



## Dissolution

*C.J. Sansom*

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## **Dissolution** C.J. Sansom

Henry VIII has ordered the dissolution of the monasteries and England is full of informers. At the monastery of Scarnsea, events have spiralled out of control with the murder of Commissioner Robin Singleton. Matthew Shardlake, a lawyer, and his assistant are sent to investigate.

## **Dissolution Details**

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Author : C.J. Sansom

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## From Reader Review Dissolution for online ebook

### Annet says

Great book!

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### Peter says

#### Dissolution

*Dissolution* is the first book from CJ Sansom in the Matthew Shardlake series, set during the reign of King Henry VIII and his Chief Minister, Thomas Cromwell. The Catholic Church in 1536 is being eradicated in Britain and the Dissolution of the monasteries has begun – by 1540 no monasteries would be left. The tensions in the country are high between those loyal to King Henry and those to the Catholic Church. Cromwell, himself is under scrutiny since his alliance with the now beheaded Ann Boleyn.

Shardlake is summoned to Thomas Cromwell's office and assigned to investigate the death of one of Cromwell's agents in St Donatus monastery at Scarnsea. Is the beheading of the agent significant, and is it a message. Shardlake is an intelligent astute lawyer, that unfortunately suffers physical deformity as a hunchback, and he sets off for Scarnsea with his assistant Mark Poer.

The historical nature of the story is fabulous and the attention to detail in dialogue and descriptions provides a wonderful atmosphere to enjoy this historical whodunit. Shardlake is a brilliant central character and he makes this novel intriguing and captivating as he delicately investigates the murder and the life at the monastery. He knows only success will placate Cromwell and the dynamics of the political and religious tensions are palpable.

I would highly recommend this book as a murder mystery, and there is just that feeling that Sansom understands the Tudor period so well that you are tempted to take all the details as fact.

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### PattyMacDotComma says

5★

**“He [Thomas Cromwell] was holding up a casket [small box] and studying the contents with a contemptuous frown, his wide, narrow-lipped mouth down-turned above his lantern chin. His jaw held thus made me think of a great trap that at any moment might open and swallow one whole with a casual gulp.”**

And with a brutal gulp, Cromwell dissolved and swallowed the monasteries across England, beginning with smaller ones in 1536 and completing the dissolution of even the largest old ones by 1540, pensioning off a few monks but turning everyone else loose into the poor neighbouring townships.

The monasteries were infamous for hoarding wealth, and Cromwell was determined to collect it to augment the royal coffers via the Court of Augmentations. There, they assess and divvy up the proceeds to buy up more land for the Crown (and cronies, no pun intended, and no - it's from the Greek). So nobody is looking after the poor.

Briefly, the Pope wasn't happy about Henry VIII's annul/remarry plans, so Henry started his own church, the Church of England with himself as the head. Today's C of E is also known as the Anglican Church, and Queen Elizabeth II is the Supreme Governor.

*(There is some historic religious connection to past centuries, and influence from the Protestant Reformation, but I'd rather get back to the mystery!)*

Matthew Shardlake tells the story. He is a lawyer in his late 30s who is hampered by his deformed hunched back. But he's intelligent and quick-witted, and Cromwell has been happy with Shardlake's work. In the opening scene, quoted above, Cromwell commissions Shardlake to investigate the Monastery of Scarnsea after showing him a letter he has just received:

**“My master Singleton is foully murdered in the heart of the monastery, in a most terrible manner. He was found this morning in the kitchen, in a lake of blood, his head cut clean off. Some great enemy of Your Lordship must have done this, but all here deny it. The church has been desecrated and the Great Relic of the Penitent Thief with its bloody nails is vanished away.**

**. . . Please send help my lord and tell me what I should do.”**

So Shardlake and his talented, loyal off-sider Mark, a handsome young ladies' man, set off in the wet, blustery cold of an English winter to replace the murdered commissioner. Cromwell was arguably the most feared man in England then, and his commissioners struck terror into the hearts of even the most powerful abbots.

Hunchbacks were considered unlucky then, so people tend to give Shardlake a wide berth, which makes it easy to find privacy in the pubs and inns along their way.

The wintry weather, the wind, the bitter cold sent me to the firesides with them. The monastery is just as miserable, but the situation is hot with plenty of suspects. In the winter, Scarnsea is a hard place to break into, but the monks and monastery staff would like to think the murderer came from outside.

Needless to say, Shardlake does have to flash his credentials a few times when insisting he can demand access to everything. Every single thing. Every desk drawer, every cupboard, every cell. He's as nervous about failing Cromwell as he is about being murdered. *(Oh, yes, there are a couple more deaths! Did I forget to mention that?)*

It's a wonderful who-dunnit with a colourful cast of very different characters, well identified in welcome, subtle ways by Sansom as they appear and reappear in the story.

