

TIME *and* CHANCE

Sharon Kay Penman



A READER'S GUIDE

A CONVERSATION WITH
SHARON KAY PENMAN

Random House Reader's Circle: The traits that make Henry a great king—arrogance, daring, single-mindedness, a love of conquest and power—do not necessarily make him a great husband, father, or friend. What price does Henry pay for his kingship?

Sharon Kay Penman: A very high price, indeed. All of the above-named traits are not virtues in a domestic context. Nor did it help that Henry was something of a control freak. At least where his family was concerned, he seems to have found it almost impossible to relinquish any real authority and this reluctance doomed his relationship with his sons.

RHRC: Would you agree that betrayal—Becket's betrayal of Henry and Henry's betrayal of Eleanor—is at the center of this novel?

SKP: Yes, I would, but we must remember that betrayal is rarely clear-cut or unambiguous. Becket certainly did not believe he'd betrayed Henry. Nor did Henry see his affair with Rosamund Clifford as a betrayal of Eleanor, for it was understood that he'd take other women to his bed when he and Eleanor

were apart. Of course Rosamund was not just a convenience. But as his emotional involvement with Rosamund deepened, he at first refused to admit it and then managed to convince himself that Eleanor did not realize Rosamund was not like his other bedmates; she was much more than a casual conquest.

RHRC: The people Henry trusted most in the world—his mother, his wife, and Becket—all questioned his decision to appoint Becket as Archbishop of Canterbury. Why did he ignore their warnings in this critical instance?

SKP: One of Henry's failings was his reluctance to accept advice once he'd made up his mind. His stubbornness did not serve him well in this case. Nor did his utter faith in Becket's friendship. He was so sure that he knew Becket better than anyone, even Becket himself—with tragic results.

RHRC: Becket was not of noble blood; he was the son of a merchant. Henry overlooked Becket's humble origins, but others, most notably his wife and mother, did not. Did his lack of rank shape the course of his life in medieval Europe? Did his ambitions and achievements come under extra scrutiny and criticism because of his extraordinary upward mobility?

SKP: Most definitely. Many men looked at him askance from the first, resentful that he'd been able to soar so high from such a lowly perch. Any man as close to the king as Becket would have become the target of jealousy and suspicion. But Becket's shame about his origins gave his enemies a potent weapon to use against him. Our belief in equality never took root in medieval soil. Even Henry, wanting to hurt Becket during their confrontation at Northampton, instinctively lashed out with a taunt about Becket's modest lineage.

RHRC: For the most part, your readers are not made privy to Becket's inner thoughts and motivations. Why did you decide to make him such an unknowable character?

SKP: Thomas Becket has remained an enigma for more than eight centuries; I wasn't so egotistical that I thought I could solve the mystery of this man in a mere five hundred pages! I made a deliberate decision to distance myself from Becket and to filter impressions of him through the perspectives of other characters. We see Becket through Henry's eyes, through the eyes of his devoted clerks, skeptical fellow bishops, the barons who loathed and mis-

trusted him, and the English people, who readily accepted him as a saint in their midst.

Was he driven by raw ambition? Did he experience a religious conversion that compelled him to forswear his worldly past? Did he shed his identity as a snake sheds its skin, taking on the coloration of each new role like Hwyl's chameleon? I thought it only fair to allow my readers to make up their own minds about this most controversial of archbishops. I realize that not everyone will agree with my tactical choice, but I felt most comfortable with this approach, which seemed particularly well suited to Becket's quicksilver, inscrutable character and contradictory history.

RHRC: One notable instance in which readers are given some insight into Becket is when Henry tells Becket he wants him to become Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket tells Henry he does not want to jeopardize their friendship and asks: "Are you sure I can serve both you and the Almighty?" Henry sidesteps the question with a joke. What would a truthful response from Henry sound like?

SKP: I suspect that Henry did not differentiate between his needs and those of the Almighty, truly believing that if Becket served him well, God would be satisfied, too.

RHRC: How much blame must Henry bear for Becket's murder?

SKP: Not as little as Henry thought or as much as his enemies claimed. Henry twice did public penance for Becket's death, once at Avranches and then again at Becket's tomb in Canterbury Cathedral. The first *mea culpa* seems to have been a pragmatic political response, but his second act of atonement appears to have been more heartfelt, less a *pro forma* gesture than one of genuine emotion. I don't believe that Henry ever felt much guilt over his complicity in Becket's death. It is human nature, after all, to rationalize away the unpleasant, and kings are more adept than most at that particular skill. I do believe he sincerely regretted that he should have given his enemies such a sharp sword and that Becket had come out the winner in their war of wills; not even a crown can trump sainthood. And it is likely that there were some private regrets for the man he'd once loved, the man he'd once thought Becket to be.

RHRC: Becket is not the only character in this novel with divided loyalties. Ranulf is torn between his loyalty to Henry and his loyalty to Wales. Did Henry serve well all those who were loyal to him?

