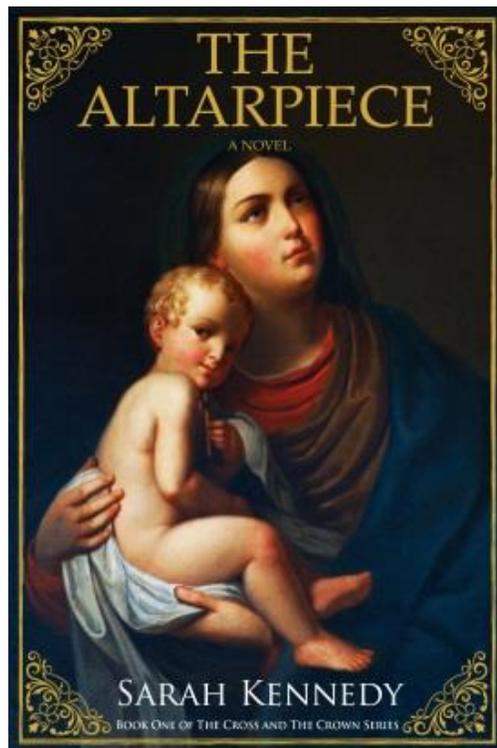


Reading Group Guide

THE ALTARPIECE

The first title in the Cross and the Crown series

By Sarah Kennedy



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Also available as an e-book

Selected Praise for *The Altarpiece*

“... there is mystery, action, and even some romance....Although the mystery and search for the missing altarpiece provide the story with needed momentum, it is the more subtle tensions of the tale that are most interesting. It is intriguing how the nuns Christina, Veronica, Ann, and Catherine struggle and come to terms with the fact that their way of life is changing and may never be the same. Kennedy also deserves credit for approaching the period from the refreshing perspective of the devout.”

—*Historical Novels Review*

“*The Altarpiece* is a powerful depiction of a horrible time in England’s history....Catherine is a very unique character. She is well-read and highly skilled in medicine of her time. While she lived in her convent, she was safe and protected. Without that protection, she may be considered a witch by people she had helped. I admired Catherine courage and her sense of right and wrong.... a very good piece of historical fiction.”—*Kinx’s Book Nook*

“*The Altarpiece* by Sarah Kennedy is the first in The Cross and The Crown Series and what a fantastic start!....Of course I knew of the priories and monasteries being taken by force by King Henry’s men but I’ve never read anything that focused on any one house so I found this very interesting. The author very vividly takes you back to this time period and you can practically feel the brutality and hopelessness of the situation being portrayed. For certain I will be anxiously awaiting the next novel in The Cross and The Crown Series called *The City of Ladies!*”—*Peeking Between the Pages*

Discussion Questions:

1. Historical documents record the fate of the monks and monasteries under Henry the VIII but not the fates of the nuns. Discuss.
2. How does reading this book change, or not change, your view of the Tudors?
3. Have notions of what constitutes witchcraft changed?
4. There are many kinds of love in this novel, from the maternal to the romantic. How is love depicted in the novel?
5. One could also say that this novel is about different kinds of faith. What kinds of faith drive the story?
6. What role do families play in this novel? How are families defined?
7. How much of the history shaping this book is history you knew?
8. What role do books play in the story?
9. Do you think that Catherine's role as a healer will help her in the future?
10. How important to the story is William? Could Catherine have survived without him?
11. Talk about the importance of loyalty in this novel.
12. Discuss how arrogance shapes this story.
13. What gives Catherine her strength? What gives Ann her strength? Do they have power in their new world?
14. What do you think is going to happen next?

Interview with the Author:

How did the idea for *The Altarpiece* originate?

The story of a piece of religious art that was hidden inside a table originated in Norwich Cathedral, where I heard such a tale years ago. It must have been percolating in my mind for a long time, though, because when I first began thinking about the novel, my first image was of a young nun, barely out of her teens, who knows that Henry VIII's men are coming to remove her and the only family she's ever known from their home.

Why did you decide to make this a series?

I've always been interested in the lives of ordinary people in history—how they got their food, treated their injuries and illnesses, how they raised their children, how they came to terms with monarchs and unjust laws. My particular focus in *The Altarpiece* was on English nuns, because so little is known about them, especially in remote, small convents. I'm also interested, however, in working people who lived around great landholdings and the ways that social rules and conventions were imposed—or defied—in the Tudor period. After *The Altarpiece*, the religious houses in England are gone—though there is still much unrest about the new order imposed by the court!