It's so easy to get lost, especially in historical fiction, that it's refreshing to find an author who's not afraid to admit a reader might not have committed every name and scene to memory. The list of Obedientaries (Monastery officials) in the front is there if you need it, too.

The cast includes civilians in the kitchen and on the grounds, and our intrepid fellows both fall for the same bright, pretty girl in the kitchen, which causes some anguish and awkwardness, but she is kind to our hunchbacked hero in spite of obviously favouring handsome, younger Mark.

The townsfolk are desperately poor and starving (and cold!) while the brothers eat well. These are real people, not just theatre props, and I loved it all.

There's a lot about religion, with monks and everyone trying hard to remember not to use Catholic phrases in

this new world. One slip, and you could end up being stretched on the rack, tearing joints apart. One seemingly mad monk has survived this, only just. But they do bend the rules. When questioning the time of a murder, Shardlake asks:

*“This was at five o’clock?”*

*‘The clock had struck a little before.’*

*‘Had Matins begun?’*

*‘No, Matins is sung late here. Usually towards six.’*

*‘St Benedict’s rule prescribes midnight.’*

**He smiled gently. ‘St Benedict wrote his rule for Italians, sir, not people who have to live through English winters. The office is sung and God hears it.**

My kind of thinking!

There are interesting sidelights, such as when they tour the premises.

**“‘Beer,’ I noted.**

**‘Empty barrels?’ Mark asked.**

**‘No, full ones. The monastery brewhouse has a monopoly in supplying the town’s beer. They can set the price. It’s in the founding charter.’”**

Talk about a licence to print money! No wonder Cromwell wants a piece of the action!

The language is appropriate to the era without being overly archaic or arcane.

I did question the phrase “runcible peas”, (as in Edward Lear's The Owl and the Pussycat poem which mentioned a “runcible spoon” many years later. *(I also discovered that a runcible spoon sounds similar to my favourite piece of multi-purpose cutlery, the splade or spork, depending on your preference. But I digress.)*

The story seems accurate and informative as well as entertaining, I enjoyed the investigative process, and I didn’t guess the perpetrator. In those times and in those dreadful conditions, even I would have been tempted to murder. Now, though, I’m really looking forward to the next in the series!

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## **Phryne says**

Now that is how historical fiction should be written, plenty of fact, some great fictional characters and a really good story. The fact that this is also a mystery and a page turner made the deal for me. This was a really good read and I will be seeking out the rest of the series very soon.

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## **Maria Hill AKA MH Books says**

This is a good old-fashioned who-dun-it, with bodies dropping every few chapters. Set in 1537 and told in the first person, Matthew Shardlake (a King's Commissioner) must investigate the brutal killing of the previous King's Commissioner, Robin Singleton at Scarnsea monastery. What is a good and reasonable Reformer to do amongst a bunch of deluded crazy Papist monks? With the fate of the Monastery at risk, everyone has something to cover up and nobody is to be believed!

The historical background is phenomenal in this book (the author really knows his stuff) and the murder mystery ain't bad. The character of Mathew Sharldlake is charming but will probably need to be developed a little more (I assume this will happen in later books?).

Altogether recommended for those who like a slightly different murder mystery and for fans of historical fiction set in the Tudor period.

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## **Emma says**

First in a long running series, book 7 Tombland is out in October, Dissolution introduces lawyer and reformist, Dr. Matthew Shardlake. Currently in favour with Thomas Cromwell, Chief Minister to King Henry VIII and a vehement Reformer, Shardlake receives a commission to investigate a death in the monastery of Scarnsea. Even before the previous Commissioner, Robin Singleton, had his head removed by some unfriendly sort during his stay there, a monastery in this period was far from safe. It was a time of terrific uncertainty due to an extensive refashioning of society, most especially in the religious sphere, with papists facing severe penalties. In 1534, Cromwell began investigating the monasteries and now in 1537, the larger ones face the threat of dissolution, being potentially rich sources of revenue for the Crown. The murder draws Shardlake into the depths of contemporary religious and political scheming, opening his eyes to its deadly consequences.

Set mainly within the walls of Scarnsea, but with some memorable scenes in London, the book seethes with sinners. For a book about religion, there's a remarkable lack of decent, honest, god-fearing folk. Nevertheless, their lack of moral character stops nobody from arguing the validity of their viewpoint and its evident justification. As someone with no religious affiliation or belief, it's sometimes hard to imagine how important the specifics of worship can be to an individual or group; what doesn't surprise is the ways in which the machinery of power or domineering individuals can make such strong convictions *useful*. This was a time when every word had to be considered before spoken and informers abound, offering testimony of guilt in exchange for reward, regardless of any 'truth'. The wrong thought, turned into speech or deed, could land you at Tyburn- hung, wracked, beheaded, drawn and quartered, or burned at the stake. A wondrous selection of terrifying options for a painful death. A Crown agent beheaded in a monastery is a big deal, it could be the spark that sets off the tinderbox, a whole country up in flames.