SKP: When Thomas, Cardinal Wolsey, was charged with treason by King Henry VIII, he had a moment of belated epiphany and said, “Had I but served God as diligently as I have served the king, He would not have given me over in my grey hairs.”

This would never have been said of Henry II. Whatever his other failings, he did not discard men who were no longer useful, as too many kings were wont to do. Henry rewarded loyalty with loyalty.

RHRC: The issue of crown versus church jurisdiction in criminal cases involving church officials is an important theme throughout this novel. Do you think this historical conflict in any way echoes contemporary debates in the twenty-first-century United States over sexual abuse in the Catholic Church?

SKP: When the current scandal spilled over into the public domain, it definitely struck familiar echoes with me. Even after eight centuries, we have not been able to agree where the boundaries should be drawn between church and state. Little wonder that this incendiary issue set Henry and Becket upon a collision course to disaster.

RHRC: Eleanor was counseled to either learn to love Henry less or to accept him as he was. Has she truly managed to do either at the close of this novel?

SKP: Yes, I believe that she did. Unfortunately for Henry, she took the first road, not the second.

RHRC: Does Henry recognize the depth of his estrangement from Eleanor or the depth of her anger once Rosamund Clifford enters his life?

SKP: No, he did not, and his blindness was to cost him dearly. Henry never learned to view life from any perspective but his own, and he seemed to be genuinely surprised when his family's festering discontent burst into outright rebellion. He continually made excuses for his sons' lack of loyalty and refused to believe the Count of Toulouse's warning that Eleanor was conspiring with his sons against him. Even on his deathbed, he was still proclaiming his faith in his youngest son, John; it was only when he was presented with incontrovertible evidence of John's betrayal that he turned his face to the wall and spoke no more.

RHRC: What made you choose Henry and Eleanor as subjects of their own trilogy? What have been the rewards and the drawbacks of focusing on two of the most celebrated and studied figures in medieval Europe?

SKP: What novelist could resist the allure of such larger-than-life characters as Henry and Eleanor? No Hollywood screenwriter could rival their reality. They loved and schemed and fought and forgave and fought again on a world stage, and eight centuries after their deaths, people still find them as fascinating and elusive and compelling as their contemporaries did. So I'd say the rewards are obvious.

The drawbacks? Perhaps the greatest one is that I had to forfeit the element of surprise. My novels about medieval Wales were set in unexplored terrain; my readers did not know what lay around every bend in the road. Henry and Eleanor's story is far more familiar, even to people not particularly enamored with the Middle Ages. Who hasn't seen *The Lion in Winter*, after all?

RHRC: This novel covers a large canvas over a twenty-five-year period. Was it difficult to decide what stories to tell and what stories to mention in passing or leave out entirely?

SKP: That is always a challenge. Usually some stories leap right off the page, practically screaming to be dramatized. Where Henry and Eleanor are concerned, there was almost a surfeit of riches. This is why I chose to tell their story in trilogy form; that way being able to do justice to all the critical events of their lives while not producing a book that would make *Moby Dick* look like a minnow, size-wise!

RHRC: In your "Author's Note," you discuss when and where your narrative deviates from the historical record. What particular challenges does historical fiction pose? How are you constrained by the historical record? How do you decide when to take fictional license?

SKP: In writing my historical novels, I obviously have to rely upon my imagination to a great extent. I think of it as "filling in the blanks," for medieval chroniclers could be utterly indifferent to the needs of modern novelists. Sometimes it is necessary to "invent" essential details; for example, chroniclers often report a death without specifying the cause. But there is a great difference between filling in the blanks and distorting known facts. I also

attempt to keep my characters true to their historical counterparts. I do my best to build a strong factual foundation for each of my novels and rely upon my Author's Notes to keep my conscience clear.

RHRC: How long did the research take for this novel? Do you do research in the beginning and then start writing or do you research as you go along?

SKP: It usually takes me about three years to research and write one of my historical sagas; this is one reason why I take medieval mystery breaks, for they can be completed in only a year.

Chance was so long in the making because of circumstances beyond my control. My first mystery, *The Queen's Man*, was nominated for an Edgar and it was decided that I should follow it up with another mystery. I therefore put *Chance* aside—much to Henry and Eleanor's dismay—and wrote *Cruel as the Grave*. The plan was then to finish *Chance* once I'd coaxed my pouting Plantagenets into cooperating again. I did not expect to come down with mononucleosis and I most definitely did not expect it to lay siege to my immune system for eighteen months! I research as I write—that is, I do specific research about a particular castle or town or battlefield.

RHRC: What kinds of sources did you use for this novel? Did Henry or Eleanor leave personal papers or diaries behind?

SKP: I make use of secondary sources such as historical biographies and translations of primary sources like chronicles, letters, charters, and government records. I do not have the linguistic skills to read medieval Latin or medieval French and I am sorry to say that Welsh continues to elude my best efforts. Fortunately, I have always been able to find translations of the materials I need.

