

Courts, Knights and Treachery

The Middle Ages has always been a fascinating period to read about, what with knights, courtiers, jousting and innumerable acts of treachery taking place.

Along with other sub-genres of historical crime fiction, medieval crime fiction has seen its popularity grow. However, at one stage there appeared to be a dearth of books on the period. It has always been a matter of scholarly debate as to what period can be classed as the Middle Ages/ Medieval period and the general rule is that the dates run from around 500 to 1500 AD. There is some overlap for example, the Japanese medieval period is said to cover 1160-1600. While that of Europe encompasses the 11th Century until the 14th Century. In India, the period was from the death of Harsha in 647 AD until the Mughal invasion in 1526. Furthermore, it was a period where the whole of Europe and not solely England transformed itself from the ancient to the modern. What cannot be disputed is the fact that the medieval era is excellent at providing authors with a wealth of material with which to construct their stories and an abundance of history for readers to delve into.

Where England is concerned one of the first medieval crime fiction books to be written was the 1955 *Murders at Crossby* by Edward Frankland. It told a tale of murder and mystery set in the 10th century amongst the Norse settlers of Westmorland.

The murder of the Princes in the Tower has always been a fascinating topic to write about and Jeremy Potter duly did so in his 1970 novel *A Trail of Blood*. It is a story of how the truth was discovered by England's earliest known detective - Brother Thomas of Croyland. Was it in fact their wicked uncle Richard III or their brother-in-law Henry Tudor who did the deed? A year later Robert Farrington wrote a novel entitled *The Killing of King Richard III*, which was in essence also the story of the mysterious death of the Princes in the Tower. His sleuth Henry Morane was a trusted friend and special agent of the late Richard III. In the follow-up book *The Tudor Agent*, in order to survive the purge of Yorkist power by the Tudors that is taking place Morane agrees to undertake a near suicidal mission. His task is to infiltrate a Yorkist revolt and kidnap the boy pretender the rebel lords hope to place on the throne. In what appears to be the final book in the series *The Traitors of Bosworth*, we see Morane out of London and in Flanders where a new pretender to the throne is being trained. What with the double threat of invasion and a full-scale rebellion at home, Morane uses his resources and ingenuity to use the events for his own ends to seek vengeance upon the traitors of Bosworth. With his knack of getting out of tight scrapes, it is unsurprising that Morane was seen as a latter day Bond in a doublet and a hose. Sadly, it appears that Farrington did not write any more books in the series. While not the first book written by Paul Doherty, he has also written a book about the Princes in the Tower. His 1990 book *Fate of the Princes* looks again at the relationship between Richard III and what is alleged to have happened to the Princes in the Tower. Elizabeth Peters who is better known as the author of the Amelia Peabody series has also weighed in with a novel about Richard III. *The Murders of Richard III* is set in between two time spans, that of 15th century England and the 1980s.

The author that is credited with highlighting the period however is Ellis Peters. In 1977 to the delight of readers, she introduced her sleuth Father Cadfael to the world in *A Morbid Taste for*

Bones. Up until her death, Peters wrote over 20 books in the acclaimed series featuring the Benedictine monk. The last book in the series was *Brother Cadfael's Penance* written a year before her death and in which the reader sees the Benedictine monk investigating an issue that is close to home. Set in 1145 Cadfael finds himself in an awkward position. The son he had before he became a monk has been kidnapped and while Cadfael may have lost track of the mother, his son has never been far from his mind. Determined to find his son, Cadfael realises that he must leave the monastery to do so with or without his Abbott's permission. As usual, Peters has written an excellent tale with Cadfael at his best. She also manages to show what can happen when personal devotion can change and turn to enmity and how it can be tempered by justice and mercy.

Another novel to emerge in 1977 was *Death in the Forest* again by Jeremy Potter. Set in the 12th century it features Edith a Princess of Scotland (who later goes on to marry Henry and become Queen Matilda of England) who has been consigned to a nunnery much to her dismay. When one of the four lords who have turned up unexpectedly is, found murdered Edith is determined to unravel what has happened and the effect that it will have on the succession to England and Normandy.