Interestingly, the author has chosen to give Shardlake a physical disability in the form of bent spine and hunched back, causing him discomfort of both the physical and mental kind. He is well aware of his difference, always seeing reactions to that aspect of himself in others, and there is no doubt he receives mockery in the book. He has a quick mind, and a quicker temper, but makes a compelling narrator, working through the clues with a sharp attention to detail, through not always an open mind. His master, Cromwell, is a sinister figure, mercurial and rather frightening, prepared to do whatever is necessary to see the King's (and his own) will done. That Shardlake cannot see this part of his personality was a stretch- even with a certain amount of denial, a man of his intelligence should have been more aware. Yet the book is about the maturation of his understanding and he is disabused of many naive notions by the end. It's a dangerous

world, but not without humour. The language is lively, filled with fun and useful insults- I fully plan to wish a pox on anyone who annoys me today.

When I worked at Waterstones, this series was one that consistently sold well, and now I know why. I'm looking forward to catching up with the rest of Shardlake's adventures soon...

ARC via Netgalley

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## **Bookdragon Sean says**

I very rarely bother with crime novels. The genre feels overdone and, well, a little bit boring. To me it all looks like the same regurgitated story. I blame the terrible police dramas on television; they make me yawn when I see how stupid they are. I did a two year course in forensic science, and it never ceases to amaze me how the writers of these television shows think that wearing gloves will therefore mean that the crime scene is not contaminated by the otherwise exposed investigators. Never mind the fact that they are trampling over evidence, leaving their own hairs and jumping to ridiculous conclusions based upon preliminary testing. These things are horribly inaccurate to the professional field; they are always forensically inaccurate. So, regardless of how this is handled in modern crime books, I always avoid them to avoid similar annoyance. This, however, isn't a modern crime book.

This is a murder mystery set in the political upheaval of Tudor England. The churches are undergoing dissolution, hence the title of the book. This, to me, sounded utterly fantastic. I mean, at last, a crime book that I want to read. I have a real interest in the Tudor period of history. It was a reign that changed the face of England. I mean, imagine how different the country would be today if King Henry VIII never broke with Rome, and with the Pope. Arguments between branches of Christianity may never have become so heated. King Charles I may never have been executed for his Catholic sympathies, amongst other things. The Dissolution with the Catholic Church changed the face of England forever along with its sequential history.

## **Murder in the monastery**

This book combines a classic whodunit scenario with the intrigue of the sixteenth century; it is brilliantly handled. At the heart of this book is a very human character: Matthew Shardlake. Shardlake is a commissioner sent, by Thomas Cromwell, to investigate his predecessor's murder at a monastery. Shardlake has a twisted back so is consequently spurned by the religious zealots of the time. This immediately drew upon my sympathy. He is obviously no different to his peers, but for all their supposed enlightenment, toward the religious reforms, they still shallowly judge someone for their appearance. It's a cruel world. This along with Shardlake's unsuccessfulness with the ladies, results in a very damaged yet resolute commissioner.

**"This is not Thomas More's Utopia, a nation of innocent savages waiting only for God's word to complete their happiness. This is a violent realm, stewed in the corruption of a decadent church."**

Thus, his investigation is no easy affair. He is met with disgust, scorn and damn right revulsion at every turn. But, he overcomes it. He is used to it, and has risen far above it. He gets on with his job and sets out to find what caused the death of a supposedly innocent man. Shardlake is clever, compassionate and determined. He has the nose of a bloodhound. He analyses the facts in a pragmatic way; he doesn't jump to conclusion and only delivers a realistic approach to the crime. He questions everything, which left me in a continuous state

of suspense until he found his answers.

The historical setting of the churches, the towns and the people are brought to life. The turmoil the age is captured along with the skulduggery of its inhabitants. Thomas Cromwell is portrayed as a mean old brute which is quite interesting after reading Hilary Mantel's version of him in which he is sympathised with, greatly. The scenario in this book kept me questioning everything. At one point there were at least seven suspects. Each had a strong motive. As the focus of the suspicion changed, so did the plausibility of each motive. I am proud to say, that my initial guess was half right. I'll say no more on that regard, other than this had a really intense ending. It's a great read.

#### Shardlake series

1. Dissolution- **A suspense filled four stars.**
  2. Dark Fire- A dark 3.5 stars
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### **Susan says**

First published in 2003, this is the first novel in the Matthew Shardlake series, and introduces us to our unlikely hero; lovelorn, hunchbacked, a reformist lawyer who begins the book as utterly loyal to Cromwell's ideals and ends it plagued with doubts about his role and mission.

