras lived and a book like this would have opened my eyes. (There was a time that I believed that I had been born too late—I think I had read too many romantic frontier novels by the likes of Zane Grey—and have since learned more about the experiences of my home-steading grandmothers. I now know very definitely that I am a 21st century woman, through and through).

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### **Arun Divakar says**

God, religion and a firm foundation of faith has been matters of great befuddlement for me for a while now. We who have feared and revered everything beyond the immediate vicinity of the fire in the cave have come a long way into the multi million dollar world of organized religion. Fear has always been the riding whip for religion and power its allure. Men and women who hold sway over the multitudes with a firm grasp on the pulse of belief will command far more murderous mobs than a dictator can ever imagine in today's world. Of late, my reading into the investigations of such conflicts in the name of belief has served to strengthen this prejudice of mine. This novel explores such a delicate situation while being set in a fictional town of Ulewic in England in the 1320's.

Ulewic is a novel of a town in the middle of nowhere. A Catholic Church struggling to find a foothold in a town still rooted deep in pagan beliefs with the captain being a weakling of a priest makes an interesting character study. Father Ulfried of the Church is the owner of a personality which I can aptly call despicable. Starting off from a neutral and futile existence in the beginning, this character acquires a negative tone as the story reaches its finale and is my most favorite character of them all in the story. Pitted against him are the Owl Masters who through superstition, violence and fear rule the village and its denizens. Then there is the beguinage and its women right in the middle of these two titans. A beguinage was a community of women who sustained themselves and the society among them through their own hard work. Unlike a nunnery, there weren't any bonds that held these women back for they were given the choice to come and go as they liked to. Naturally such a community of self sustaining women in a pre-dominantly male oriented society gave rise to conflicts and that is what the novel explores in depth and detail. It is as the Joker says : *An irresistible force meeting an immovable object.*

The structure of the book works out brilliantly to its advantage. The story is told from multiple POV's and the narrative effortlessly shifts gears between one persona and the next. While the scope is limited to the small town, the scale of exploration on topics of Christianity, Paganism, liberal thought, sexuality are rather massive in the book. This was the one reason why I wasn't totally bugged when melodrama started seeping it by droplets along the narrative for the scope of the tale warrants it. The pace is rather well maintained and on some days kept me reading late into the night. For all this brilliance on the part of the author, I felt let down by the ending. It felt all rushed through and did not sit with me well when most of the loose ends were tied. Well, you can't have them all !

All in all, a most excellent story.

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## Blair says

At first, I wasn't certain I would enjoy this book - I often read historical fiction, but usually gravitate towards stories set in the 18th and 19th centuries, while this is set much further back, in 1321. However, once I'd got a handle on the complex plot, I found myself absolutely loving it. The characterisation and lively dialogue really bring the story to life, and the plot tackles so many issues that are incredibly relevant to modern life, while the narrative still felt authentically historical throughout - no mean feat. The use of five - very different and equally unreliable - narrators is a masterstroke, allowing the reader to see how the same events are (mis)interpreted and understood by different individuals. My only criticism is that the plot gets a bit muddled towards the end and the conclusion isn't particularly satisfying after the atmosphere of suspense and fear created so effectively in the earlier part of the book.

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## Jeffrey Keeten says

**"Beguines are pernicious tares sown by the Devil to destroy the order of man and God. It was women that destroyed the order in the Garden of Eden, Lilith refusing to lie beneath Adam, and Eve seducing him into forbidden knowledge. Now they are hell-bent on destroying the very priesthood itself, and with it the Holy Church and all Christendom. They will drag you to hell with them if they can. I caution you not to suffer them to take root here, lest all you hold dear is destroyed and thrown in chaos."**

## Beguines, now aren't they so dang cute?

During the crusades, as we all know, a bunch of European men decided to leave home and go throw a big party in the Middle East. Saracen swords removed many heads and limbs and those the sword didn't kill dysentery and other diseases waded through their ranks bringing weakness and death. Now back home there were not only a shortage of males, due to this misguided road trip to Jerusalem, but also a large number of women and children without means of support. The Middle Ages was a male based society and women were expected to live under the guardianship of a man. So a recently widowed woman had a choice to join a nunnery, which if you have kids that is out, or find some man who finds you useful for his bed or at least as slave labor in his fields or kitchen. In the later part of the 12th century, but with gaining momentum in the 13th and 14th century these women banded together and formed beguinages.