It is quite truthful to say that between 1977 and her death in 1995 that Peters appears to have cornered the market. All her books in the Cadfael series are firmly related to actual historical events. The 1980s appeared to be a slight turning point in the setting of medieval crime fiction mysteries, the majority of which were written by Ellis Peters and Paul Doherty (under one of his many guises). Apart from Peters and Doherty, from 1980 until 1990 very few books were written by other authors. In 1983, husband and wife team (Mary Ann and William) EMA Allison wrote *Through the Valley of Death* set in 1379 England featuring Brother Barnabas who was assigned to investigate the murder of Brother Anslem a Cistercian monk. However, who would want to kill a monk? In his former life as Captain Jean d'Albret, the deceased had committed terrible acts across England and France thus earning himself numerous enemies along the way. Some of them being extremely distinguished and powerful enemies. It is up to the rather dangerously innocent Brother Barnabas to find the killer and before his investigation is completed, he comes to learn about the evil that men and even monks do. It was in 1985 that the redoubtable Paul Doherty emerged on the scene with *The Death of a King*, which looked at whether or not Edward II was murdered. As a Chancery clerk, Edmund Beche attempts to fulfil Edward III's charge to investigate the death of King Edward II.

The following year saw three other books being released. *Flying to Heaven* by John Fuller set in 14th Century England, *Satan in St Mary's* by Paul Doherty, which introduced readers to Hugh Corbett a clerk of the King's Bench who is sent to investigate political crimes and to counter spies of Edward's rival Philip of France. In *Satan in St Mary's*, Corbett investigates black arts and rebellion when a man is found murdered in a locked church. So far, Doherty has written fourteen books in the series featuring Hugh Corbett. The most recent book in the series is *The Magician's Death* where Hugh Corbett (now Sir Hugh Corbett) Keeper of the Secret Seal of King Edward I and a royal spy is instructed by the King to organise his spies in Paris to steal the Book of Secrets. The book is supposed to contain many marvels of nature and science written in an unbreakable code called the Secret of Secrets. Finally, Duane Crowley's *Riddle me a Murder* features Geoffrey Chaucer as a sleuth. Set between 1365 and 1400 *Riddle me a Murder* is a tale

of murder and suspense based on an apocryphal incident in his life. In this novel, Geoffrey Chaucer is portrayed as a soldier, lawyer, lover, and poet who is given his first assignment by the powerful Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt who is his patron. He invariably becomes involved in a tangled web of treachery, and intrigue when a woman close to the Queen is found murdered, and his patron's physician is accused of the deed. Crowley of course is not the only author to use Chaucer as a protagonist. *Murder on the Canterbury Pilgrimage* by Mary Devlin was written in 2000 and once again had Chaucer as the main protagonist. Set in 1382, Geoffrey Chaucer is invited to join a religious pilgrimage to Canterbury. He accepts the invitation and while on the trip plans to record the tales that the pilgrims tell as the Canterbury Tales. When he is accused of a murder Chaucer finds himself hunting the homicidal crusader.

Death is a Pilgrim: A Canterbury Tale by Gertrude and Joseph Clancy is another book that uses Geoffrey Chaucer as a detective. Set in April 1387 a band of pilgrims on the road from London to Canterbury are driven by a storm to take refuge at the Priory of Saint Innocents. When one of the party is found dead of a mysterious wound an informal inquest is held to hear the pilgrims' tales of what they had been doing. While the Clerk of Oxford deduces how the crime was committed, Chaucer discovers who the murderer must be.

Unsurprisingly, Doherty has also written a series using Chaucer's Canterbury Tales as a background. The first book in the series is *An Ancient Evil: A Knight's Tale* and investigates vampirism in Oxford. Doherty's fascination with medieval history has meant that he has written another book that looks again at the relationship between Edward II and Edward III. In *A Tapestry of Murders: A Man of Law's Tale* a question arises as to whether or not Edward III was in fact the son of Edward II.