There are some extant letters written by Henry and a few by Eleanor which are part of the correspondence of state and therefore not that personally revealing. A notable exception is the outrage that sears through the formal phrasing of the ill-advised letter Henry sent to the French king after Becket's flight into exile, which I quote in Chapter 17 of *Chance*. And Thomas Becket's letters to the pope also shine a light into his psyche, displaying his aggrieved sense of injury, his instincts for high drama, his weakness for self-pity, and his stark, stubborn courage. Moreover, as I said in my Author's Note, the Henry-Becket schism is probably the best-documented episode of the Middle Ages, a veritable treasure trove for historical novelists.

RHRC: Which writer would you invite to a reading group meeting to discuss what work? What would you most like to ask him or her?

SKP: Emily and Charlotte Brontë, if I'm not limited to the living. If I am, I'd love the opportunity to meet Harper Lee and to ask her why she never wrote another book after her classic *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

RHRC: What other titles would you recommend for a reading group discussion?

SKP: Any of my books! Seriously, I do think *Here Be Dragons* would be a good candidate, as would *The Sunne in Splendour*. If you want to stray from Penman territory, I would highly recommend anything by Alice Hoffman or Barbara Kingsolver.

RHRC: How would you describe your average workday of writing?

SKP: I work on a chapter at a time and do not sit down at the computer until I have all the research done and the scenes in my head, waiting to spill out onto the page. I do not set specific work hours as some writers do. I generally stay with a chapter until I am satisfied, do very little rewriting, and if a scene is going well, I've been known to keep night owl hours.

RHRC: What will *Devil's Brood*, the final installment in the Henry and Eleanor trilogy, cover? When can your readers expect to find in the bookstore?

SKP: I plan to begin *Devil's Brood* with Henry's return from his self-imposed exile in Ireland, when he reluctantly agreed to do public penance for Becket's death, taking a solemn oath before the papal legates that "he neither ordered it, nor willed it, and that when he heard of it he was greatly grieved." The final entry in my trilogy will deal with Henry's fraying bond with his wife and sons, surely one of history's most dysfunctional families. I expect to end the book with Eleanor's release from confinement upon Henry's death and Richard's accession to the throne.

As to when it might be in the bookstores, I do not want to tempt the fates by making any predictions, for my memories of mononucleosis are still too vivid for comfort.

READING GROUP QUESTIONS AND
TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Becket and Ranulf wonder whether Henry is ruthless because he is king or king because he is ruthless. What do you think?
2. As a leader, how do you rate Henry? What about as a father, husband, and friend?
3. Henry believes he will be able to make up for his absence in his children's lives once they are older. Do you think this will be possible?
4. Discuss the pros and cons of a royal childhood in medieval Europe.
5. Despite his hatred of his former wife, Louis agrees to a marriage between his daughter and Henry and Eleanor's oldest son. Why does he do so? Is this a wise decision?
6. "If I were God Almighty, I'd have decreed that all kings be only children," remarks Henry. This novel provides ample evidence of the bloodshed and conflict succession in a monarchy has entailed. Discuss this conflict as it played out in England, Wales, and France in the novel.

7. "Eleanor always seemed to be defying the natural boundaries of womanhood," remarked one character. Discuss how Eleanor both transcends and is constrained by the gender conventions of her day.
8. Ranulf remarks, "Passion might not be the soundest of foundations for a marriage, especially a royal one." Discuss the nature of Henry and Eleanor's marriage. What do you consider a sound foundation for a marriage?
9. Do you think Eleanor makes the right decision not to confront Henry about Rosamund Clifford? What do you think would have happened if she had?
10. What has Rosamund Clifford gained and lost with her decision to be with Henry?
11. When Henry announced his plan to elevate his chancellor Becket to Archbishop of Canterbury, Eleanor cautioned Henry that he might "be asking too much of Becket." Do you agree or disagree with Eleanor's assessment?
12. Henry cannot understand what he considers Becket's betrayal. Is it a betrayal? Is Henry simply blinded by his ego?
13. Do you agree with Hywel's characterization of Becket as a chameleon?
14. Henry struggles with his guilt over Becket's murder. What do you judge to be Henry's role in his death? Do you agree or disagree with the author's assessment?
15. This novel illustrates the fine line between church and state in medieval England. Do you agree that this novel makes a good case for the separation of church and state?
16. Henry's decision to commit the Constitutions of Clarendon to the written record is a controversial innovation. Discuss how a culture is changed in the shift from an oral to a written tradition.

17. Many characters in this novel suffer from divided loyalties. Who makes the most and least wise decisions regarding which side to choose?
18. Why does Ranulf finally choose a side and turn his back on Henry? Do you think Ranulf's rejection is justified?
19. Why did your group choose this book? Are you happy with your choice?
20. Have you read the first book in the trilogy? Will you read the final installment?
21. Discuss the characters you found most intriguing. Who would you most like to see return in *Devil's Brood*?
22. What is your group reading next?