

marriage, at nine. A'isha herself narrates how she ends up in trouble, explaining when her marriage is actually consummated, and how she becomes the prophet's most beloved wife. Scheduled for publication by another publisher, *The Jewel of Medina*, was "indefinitely postponed" on the eve of the launch, supposedly because of fear of terrorists attacks. Reading this debut novel makes you wonder if that was really the case. Other than its background, seventh-century Arabia, the novel has little merit larded as it is with generous servings of purple prose and with a main character, A'isha, who is selfish, impulsive, and a ludicrous proto-feminist. There are anachronisms galore, from golden teeth to the Turkish institution of *hatun*, not to speak of our heroine constantly wielding a sword for which there isn't an iota of historical data. Islam as a religion and Muhammad are generally treated fairly, the notable exception being the less than dignified portrayal of the prophet's sex drive (which made this Catholic cringe in distaste). Nowhere to be found is the woman Muslims revere as the "Mother of Believers," an early scholar, and the source of many of the oral traditions regarding the life of Muhammad. Preposterous throughout.

Adelaida Lower

DANCING WITH DEMONS

Peter Tremayne, Minotaur, 2008, \$24.95, hb, 288pp, 9780312375645 / Headline, 2007, £19.99, hb, 288pp, 9780755328383

In this 16th installment of Tremayne's Fidelma of Cashel series, the High King of Ireland is killed at night in the middle of his well-defended compound. Although his killer appears to have committed suicide after having murdered the King, things simply don't jive. How did this deed occur in a fortified palace? Why would anyone have wanted to kill the High King? What is the motive for the murder? Enter Fidelma, the sister of the King of Muman and a highly respected advocate of the courts of Ireland, to investigate and solve these seemingly insoluble dilemmas.

Rather than becoming stale and repetitive, Fidelma simply gets better with age. Tremayne consistently imbues her with charisma, intellect and a touch of down-home toughness when the situation calls for it. What is more engaging to the reader is Tremayne's vast knowledge of Celtic Ireland and how that knowledge is employed to expand every Fidelma mystery from an investigation into an experience. Here, for instance, Fidelma is confronted with an intricate web of deceit and conspiracy involving warring religious factions which, if not resolved, will tear apart the very fabric of the united kingdoms and send them reeling into civil war.

I admit to having read every one of these Fidelma books and I'm hooked. This one stands out, however, making it a wonderful, quick and highly enjoyable read.

Ilysa Magnus

11th CENTURY

MASTER OF SURRENDER

Karin Tabke, Pocket, 2008, \$6.99/C\$7.99, pb, 376pp, 9781416550891

In a prison in Iberia in 1059, the brotherhood of The Blood Sword was created out of the agony of torture and triumph of survival. In 1066, that brotherhood became the most powerful squadron of William the Conqueror's invading army. After Harold was killed, William sent these knights, led by Rohan du Luc, to secure certain properties for him, particularly the castle of Alethorpe. Lady Isabel of Alethorpe was left in charge when her Saxon father and brother went to fight the Normans. Isabel is intelligent and beautiful; Rohan is strong and powerful. She hates the Normans; he is bent on subduing the Saxons. Despite their differences there is a strong sexual attraction.

Ms. Tabke's forte is sexual tension, and this story abounds with it. Despite some historical improbabilities, this enjoyable story moves at a fast pace and holds the reader's interest.

Audrey Braver

12th CENTURY

THE DEATH MAZE (UK) / THE SERPENT'S TALE (US)

Ariana Franklin, Bantam, 2008, £12.99, hb, 320pp, 9780593056509 / Putnam, 2008, \$25.95, hb, 384pp, 9780399154647

Fair Rosamund Clifford was Henry II's mistress, and she was buried in Goldstow Priory, near Oxford. These are established facts. She is surrounded by legends but none of these surfaced until over a hundred years after her death. They may have been based on folk memory but there is no proof. She could have lived at Woodstock, one of Henry's favourite manors, and he may well have made her a bower (or tower?) there. In Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicles* he says, 'Boures had this Rosamunde.' The protective maze and Queen Eleanor's supposed part in her death are much later and improbable additions to the legends.

The paucity of fact enables historical novelists to imagine and invent the rest, even to substitute fictional characters in place of the real ones. Ariana Franklin, in doing this, has created an intriguing, clever and richly detailed detective novel, the second to feature the female doctor, Adelia. Her former lover, now Bishop of St Albans, wants her to discover the murderer of Rosamund, absolving the Queen, who, with her sons, is quarrelling with Henry and thereby preventing another civil war.

Set against the background of a hard winter, when a second murderer is on the loose and many characters, for most of the time, snowbound in Godstow, it is an absorbing, if at times gruesome story. Adelia is an attractive heroine, a refreshingly blunt, irreverent and independent

sleuth who is reluctant at first to be involved, but she becomes determined to discover the truth about both murders.

Ariana Franklin's first novel featuring Adelia won the Crime Writers' Association Ellis Peters Historical Award in 2007. As Diana Norman she has previously published several much-acclaimed historical novels.

Marina Oliver

DEVIL'S BROOD

Sharon Kay Penman, Putnam, 2008, \$27.95/C\$31.00, hb, 736pp, 9780399155260 / Michael Joseph, Feb. 2009, £20.00, hb, 752pp, 9780718154653

With her customary skill in depicting the personalities of medieval England's most famously dysfunctional family, Penman delineates the last eighteen years of Henry II's reign. Most of the action takes place in his French holdings, with less time spent in England proper. It opens in 1171, as the king weighs his responsibility in the death of his once-good friend, Thomas Becket. Though acutely attuned to political matters, Henry proves to be blind when it comes to those closest to him. Eleanor, his redoubtable queen, takes offense at his refusal to acknowledge her sovereignty in Aquitaine; their four sons, eager to assume power in their own right, join Eleanor in rebellion after Henry continues to clip their wings. As they battle both their father and one another, Henry struggles to hold onto his formerly thriving empire.

Several portrayals stand out, particularly those of people not often seen in fiction: Henry, the hot-headed Young King, who ultimately (and sadly) serves England best through his tragic early death; and Geoffrey, the third son, whose role as Duke of Brittany drives his changing loyalties. Richard, a soldier prince with a ruthless streak, remains faithful only to his mother, whose determination to preserve Aquitaine for his inheritance results in her long imprisonment. John, the youngest, remains an unknown quantity until the very end.

Most remarkably, in a book where dozens of characters share the stage, there are no true villains or flawless heroes. Though dense with detail in some sections, *Devil's Brood* does an excellent job of rendering a complex series of historical events comprehensible. Those unfamiliar with Plantagenet history will probably want to read *Time and Chance* first, but this long-awaited volume delivers all you can expect from Penman: a story so immediate and real that you'll feel like you've lived it.

Sarah Johnson

14th-15th CENTURIES

THE LAST QUEEN

Ballantine, 2008, \$25, hb, 384pp, 9780345501844 / Hodder & Stoughton, 2008, £6.99, pb, 350pp, 9780340962947