A more recent addition to the series of books using Chaucer as the sleuth is *Chaucer and the House of Fame* by Philip Gooden written under the name of Philippa Morgan. Set in 1370 midway through the long Anglo-French conflict known as the Hundred Years War. Chaucer is tasked with the delicate job of persuading the remaining important noblemen of Aquitaine to remain loyal to the King. However, when Chaucer and his companions reach the Dordogne in south-west France a murder takes place and Chaucer finds himself no longer acting as a diplomat but as an investigator instead.

Although not based on the Canterbury Tales, Judith Healey's *The Canterbury Papers* has Canterbury Cathedral as its background. The story, set in the early 1200s, is narrated by Princess Alaïs Capet, a bored and somewhat bitter member of the French nobility, long passed over for both matrimony and higher status. Alaïs is approached by Queen Eleanor, who asks her to retrieve a secret and highly personal cache of letters hidden in England's Canterbury Cathedral. Eleanor won't explain the importance of the letters, but in return for salvaging them, she promises to divulge family secrets that Alaïs could use to her advantage. When she reaches Canterbury, she finds not only the letters missing but also a trail of dead bodies in her wake. Barely staying ahead of her unknown enemies, Alais joins with the Knights Templar to begin to uncover a conspiracy by powerful and evil people wanting to take over two kingdoms.

I am sure that in 1988 one had not realised how prolific Paul Doherty was due to become even using the various pseudonyms that we have come to associate with him. He appears to have

taken up the mantle of Ellis Peters. In 1988, he began another series featuring Matthew Jankyn. Set in the 15th Century, Jankyn would have you believe that he is an Oxford scholar, soldier, veteran of Agincourt, confidant of kings and rebels when he is in fact a spy, a coward and above all a liar. The series is narrated by the odious Jankyn and we learn how he becomes employed by the Bishop of Beaufort to investigate the rumours that Richard II did not die in 1399 but is in Scotland gathering an army to march against Henry. The first book in the series is *The Whyte Harte*. The other books in the series are *The Serpent Amongst the Lilies* and *Dove Amongst the Hawks*. Unfortunately, all these books are now extremely hard to find.

The 1990s saw a huge resurgence in medieval crime fiction and the author leading the charge was none other than Paul Doherty this time using the alias Paul Harding. The new series that he started features two of the most differing characters as protagonists. Brother Athelstan a Dominican monk who has been sent to work in the slums of Southwark as penance and Sir John Cranston the jovial, food loving, beer swilling Falstaffian coroner of the City of London. The series is better known as the *Sorrowful Mysteries of Brother Athelstan*, and the first book in the 14th century series set in England is entitled *Nightingale Gallery* a murder in a mystery house. When the crown of England is left in the hands of a mere boy a power struggle ensues. When one of the powerful merchant princes of London is murdered, Sir John Cranston skilfully assisted by Brother Athelstan must solve the murder. With their investigations taking them from the sinister secrets of Nightshade House in the slums of Whitefriars to the barbaric splendour of the English Court; Cranston and Athelstan are ably helped but also sometimes hindered by a motley group of people who include Cecily the courtesan, Watkin the dung-collector, Ranulf the rat-catcher. This is one of the best series from this productive author. The latest book in this delightful series is *The House of Shadows* where Cranston and Athelstan find themselves investigating not only two gruesome killings but also the Great Robbery of the Lombard treasure that happened in Southwark some twenty years earlier.

Margaret Frazer is another author who at the beginning of the 1990s decided to write about the medieval era. Her main protagonist is Dame Frevisse a Benedictine nun. Sister Frevisse is extremely well connected. She is close to her uncle Thomas Chaucer, son of Geoffrey Chaucer and while he has refused many titles, the fact that he has a number of noble and half-royal relations it means that Sister Frevisse has a number of important friends to call upon. In the first book in the series *The Novice's Tale*, Thomasine D'Evers a frail seventeen-year-old novice is a suspect in the brutal murder of her aunt Lady Ermentrude Fenner. Disliked by many, it is up to Sister Frevisse to ferret out the reason and real murder of Lady Ermentrude. While Margaret Frazer has fashioned all the titles after Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, unlike other authors the stories are not narrated solely by the title character but also by Frevisse and in third person. There are fourteen books in the series *The Widow's Tale* being the most recent. The Dame Frevisse mystery series have twice been nominated for Edgar Awards. Margaret Frazer has also recently started a new series featuring the player Joliffe who can often be found in her Dame Frevisse series. The first book in the series *A Play of Isaac* finds Joliffe taking on the role of sleuth when the body of a murdered man is found outside the barn door where Joliffe and the troupe of travelling players are staying.