Shardlake is sent by Cromwell to the Monastery of St Donatus the Ascendant at Scarnsea, Sussex. It is 1537 and the dissolution of the monasteries is underway. Cromwell had sent Commissioner Robin Singleton there with lawyer, Lawrence Goodhops. Now Singleton has been found murdered and Shardlake is sent to investigate. He is accompanied by Mark Poer, a young man he had taken into his household as a family obligation. Mark has been in disgrace for his dalliance with a knight's daughter and Shardlake hopes that success in their mission will plead Poer's case for rehabilitation, while putting him in Cromwell's favour. However, once they arrive they find Goodhops terrified and the monks suspicious and concerned about their future. Snow begins to fall, making travel difficult, and the monastery is isolated, with dangerous marshland outside the gates and the possibility of smugglers. Before long, Shardlake is embroiled in an investigation of murder, which reaches back to the trial and beheading of Ann Boleyn – an event which Shardlake attended on Cromwell's orders.

Although this is the first novel in the series, and there are bumps along the way, the character of Shardlake himself already seems like an old friend. The setting – the isolated monastery with a fixed group of suspects – works very well. Mark Poer is not the greatest foil to Shardlake, but the novel introduces other characters who appear in later books. Overall, even re-reading this, it is an assured and excellent debut to a series which has to be my favourite historical mystery series in print (even if Bernie Gunther is such a close second he is virtually joint first...). The next books in the series are: Dark Fire, Sovereign, Revelation, Heartstone, Lamentation, with Tombland due out later this year. A new Shardlake is an event but, until then, it is wonderful to revisit these books and rediscover how great they are.

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### **James Thane says**

Even though I read a lot of history, I've never been a fan of historical fiction and so when one of the book clubs to which I belong picked this novel as a monthly read, I approached it with some trepidation. For the most part, though, I was pleasantly surprised and I enjoyed the book more than I expected to.

*Dissolution* is set in England and the action takes place over a couple of extremely cold and snowy weeks in 1537. This is shortly after King Henry VIII has broken with the Catholic church and created the Church of England, with himself as the head of the church. At this point, of course, religious freedom is only a dim, distant dream, and all English people are required by law to follow Henry into the new Anglican church, whether they like it or not.

Many of them don't like it. They remain true to the Catholic church and continue to give their religious allegiance to the Pope. Many of these people will be persecuted for their beliefs and not a few will be executed. In many respects, these are not the sunniest of times.

Once establishing himself as head of the English church, Henry conveniently grants himself a divorce from his wife, Catherine of Aragon, so that he can marry Ann Boleyn. The Pope had refused to grant Henry an annulment of his marriage to Catherine and this precipitated the break between Henry and the Pope.

Henry also moves expeditiously to confiscate property in England that had belonged to the Catholic church. Most important, there were many Catholic monasteries in England that controlled vast amounts of valuable land. Henry began the process of dissolving the monasteries (the Dissolution) and appropriating their wealth. His principal ally in this effort was his vicar general, Thomas Cromwell, who was much feared by Henry's opponents.

Cromwell sends a commissioner to begin the process of dissolving the monastery of Scarnsea on the southern coast of England, but shortly after arriving at Scarnsea the commissioner is murdered. Cromwell now sends one of his protégés, a lawyer named Matthew Shardlake to investigate the murder and to conclude the dissolution of the monastery.

Shardlake is a brilliant lawyer and is devoted to the reform of the church. He is also a hunchback who has always been self-conscious and socially ostracized to some extent because of his handicap. Shardlake is accompanied by a handsome young assistant named Mark Poer, and the two make their way through the snow to Scarnsea to find a tangled web of murder and intrigue along with financial and sexual irregularities. More murders will follow their arrival and it's clear that Shardlake and his young assistant are also in grave danger every moment that they remain in the monastery. The burning question is whether or not Matthew Shardlake can accomplish his mission before both he and Mark become victims themselves of the evil that seems to infuse Scarnsea.

What I enjoyed most about this book was the atmosphere that Sansom creates. He vividly recreates the turmoil of the period along with the sights, sounds and smells of the era. The reader feels the chill in his or her own bones as the characters struggle to stay warm in the middle of the freezing cold weather. This historical detail is engrossing and the story is a compelling one.

If I have a complaint about the book, it's that about halfway through the book, the story started to drag a bit. Shardlake spends an awful lot of time wandering through the snow from one part of the monastery to another in order to interview people and it starts to get a bit repetitious. I found myself encouraging Shadlake to pick up the pace a bit. This is a book that runs 385 pages which, in my estimation, would have been much better at about 325 pages. But that is a relatively small complaint, and this is a book that should appeal to anyone who enjoys historical mysteries. 3.5 stars for me, rounded up to four.

