

A Medieval Village

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I very rarely read children's books. But recently, after coming upon a review of this one: *Good Masters! Sweet Ladies! Voices from a Medieval Village*, by Laura Amy Schlitz, I bought it and was so charmed by it that I wanted to mention it here.

I had a personal reason for being interested. I have long had a passion for Medieval times and still have an entire bookshelf devoted to reference volumes about that era. Way back in, oh, probably 1980, I began writing a novel set in a small English village in - I think it was 1439 (I am at the wrong house and can't look it up). In any case, it was the year that the plague entered England and eventually killed a third of the population. I remember that I named my fictional village Tarrant Marsh.

I remember, too, that my protagonist was a young girl, left with a newborn baby to care for after her mother and the rest of her family...and almost all of her village..dies. (Interesting to think of it now, since many years later the book "The Giver" dealt with a young boy caring for an endangered infant)

I was loving the writing of my Medieval book. Then I happened on a review of a book by well-known writer of historical fiction Ann Turner, a book called "The Way Home"...well, here, I'll look it up:

Kirkus Review:

An odd little adventure set during the plague year 1349 in England and featuring hare-lipped Anne, who has cursed the local lord for beating her and killing his falcon, and so must flee her village when the lord dies soon afterwards. (In fact, she may well be responsible for infecting him.) We hear of Anne's good friend Hugh, who's been exiled to the nearby woods; but now her Da sends Anne to spend the summer in a marsh a few days' distant. We follow her there and see her build a hut and set herself up with two new chicks for companions; then Turner skips to the end of summer, when Anne sets off for home but is captured by a father and son who want a wife for the son. The father is cruel, and his wife ("sow-woman," Anne calls her) is not much more attractive; but the more sympathetic son eventually relents and unties the rope with which Anne has been tied to him to prevent her escape. And so it's home, to find the village wiped out by the plague. The ending is unrealistic, with Anne, excited, running down the road to greet a returning Hugh; and Anne's earlier, acerbic remarks about marriage also seem planted by the author. But the intervening events have some mild shock value as a picture of other times and other circumstances.

(Goodness, reading that review now makes me think how much the author must have hated the phrase "odd little adventure.")

I never read the Turner book. And it wasn't the same book I was writing. But it was enough like mine in setting and plot, apparently, that I set mine aside reluctantly after reading about it. It was simply a case of two writers having similar ideas at too close to the same time.

But I have often thought of it over the years, remembered my protagonist fondly, and wished I could have finished the now-discarded book. And I am still drawn to the period, which is why I just bought and loved the new book by Laura Amy Schlitz (and wonderfully illustrated by Robert Byrd). It is not at all like the one I'd been writing, or the one Ann Turner wrote, but it is a wonderful portrait of the era and of its people.

So I am recommending it highly to those readers like me who are drawn to that setting.

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