In the first part of the 1990s, Kate Sedley also began a series set in 15th Century England featuring Roger the Chapman. Set during the last years of the Wars of the Roses, Roger is a

lapsed Benedictine monk who has left his order to become a chapman or peddler of wares; he becomes involved in a number of different mysteries along the way. The first book in the series is called *Death and the Chapman* and finds Roger involved in solving the disappearance of the son of a wealthy tradesman. The most recent book in the series is *The Burgundian's Tale*.

Not long afterwards, Candace Robb appeared on the scene with the first book in the series called *The Apothecary Rose*. Also set in the 14th Century we are introduced to Welshman Owen Archer a former King's Captain of Archers he lost an eye during the wars in France. In the first book in the series, it is Christmastide 1363 and Archer has been sent by the Bishop of York to investigate the mysterious death of two pilgrims from an herbal remedy. Masquerading as an apprentice to Apothecary Nicholas Wilton from whose shop the fatal potions were bought. Archer finds himself intrigued and mystified by Wilton's lovely young wife Lucie and the various other people who have secrets. Archer soon becomes involved in a dangerous drama of old scandals, tragedies, obsession, and unholy love. The latest book is *The Cross-legged Knight*.

Not content with the Owen Archer series, Candace Robb started another series set in 13th century Scotland. *A Trust Betrayed* is the first title in the series and introduces Dame Margaret Kerr of Perth, Scotland. It is a time when the wars of independence are still raging and there is conspiracy abound. With her husband, missing and when his cousin (who had gone looking for him) turns up dead, Dame Margaret decides to try to find out what has happened.

A E Marston joined the fray as well in 1993 when he wrote the first of his Doomsday book series entitled *The Wolves of Savernake*. Set in the years after the Norman conquest of England it features a Norman soldier Ralph Delchard and Breton-Saxon lawyer Gervase Bret. The two men are part of the commission surveying England and compiling what becomes the Doomsday Book. It is an ideal structure for investigating and solving crimes. The last book to have been written in this series was back in 2000 and was *The Elephants of Norwich*. It is a shame that the author has not written any more of the Doomsday Books as they are stylishly written with a definite feel for the period. Nevertheless, one is not surprised because like the impressive Paul Doherty, Marston has written a number of other series not only under his name but under various pseudonyms as well.

Paul Doherty appears to be the one author who keeps on excelling himself within the era. Not content with the number of books that he has written using the name P C Doherty or Paul Doherty (and still continues to write), under the guise of G L Grace, he once again decided to throw his hat into the ring by beginning another series. *The Shrine of Death* is the first book in the Kathryn Swinbrooke series. Swinbrooke is a physician during the time of Edward IV and in the first book; she investigates the murders of some pilgrims.

The second part of the 1990s saw a number of new names emerge on the scene. Michael Jecks was one of the first with his West Country series featuring Simon Puttock, bailiff of Lydford Castle who is responsible for law and order across the Stannaries (or tin mines) of Dartmoor, and Sir Baldwin Furnshill, a dispossessed and initially disgruntled former Templar Knight who is now Keeper of the King's Peace in Crediton. Set in Devon in the 14th century, during the reign of Edward II the books bring alive what is a fascinating and turbulent period of history. They are strong on both atmosphere and period detail. *The Last Templar* is the first book in the series and

is an enthralling tale of petty jealousy, burning passion and brutal vengeance. So far, Michael Jecks has written eighteen books in the series. The most recent being *The Chapel of Bones* in which Furnhill and Puttock find themselves investigating a vicious slaying that has taken place at Exeter Cathedral Close. The victim was universally disliked and very few are mourning his passing. However, what appears to be a matter of desire or avarice soon grows much more worrying as Baldwin becomes conscious of the unsettling and ominous Chapel of Bones, erected long ago in reparation for an appalling murder.