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## Manju says

A murder in a Monastery, and Matthew Shardlake, a London lawyer, was sent to investigate it. Matthew,

who was working for Thomas Cromwell, wanted to impress his boss and was adamant to solve the case as soon as possible but alas mystery turned murkier and another murder was committed.

Since it was 1500, so no modern sciences to help us in way of finger prints, autopsy, lie detector test etc. Matthew had to talk to monks and see all of them as suspects, and that's what I like about historical mysteries. I have not read many but the few I have read, I liked how the detectives has to depend on their instincts and hunches and someone was always on their heels to murder them.

I loved the writing style of Samson and how he depicted the strife in the English population. Also, he gave every character a very interesting back story which was believable and atmosphere that he created in this book was apt for the mystery.

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### **Stephen says**

5.0 stars. This story grabbed me from the very first page and kept me engaged throughout the entire book. I do not read as much historical/crime fiction as I do science fiction/fantasy but this book might cause that to change given how much I enjoyed this. I am a bit of a history buff and I was drawn to this story because it is set during the English Reformation, a period I was interested to learn more about.

The main character, Matthew Shardlake, is a hunchback, English lawyer working for Thomas Cromwell (the architect of the English Reformation). Shardlake is sent to a Benedictine monastery to investigate the brutal murder of one of Cromwell's men. However, Shardlake's true mission is to arrange for the voluntary surrender of the monastery to the English crown. The book was very well written, with a complex, well structured plot and very memorable characters. This is a great story filled with intrigue, political machinations and realpolitik being conducted under the guise of religion. Highly Recommended!!!!

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### **Marita says**

This is a good historical mystery, told by a master story teller. It is a tale of greed and revenge in which suspense and red herrings abound. The characterisation is good, the plot is interesting and our hero has to come to terms with some of his own shortcomings. The historical angle is also interesting; I had not previously given the dissolution of the monasteries much thought.

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### **Thomas says**

I enjoyed reading this historical fiction book, recommended by GR friend Ingrid. The book is set in 1537 England. Henry VIII has left the Catholic church and the country is divided between those faithful to the new Church of England, with Henry VIII as its head, and the Catholic church. A royal commissioner is murdered in the monastery of Scarnsea on the southeast coast of England.

Thomas Cromwell, Henry's vicar general, calls a lawyer, Matthew Shardlake, to his office and tells him to go to the monastery, find the murderer and persuade the monastery to surrender its property to the king. Shardlake and his assistant Mark Poer go the monastery and investigate. More murders happen and the ending was a surprise to me. I thought that the author wrote a very evocative novel, painting a vivid picture of Tudor England, with all its cruelties and maneuverings by various players jockeying for power and money.

Two quotes-- Catholic Church holy relics: "They say that there are two headed dragons in the Indies. Well here we have two headed saints" {Cromwell showing Shardlake two different skulls of the same saint} Shardlake, dealing with an informer: "I was shaking like an aspen leaf from head to foot."  
I give this library book a solid 4 out 5 stars. I recommend it to historical fiction fans.

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## Paromjit says

This is a reread for me, the first in this historical series set in Tudor England that introduces and establishes the lawyer, Matthew Shardlake, afflicted by a deformity he was born with, leaving him in constant pain. Henry VIII has ordered the dissolution of the monasteries, intending to profit greatly from them. This has created a febrile atmosphere of religious unrest with Catholics being hunted down and plentiful executions. It is 1537, a tired and unhappy Shardlake has been summoned by the much feared Lord Thomas Cromwell, a man who had ill advisedly allied himself with the now beheaded Anne Boleyn, leaving him with much to prove.

One of Cromwell's agents has been murdered, beheaded no less, whilst investigating St. Donatus monastery at Scarnsea. The beheading is sending a personal message to Cromwell as he insists that Shardlake goes there and find out what is going on. Shardlake and his assistant, Mark Poer, travel to the monastery, finding the monks unsurprisingly scarcely repenting of their faith, as they are politically demanded to do, despite the terrible repercussions if they do not. Shardlake has little sympathy with the Catholic faith, being a strong supporter of the reformation. With more murder and a host of suspects, Shardlake has his work cut out to get close to the truth.

Sansom does a terrific job in evoking the turmoil and atmosphere of this historical period. Shardlake makes for a compelling central character that carries this great series with aplomb. I found this just as good a read as the first time round, entertaining and informative. Many thanks to Panmacmillan for an ARC.