Do you have a favorite character?

Well, Catherine, of course! She is so much smarter and more thoughtful than I was at her age, and she struggles with expression of her beliefs and her desires in a culture that idealizes quiet, submissive women. But Ann Smith is very dear to me. She's big and rough and practical, but she's also good-hearted. She stands by her friends whatever may come, and she doesn't suffer fools gladly.

You are a scholar of the Renaissance, but did you have to do any research for this novel?

Yes, I did! I needed to make sure that the details of clothing, tableware, and geography were all accurate, and I paid close attention to dates, because my characters are affected by larger political events, and they encounter well-known figures. I had to make sure that people were where the historical record says they were. I did update some terms for ease of reading; for example the women refer to their skirts rather than their kirtles. That's a little anachronism that eases the way into the period for the contemporary reader. But I had to make sure when I was modernizing small details that the current word referred to the right thing.

Why were the monasteries and convents destroyed, when clearly there was so much valuable art and literature in each?

The very value of many of the religious buildings actually led directly to their destruction. Henry VIII's men stripped off the lead roofs for recycling into ammunition, and the gold and silver could either be melted down and re-used or be sold to bring in money for the crown. The stained-glass windows could be removed and dismantled or used in private homes.

Items of beauty and value could also be used as bargaining chips, traded for loyalty as the king and his court consolidated their power. Once the buildings were sitting empty, the stones were often scavenged by nearby farmers for houses and barns.

Sadly, some of the destruction was caused by Protestant fanaticism, and men often came through English churches and chopped the hands, feet, and faces from the religious and funerary statuary. That's where we get the expression to "deface" something.

We will never know how splendid the medieval and early Renaissance religious houses in England were, and that seems to me an incalculable loss.

Do you still write poetry?

I do, though less than I once did. I still love poetry, and I still teach it and read it. I just find nowadays that the novel provides me with the space to explore character and event, to delve deeply into history in ways that satisfy my creative impulse.

Why did you turn to prose after having so much success with your poetry? What are the advantages of writing one versus the other, and how do they differ?

I'm not really sure why my imagination changed in that way. I do notice when I look back over my books of poetry that I was moving to a more narrative style, and my subjects were more character-driven. I was writing many dramatic monologues—so many that a friend said to me a couple of years before I started writing *The Altarpiece* that I should try my hand at a novel. I scoffed at the time—but she was right!

What do you hope readers take away from the novel?

I hope that readers come away from *The Altarpiece* with a new understanding of what life might have been like for ordinary men and women in Tudor England—and so with a new appreciation of the complexity of the past. Tudor England is often fictionalized, but the focus is almost always on Henry VIII, his six wives, their families, and Queen Elizabeth. I love those figures, and I'm fascinated by the effect they had on European history, but I want to weave a thread from the present to the past, so that we can find the connections between them and us. We all suffer from conflicts between what we want and what we believe is our duty. We all wrestle with the authority figures in our lives. I hope readers come to understand that even religious women with strong convictions experience anger, vindictiveness, and lust—as well as friendship and love.

What's next?

City of Ladies comes out in October 2014! It's the second book of the Cross and the Crown series. I won't tell what happens, but Catherine is a couple of years older and a lot has happened to her. She is different in many ways, but she's still sorting out her feelings about her king and her country. I'm at work right now on Book Three, and I'm happy to hear from my readers about where they think Catherine should be headed next!

About the Author:



Sarah Kennedy has written seven books of poems, including *The Gold Thread*, *Home Remedies*, and *A Witch's Dictionary*. A professor of English at Mary Baldwin College, she holds a PhD in Renaissance Literature and an MFA in Creative Writing. She has received grants from both the National Endowment for the Arts and the Virginia Commission for the Arts and is a contributing editor for *Shenandoah*.

Her website is sarahkennedybooks.wordpress.com.

Book 2 of The Cross and the Crown series, *City of Ladies*, will be released on October 21, 2014.

Knox Robinson Publishing was founded in 2010. For more information, visit www.knoxrobinsonpublishing.com.