In 1995, Barry Unsworth the author of the Booker Prize novel *Sacred Hunger* wrote *Morality Play* a novel set in 14th century England. It revolves around a theatre troupe whose decision to enact a recent murder leads them to uncover a conspiracy. Narrated by a twenty-three year old monk who, fearing the wrath of his Bishop for breaking his vows of chastity, takes up with a troupe of travelling players. They find themselves involved with solving the murder of a young boy as a deaf and mute girl stands accused of the crime. While trying to portray the story as a drama for the town's entertainment the players soon uncover the true story and find themselves in the middle of a corrupt power play and a morally twisted conspiracy. *Morality Play* is an accomplished novel that deftly portrays how art can literally reveal truth. It also explores timeless moral dilemmas, questions about the exploitation of the media, the uses of justice, and the abuses of power. A postmodern, complex novel it is multi layered and entails concentration and thought but the reader is of course deeply rewarded.

Of course, the university town of Cambridge had its own sleuth as well during this period. Susan Gregory's first series features Matthew Bartholomew a physician and teacher at Michaelhouse in the fledgling Cambridge University of the mid 14th century. In the first book in the series *A Plague on Both Your Houses*, it is 1348 and the inhabitants of Cambridge are under the shadow of the pestilence that has swept Europe onwards towards England. Bartholomew is distracted with the mysterious death of the Master of Michaelhouse. Rather strangely, the University are reluctantly for it to be investigated. When three more scholars die, Bartholomew defies the authorities and begins his own investigation. What Bartholomew finds out makes him question the innocence of his closest friends and even his own family. Gregory has created a rather unusual character in Matthew Bartholomew. His unorthodox but effective treatment of his patients frequently draws accusations of heresy from his more traditional colleagues. Bartholomew brings his knowledge and deductive skills to bear on what amounts to prototype forensic analysis. In 1998 and using the pseudonym Simon Beaufort, Gregory joined forces with her husband (a history lecturer at Cambridge University) to start a new series featuring Sir Geoffrey Mappestone a Crusader who desires to learn rather than plunder. Set in 1100 *Murder in the Holy City*, which is the first book in the series Mappestone, investigates a series of deaths of knights in Jerusalem.

Sharon Penman's Edgar nominated mystery; *The Queen's Man* is the first in the series featuring Justin de Quincy. De Quincy is twenty-something and a special envoy, spy and confidant to Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine. The illegitimate son of the Bishop of Chester who refuses to acknowledge his paternity, De Quincy finds himself working on behalf of the Queen to find out whether the death of a man bearing a letter to the Queen from King Richard was murdered or simply a victim of a robbery. The other three books in the series so far are *Cruel as the Grave*, *Dragon's Lair*, and *Time and Chance*.

Michael Jecks is not the only author to use an ex-crusader as a main protagonist. Former Homer Office pathologist Bernard Knight commenced his series featuring Sir John de Wolfe in *The Sanctuary Seeker* in 1998. Appointed the first coroner for the county of Devon by Richard the Lionheart, de Wolfe goes to the village of Widecombe to hold an inquest. Yet, on his return to Exeter, he finds that the Sheriff Richard de Revelle, his own brother in law is determined to frustrate the murder investigation. When it becomes known that the dead man was a Crusader and a member of one of Devon's finest and most respectable families, Crouner John is determined to disclose the truth even if it means facing the combined might of the Church and nobility. *The Witch Hunter* is the latest book in the series.

Another series to feature an ex-Crusader is Sarah Conway's Lord Goodwin series. In *Murder on Good Friday*, Lord Goodwin Bailiff of Hexham and in the service of the Archbishop of Canterbury investigates the murder of a young boy whose body bears crucifix type puncture wounds. While the body was found on Easter Monday, Goodwin believes that the boy was actually killed on Good Friday. The townspeople believe that the Jews are to blame for the vicious murder and demand justice. Disillusioned and battle weary Goodwin sets out to find the murderer as a means of atoning for his part in the Crusade. The second book in the series is *Daughters of Summer* and sees Lord Goodwin investigating the death of Master Gruffydd an arrogant merchant.