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## Samantha says

Set during the Dissolution of the Monasteries under Henry VIII, this novel brings this episode in history to life through the character Matthew Shardlake. He is developed throughout the story, creating a multi-faceted, compelling protagonist. Passers by only see Shardlake as a cripple, but the reader sees his pride, insecurities, longing for companionship, and devotion to a cause that he believes is sincere.

Through the example of the Monastery of St. Donatus at Scarnsea, we are shown first hand what it was like for the monks at this time to be at the mercy of the king. First they were ordered to change centuries old rituals to fit the reformist trend, only to eventually lose their entire way of life. Putting it on this personal level and seeing what happens to each of the characters Sansom creates, the reader can vividly imagine this period of history.

The author's depiction of Tudor times is second to none. Daily living and all its struggles are injected into this story without becoming info-dumps or narrations of boring detail. Cromwell makes a couple of brief appearances, and he is realistically written, if not as sympathetically as in Mantel's novels.

I appreciated the author's ability to give each of his characters an active faith that did not truly fit into any category that the government of the time was attempting to create. Shardlake proclaims himself an ardent reformer, until he is struck with the realization that the reforms are more about redistribution of wealth than

true worship. Though the setting was a religious house and each person revealed their thoughts on God, the book never overdoes the Christian theme or becomes preachy.

And then there are the murders! I loved this book for the great character development and visualization of Tudor England, but it is also a great mystery. Shardlake is sent to Scarnsea to investigate the murder of his fellow commissioner and discovers a much more tangled web than he expected.

A must read for anyone interested in this period of history.

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### **Jeffrey Keeten says**

**”This is not Thomas More’s Utopia, a nation of innocent savages waiting only for God’s word to complete their happiness. This is a violent realm, stewed in the corruption of a decadent church.’**

**‘I know.’**

**‘The papists will use every means to present us from building the christian commonwealth, and so God’s blood I will use every means to overcome them.’**

**‘I am sorry if my judgement erred.’**

**‘Some say you are soft, Matthew, ‘ he said quietly. ‘Lacking in fire and godly zeal, even perhaps in loyalty.’**

**Lord Cromwell had the trick of staring fixedly at you, unblinking, until you felt compelled to drop your gaze. You would look up again to find those hard brown eyes still boring into you. I felt my heart pound. I had tried to keep my doubts, my weariness, to myself; surely I had told nobody.”**

**A view eastwards along the chancel of the church at the Cistercian monastery of Rievaulx Abbey in the Yorkshire Wolds. The monastery was founded in the 12th century and abandoned during the Dissolution of the Monasteries.**

I had just been introduced to Matthew Shardlake when he is summoned to the office of Lord Thomas Cromwell. Shardlake has become disillusioned about working for Cromwell. It is arduous work, requiring travel hither and yon, and mentally draining to see the look of fear and barely suppressed loathing that people feel for a representative of Cromwell. To make matters worse the infirmity he was born with, a hunchback, continues to give him more and more trouble with each passing day. Already weary in soul and feeling the physical toil of the past few years the last thing Shardlake wants to do is to be dispatched to the St. Donatus monastery at Scarnsea.

But there has been a murder and not just any murder, but the murder of a Cromwell representative while he was investigating the monastery for improprieties. The killer was sending a very clear message to Cromwell by beheading his agent. Cromwell’s own head is lucky to still be setting squarely on his shoulders after he became such an ardent ally of the recently beheaded Anne Boleyn.

To prove his loyalty to Henry the 8th Cromwell is fervently enforcing the recent **First Act of Succession (1536)** dissolving as many monasteries as possible, within the confines of the new law. He is confiscating

their lands and gold baubles to help bolster the King's treasury. St. Donatus is one of the larger monasteries all of whom hope to survive the purge. Although anybody in the know realizes that Henry will not be happy with just a few when he can pass a law, **Second Act of Succession (1539)**, that will bring them all down. Right now it is 1537 and Shardlake can offer some assurances to the abbot that the monastery can still be saved.

**Haughmond Abbey. The extensive remains of an Augustinian abbey, including its abbots' quarters, refectory and cloister.**

This was a time of uneasy alliances with Catholics swearing allegiance to the new church not because they necessary believed, but because they wished to keep their property and to keep their heads attached to the rest of their bodies. People used the new laws to settle old grievances, turning their enemies in for Catholic devotion that reminds me of neighbors turning on neighbors in Germany under the Third Reich.

Protestants killing Catholics. Catholics killing Protestants. Good lord, all so a king can bed a particularly crafty young lady who would settle for nothing less than the crown on her head before she ministered to the Kingly "crown".

Anne Boleyn was a true Eve, nearly bringing a kingdom down with her feminine wiles and her "progressive" religious ideas. Think of the lives that would have been saved if Henry the 8th in one of his many mishaps had crushed his balls or better yet sliced his dinger off. Are we to believe that his main objective in having so many wives was to procreate an heir? Maybe so, but truly in the course of doing so it is hard not to see him as bordering on sexual conquering lunacy.