Need breeds necessity, but still I can't express how impressed I am with the ingenuity of these women to do something so daring that truly embraces the concept of **Carpe Diem**.

They made their living weaving and tilling the soil. They lived a pious life without vows. They could leave at any time. In this book they have a leadership paradigm in place, but as I found after some research many of the beguinages existed as a much looser confederation of like minded individuals. I'm of the opinion, after working with unions and other organizations, that eventually it is the natural order that leadership will emerge in nearly every situation simply because someone must organize the best use of labor. Servant Martha has lead a group of adventurous souls from a beguinage located in Bruges to start a new sanctuary in England. Every woman that enters the beguinage is given a new name of a saint. If they move up to the leadership counsel they will be given yet another name designating their responsibility with the name Martha, for instance Gate Martha, Merchant Martha, Healing Martha etc.

## **Bruges Beguinage that still exists in Belgium although at some point it was taken over by Benedictine Nuns.**

Servant Martha is really the glue that holds everything together. She is taller and more vigorous than the average woman and is strong willed with defined opinions all traits that make her a natural leader. As one of her followers describes her: *"If Servant Martha had lived in the time of Noah and God had told her that **HE** was going to send a flood to destroy the world, she would have simply said, 'Nonsense.' And he wouldn't have dared to do it.*

Things are going well for the beguines. They are prospering. The crops have done well and the goods they sell at market have found ready buyers. They have more than enough to sustain themselves. Times have not gone so well for the villagers. An anthrax based virus has infected their hogs and to keep the contagion from spreading the King's men have killed all the hogs. The crops have been flooded. The Lord of that region and the church and the local Owl cult each have demanded their share of tithing from the village leaving them on the verge of starvation. The beguines begin to share their food and provide healing for the poor at no charge. Whoa, whoa wait a minute at no charge?!

Father Ulfrid thought he had problems before the beguines showed up. He has been booted to this hamlet over a bit of scandal involving a pretty young lad and the bishop has him on a short leash. He has bumped heads with the Owl Cult and found that forming an alliance with them will maybe insure his ability to keep breathing will continue. Besides the problem isn't with the over burden of tithes or natural disasters, but with those damn beguine witches. Why have they prospered while everyone else has suffered? Why are they taking care of the poor and disaffected taking money away from his church coffers?

Fear is instilled and the superstitious nature of the village starts to erode the relationship between the beguines and the people they only wish to help. *"Now, you listen to me, my lad, your father would flay the hide off you if he knew you were messing with those hags. You don't know what goes on behind those walls of their; if they got hold of a lad like you, like as not you'd never be seen again. All those women together like that can do things you wouldn't dream of, lad. They can make your nose rot off your face and your cock shrivel up like a worm. So mind you stay well out of their way."* That shriveling cock threat gets a guy every time.

Servant Martha is under attack from the church with threats of excommunication and the Owl Cult continues to step up their harassment as well. Servant Martha finds herself in a desperate struggle with the supernatural...or is it? *"It was huge, bigger than a bull. It had the head of a bird of prey, with a black hooked beak, as long as a man's hand. Huge round eyes blazed unblinking out of the feathered face, the deep black pupils ringed with red flame. The creature was staring straight at me. But it wasn't a bird. It couldn't be a bird...between its great wings, the broad chest was not covered with feathers, but bare wet skin that glistened bone-white.*

## **Owl Man...not a superhero**

There are many more elements to the story than what I have chosen to reveal today. The story is told through the eyes of the participants. Karen Maitland also included these wonderful tidbits about saints between the chapters. Here is an example:

**St. Diama's Day: Seventh-century Irish Bishop who was famed for converting the pagan Mercians in England to Christianity, but after the Bishop's death it was widely claimed**

**that the pious Diuma or Diona was in fact a woman.**

I enjoyed Karen Maitland's first book Company Of Liars more than I did this one. It has a Chaucerian feel to it coupled with a twisty plot that kept me guessing the whole time. This books main value to me was introducing me to the beguines. What a wonderful concept that provided security to women that were otherwise at the mercy of the Church or the local Lord or a drunken lout. If a woman didn't have something those entities wanted than she had no bargaining power and; therefore, little worth. The concept of giving freely to those in need and challenging the concepts of the church landed many beguines in trouble. They were burned as heretics, ordered to disband, and considered a threat to the natural order of things. **Woman are just so dangerous when they have choices.** I will leave you with one last thought from Servant Martha. *"How easily we forget that we have chosen what we are and can choose what we will become."*

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