The late Sylvian Hamilton sadly only wrote three books featuring her ex-Crusader before her death. Set in the 13th century, the first book in the series is *The Bone-Pedlar* and introduces readers to Sir Richard Straccan an ex-Crusader and dealer in holy relics. The second book in the series is *The Pendragon Banner*. The last book Hamilton wrote prior to her death is *The Gleemaiden*. Straccan is detailed to escort the giant bell Gaudete from London to Durham. Straccan finds himself involved with multiple murders, a kidnapping, treason and a rather mysterious young boy whom the Bishop of Toulouse wishes to see dead.

In the *Falconer's Crusade* Ian Morson joined the ranks of authors of medieval crime fiction when he introduced his sleuth Regent Master William Falconer of Aristotle College Oxford. Falconer considers himself a deductionist and when he is not tutoring he experiments with flying and keeps a live owl in his rooms. Set in 1264 the students and townspeople live together rather uncomfortably. When a new student stumbles across a fresh corpse of a girl, he barely escapes being lynched by a mob and takes refuge in the Jewish ghetto following which three more murders take place. Is there a connection between the murders and the visit of King Henry III's son Prince Edward to Oxford while he is currently being courted by mutinous barons? In addition, what is the significance of the small book found on the murdered girl, which she believed, would protect her? *Falconer's Crusade* is quintessentially a novel about 13th century Oxford with its political entanglements, the hatred, and the conflict between the townspeople and the students and the suspicions of Jews. Unfortunately, Morson has only written five books in this series. The last book was the Ellis Peters Historical Dagger nominated the *Falconer and the Great Beast* back in 1998. In this book to the dismay of the townspeople of Oxford, they have two rather extraordinary visitors to contend with. The first is an elephant owned by King Henry III and the second is a delegation of Tartars. The delegation is greeted with silence by the townspeople. The hostilities between the town and the university have not abated and along with

that taking place within the Tartar tribe, itself make it difficult for all concerned. When the Tartar leader is brutally slain, Falconer is drawn into the investigation. There are suspects galore and it is up to Falconer to search out the truth and the murderer. I hope that readers might soon see the return of Regent Master William Falconer before too long. Since Cambridge already had a sleuth, it is expected that eventually someone would decide that Oxford would also be a perfect place for one as well.

Another author that emerged at the same time is Domini Highsmith, her three books so far, *Keeper of the Shrine*, *Guardian at the Gate*, and *Master of the Keys* are set in Beverly, England in the 12th century with his sleuth being Father Simeon.

One should not forget that during this time the inexhaustible Paul Doherty was still (and still is) churning out books in the various series that he was writing and under various names.

In the latter part of the 1990s, a number of other authors also began to write about the medieval period thus swelling the ranks. Anthony Clarke's *Ordeal at Lichfield* is set in AD 657 in and around Lichfield Cathedral. Mercia is beset by nationalist and religious strife. Warring Saxon kings are fighting amongst themselves while holding sway over Britons. The main protagonist is Edwin a young Brito-Saxon monk who is also known as Aldhelm. He has come to Lichfield on a personal quest, that of revenge. *Ordeal at Lichfield* won the Lichfield Prize in 1997 as the best book of its year about Lichfield. For the most part the book is taken up with Edwin's unintentional travels around the locality. Sadly, when comparing the *Ordeal at Lichfield* with a number of the other books set within the medieval era then one is bound to be disappointed. Clarke appears to have tossed into one melting pot all ethnic, political, and religious persecutions taking place at the time without any thought or reason. So far, this appears to be the only book that he has written on medieval crime fiction.

Joan Wolf's Hugh Corbaille series started in 1999 is set in 11th century England. The first book in the series *No Dark Place* sees Corbaille on a quest for his background. However, a killer who does not want the truth revealed hinders his progress. In the follow-up book, *The Poisoned Serpent* Corbaille must help a friend who is accused of the murder of the new Earl of Lincoln.