I know he was worried about starting a war with Spain and France, but wouldn't this all have been easier and saved a lot of hanging, beheading, burnings etc. if only Catherine of Aragon had say had an accident in the bath or had a bit of loose stone masonry fall on her head? Not that I wish ill on Catherine. She seems to be the one purity in this whole sordid mess, but would thousands of lives been spared?

Shardlake with his rather comely (male) assistant in tow arrives at the monastery to discover that there are more problems than just one murdered man. Needless to say everyone is on edge knowing that the King's representative needs very little cause to close the monastery and confiscate their lands. Shardlake finds a nest of barely repentant monks still clinging to their idols and traditions. It is too much to expect that people can just flip a switch and do away with beliefs that have sustained them their whole lives.

**The ruins of Glastonbury Abbey dissolved in 1539, following the execution of the Abbot on charges of treason.**

A monk is poisoned...what did he know or what did he see? An old murder comes to light of a young girl who once worked at the monastery. Before long Shardlake wonders if he is chasing one murderer or three? He soon discovers that the monastery keeps two sets of books and the missing blue book may be the very thing he needs to find to unmask at least one of the killers. To make things even more irritating for him he finds himself competing with his young assistant for the affections of a young lass who works in the infirmary of the monastery.

Shardlake is very dismissive of Catholicism, a true believer in the Reformation, but at the same time he is sickened by the lives that are being ruined needlessly. He certainly feels the pressure to not only uncover the true murderers, but also to reach solutions that will put him back in the good graces of Cromwell. It is a time when people must deny their true nature whether they are homosexual, Anabaptist, or harboring affection for

the Pope of Rome. It is always tragic when people who have much more in common than they have in disagreement are killing each other over the whims of Kings. I will definitely be reading more in this series. I've heard that the books just keep getting better and better.

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## Adina says

I have a special affinity for historical mysteries and Dissolution is one of the good examples of this genre, at least for me.

The novel is the first installment in Matthew Shardlake series. The action is set in the time of (in)famous king Henry VIII and it has as main character a hunchback lawyer under the service of the equally famous and controversial figure, Thomas Cromwell. The titles hints on the subject of the novel, at least it does to readers familiar with British history. I knew vaguely of the Catholic Church Dissolution and reading this has been a perfect opportunity to improve my knowledge. Samson, with a PHD in history, presents the historical events without transforming the book in a history lesson, which I appreciated.

About the mystery part... one of Cromwell's Commissioners, that is, the person sent to negotiate the surrender of Scarnsea monastery is found brutally murdered on its premises and Mr. Shardlake is sent to investigate together with his young protégé. The lawyer arrives in a hostile environment where each monk seems to hold a secret and could be the potential murderer. Under overwhelming time and secrecy pressure imposed by Cromwell, Shardlake begins a long set of interviews and immerses himself in the life of the monastery. I learned interesting details about the monastic life, most of them not showing the Catholic Church in the best of lights.

I felt that the portrayal of the Catholic Church and of the reformist was balanced and that the conclusion rings true event Today's: Whenever people with power fight the only true losers are the common people.

*"It seems a universal rule in this world that people will always look for victims and scapegoats, does it not? Especially at times of difficulty and tension."*

I had 2 small problems with this novel. Firstly, some of the characters were not drawn enough, felt flat and one dimensional. Secondly, the way the killer was discovered felt a bit more like a stroke of luck more than the result of a careful investigation.

All in all, a highly enjoyable read which will make me continue with the series, no doubt about it.

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## Mark says

What can I say. Really exciting, really atmospheric and the novel for which the phrase 'page turner' was created. Its the first in a series, in which i shall most definitely be heavily indulging, revolving around a well drawn character called Matthew Shardlake who, when the novel begins, is an ardent if gentle reformer working for Thomas Cromwell just as, with the death of Jane Seymour, Henry VIII is set free to vomit his

horrible nastiness over a few more women.

Shardlake, a lawyer who struggles with the disadvantage of suffering from a hunchback, is sent to a Monastery on the East Coast at Scarnsea to investigate the brutal murder of one of Cromwell's men who had been sent there so as to speed up the process of dissolution. In the latter part of the 1530's Cromwell had taken on the role of destroying the monastic tradition of England couching it in terms of cleansing the realm of the filth of papist domination. This Shardlake applauds and spends the first part of his stay at St Donatus monastery sneering and judging and belittling. The monastic community is painted as a community almost without saving grace. Overly worldly and lazy, riven by division and hate and all of the monks bar the black moorish convert Brother Guy are represented as gross hypocrites.