The clergy have always held a significant position in English literature because they are in the unique position of being able to go everywhere and talk to everyone. The medieval period is an excellent example where the clergy have been present. Alys Clare introduced another clerical investigator to the fold in the first book of her Hawkenlye series. *Fortune Like the Moon*. When a young nun from the nearby Hawkenlye Abbey is found with her throat cut King Richard Plantagenet is forced to send his emissary Josse d'Aquin to investigate the gruesome death and absolve the King from blame. D'Aquin finds an intelligent ally in Abbess Helewise of Hawkenlye and together they dig deep to find the answers.

Another medieval series that has a member of the clergy as a sleuth is Priscilla Royal's Prioress Eleanor of Wynethorpe series. The first book in the series is the *Wine of Violence*. Set in the late summer of 1270 Eleanor of Wynethorpe has just been appointed prioress of Tyndal much to the dismay of others. The day after she takes up her post a monk is found brutally murdered in the cloister gardens. Brother Thomas a newly tonsured young priest also arrives to investigate

the Order's shaky finances. It is up to Eleanor to search out the killer in a place that is dedicated to peace and serenity. The second book in the series is *Tyrant of the Mind*.

Peter Tremayne's Sister Fidelma of Kildare series are a medieval clerical series with a twist. Fidelma is not only a nun, but also a 7th century lawyer of the Celtic Church, a dálaigh or advocate of the Brehon Court of Ireland. In the first novel *Absolution by Murder*, Fidelma is a representative at the all-important Synod of Whitby called by the Angle King of Northumbria in 663 where murder nearly disrupts the proceedings.

Members of the clergy are not the only ones who have been used as sleuths. In 1999, Roberta Gellis introduced Magdalene la Bâtarde the madam of the Old Priory Guesthouse in Southwark in the first book of the series *A Mortal Bane*. When the Bishop of Winchester's messenger Baldassare is murdered Magdalene la Bâtarde stands accused. The Bishop puts his most trusted knight Sir Bellamy of Itchen in charge. If he does not find the real culprit then la Bâtarde will have to face the gallows. The other books in the series are *A Personal Devil* and *Bone of Contention*.

John Hall's *Special Commission* is an unusual tale. It is set in the middle of the 15th century and at a remote manor house. The May Day celebrations are marred when a man is found murdered. The obvious suspect is an uninvited and unwanted guest; however, he refuses to appear before a judge and jury. The only hope it seems of solving the crime is for the Lord Chancellor to appoint a Special Commission to look into matters.

2000 saw a few entries by authors (some of them new) but not as many as in the 1990s. Unremarkably Paul Doherty started a new series under the name Vanessa Alexander. The first book *The Love Knot* is told in a series of letters between Princess Joanna the daughter of King Edward I and her alleged lover penniless squire Ralph Monthermer. The long-faced, sad-eyed nunnery clerk Henry Trokelowe sets out on behalf of the King to investigate whether the relationship was simply a case of unsuitable love or whether they share a more sinister secret. The other books written by Doherty as Vanessa Alexander are not medieval in their setting.

In 2000, Julian Rathbone wrote the *Kings of Albion*. Tim Armstrong wrote *Cecilia's Vision* in 2001 and Rebecca Nelson also wrote the *Thirteenth Scroll* that same year. 2003 saw the emergence of Pat McIntosh with her first novel *The Harper's Quine* featuring Gil (bert) Cunningham a notary in training. The second book in the series due to be published is *The Nicholas Feast* while the title of the third book is said to be *The Merchant's Mark*. Notwithstanding the fact that very few new books were written, authors like Paul Doherty (under his various names), Bernard Knight, A E Marston, Michael Jecks, Susanna Gregory, Margaret Frazer, Alys Clare, Candace Robb, Peter Tremayne, and Kate Sedley all continued to write their excellent series.