Initially this ridiculous sweeping generalization, dismissing every monk as a fatuous idiot or hypocrite, annoyed and jarred as i read but of course the whole point is that the novel is in the first person. We walk in Matthew's world, caught up in his bigotry and judgements, we see the protestant reform and its leaders through his idealized and naive eyes and the catholicism is tarnished by his experiences, including his cruel rejection, because of his deformity, when he sought priesthood as a lad.

Gradually, though he does not come to think particularly highly of catholicism, he does begin to realize that perhaps it is not the monstrous fetid swamp he believed and nor is the longed for Protestant Commonwealth just around the corner. He sees more clearly and thus more sadly.

The story itself is wonderfully exciting with marvelous hiss/boo villains, a handsome manservant and long-suffering servant girl who provide the opening for ramblings on love and loss as the snobbery of social division in which even Shardlake partakes threatens there future, a mad tortured monk who might not be as mad as Shardlake first thinks and all sorts of links to the court of Henry and his shadowy henchmen as well as suspects galore for the brutal beheading.

The story is cleverly written in that Sansom does not make Shardlake anything other than a man of his time. He is not made to think and speak in a way that no man of his time would( Please note writers of the british farcical courtroom drama 'Garrow's Law' which makes our hero some 21st Century reformer thinking and speaking and behaving in a way that is about 200 years ahead of his time.) This is not what Sansom has done in the character of Matthew. He is zealous for the reform, though not a vicious zealot, but his hatreds and prejudices are similar to those of his peers if not expressed with such brutal cruelty as was perhaps the norm. His disability perhaps makes him less likely to condemn the outsider but he is not made to look at the 1530's as an enlightened man of the 2000's. Homosexuality is seen as nothing but foul and perverse and beyond the pale, catholics and anabaptists are to be scorned and loathed and, at the beginning of the book at least, your betters, those above you in society, are to be trusted and believed. God has given you a position and you should not be anything but content with that.

I found the world he painted pulsed with life, the brutality and degradation, the despair and fear, the struggles and unrest all whirled round in a great turmoil of a society being changed irrevocably. The reign of Henry resulted in far more changes than just a wife or two and this rumbling underground, gradually heading towards the surface is well captured by the prose and plot of 'Dissolution'.

Clever

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## **Emma says**

'The Bible says God made man in his image but I think we make and remake him, in whatever image

happens to suit our shifting needs.'

This is a complex time in Tudor history, brilliantly brought to life by CJ Sansom. The status quo in Britain at the time this story is told is an uneasy one. Thomas Cromwell has been commissioned by Henry VIII to dissolve the monasteries. Papists are hunted down. As one character says 'there is nowhere safe in the world, no thing certain.'

Matthew Shardlake, a hunchbacked lawyer from London is charged with the investigation of one of the Kings commissioner's murder while auditing a monastery. He is a good man and well developed intelligent character. He knows he is not a 'catch' for any woman because of his disability and yet it is painful to read of his hopes of genuine feelings between himself and a serving girl, and also to see his disillusionment with Reformers' dishonesty and corruption.

I loved this book more when I was more of a historical fictionista but since I have been seduced by historical fantasy, I am slightly less keen.

Still a really enjoyable and quality book and I will probably over time reread the others in the series. It seems a long time since the last volume by CJ Sansom and I think my urge to re read this came from my longing for a continuation of Matthew Shardlakes adventures.

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### **Michael Cattigan says**

Looking at the reviews here, it seems that this book is getting hammered because it cries out to be compared with other powerhouses of books.

Set in the 1500s of Henry VIII, it clearly bears parallels with Wolf Hall which is set two wives earlier. It has to be said that it lacks the beauty of the language of that novel or its subtle, multilayered realistic characterisation. Mantell's Cromwell is a far more engaging and convincing narrator than Sansom's Shardlake.

Similarly, set in an isolated monastery, narrated by an articulate first person narrator who is investigating a murder, comparisons with Name of the Rose are easy to make. I may be mistaken, but I wonder whether the reference to the (fake) lost Comedy of Aristotle in Scarnsea's library was a deliberate echo (or Eco?) of Name of the Rose. Again, however, Dissolution comes off worse in the comparison: it lacks the intensely almost arcanelly intellectualism of Eco, who I love hugely; the language comes across as being broadly modern with the occasional nod towards the period whereas Eco's writing has always struck me as amazingly authentic.

This said, look at the writers with whom Sansom is being compared: I cannot think of any writer who would come off better in such a contest! It is the fact of the parallels that almost demand the comparisons to be made which is the problem, not the writing or the plotting itself. Sansom has so far succeeded in engaging and entertaining me, creating a universe which feels reasonably authentic. That seems to me to be worth a good 4 stars...

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