While books written about the medieval period are predominately from the view of English history, even further a field, there appears to have been books written covering the period. In 1958, Robert Van Gulik a Dutch diplomat who was an expert on Chinese history and culture wrote the first in what went on to be a memorable series featuring Judge Dee, a magistrate of the city of Poo-yang in ancient China. The series is set in 7th century China. *The Chinese Bell*

Murders the first book in the series describes the judge's exploits in the tribunal of Poo-yang early in his career. In the spirit of ancient Chinese detective novels, Dee is challenged by three cases. First, he must solve the mysterious and brutal rape murder of Pure Jade, a young girl. Jade the daughter of Butcher Hsai who lived on Half Moon Street. All the evidence points to the guilt of her lover and he is on the verge of being convicted, but Judge Dee has his doubts. He sets out with his lieutenants to find the real murderer. Dee also solves the mystery of a deserted temple and that of a group of monks' terrific success with a cure for barren women. The final story in the series appears to be *Judge Dee at Work* and can be found in *The Ethnic Detectives* a 1985 collection of stories featuring ethnic detectives. Judge Dee – Jen Dijeh was in fact a real person, a magistrate who lived between 630 and 700 and was known for his wisdom and his wit.

In 1970, author Leon Comber also wrote a book set in 11th Century China called *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao*. Said to be inspired by Van Gulik's Judge Dee series it is translated from Chinese and like the Van Gulik books they are based on the true life of 11th Century Magistrate Pao an official of the Sung dynasty. Pao Lung T'u Ch'eng or Pao Ch'eng the scholar of the Lung T'u Pavilion (to give him his correct title) lived between 999 and 1062 AD. He was a combination of a detective, prosecutor, judge, jury, and a representative of the legal system that had a wide range of tortures with which to punish or extort confessions from its victims. The six cases, which Magistrate Pao comes up against in this engrossing collection, span the gamut of the more violent human passions and actions. The crimes that are perpetrated in *The Strange Cases of Magistrate Pao* include murder, rape, robbery with adultery and suicide thrown in for good measure.

Eleanor Cooney has written two books set in China. In the first book, *Court of the Lion* set during the T'ang dynasty, the death of the young crown prince in the glittering court of Emperor Minghuang sets off whispers of murder. At the same time, the emperor is forced to banish his beloved Empress for the crime of dabbling in witchcraft. As the Emperor begins to neglect, his duties it is down to Kao Li-Shih, the Emperor's chief eunuch and best friend to resolve matters. The second book *Deception: A Novel of Murder and Madness in T'ang China* set in 7th century China has two historical characters Judge Dee and the sinister Empress Wu Tse-tien as the main protagonists. Judge Dee who is familiar to many readers via the Van Gulik novels finds himself investigating a series of grisly ritualistic killings, which he believes are related to a fifty-year old unsolved murder. At the same time, Madame Wu, chief consort of Emperor Kao-tsung, schemes to depose his Empress and wield absolute power as ruler of China. Eventually Dee and Wu are brought together and he discovers the truth about the numerous murders she has committed as she seeks to usurp the ancient T'ang dynasty and replace it with her own Chou dynasty that has been founded on a corrupt form of Buddhism that relies on magic, superstition, and deceit.

Not one to be left out, Paul Doherty has written about 13th century China. *The Plague Lord: Bloody Murder at the Court of Kublai Kahn* see the Venetian Marco Polo in the Mongol Empire. Kublai Khan summons his trusted advisor and friend Marco Polo when the members of the Guild of Pourers, the city cleaners are being picked off one by one in a series of gut wrenching murders. What also is the link between these deaths and the reappearance of the Water Lily sect, a secret society dedicated to service of the Plague Lord, Wen Yi Kwei.

Japan hasn't been left out within this period. Ann Woodward has so far written two books set in 11th century Japan. The main protagonist is Lady Aoi and in the first book the *Exile Way*, she is lady-in waiting for the principle wife of an imperial prince, puts her own life in danger when she uses her cunning to try to solve the murder of a young girl. The second book is *Of Death and Black Rivers* and after just returning to the Imperial Court, Lady Saisho, a timid, retiring creature, runs off with a powerful general known as The Dark Warrior of the North, to be his mistress. Nevertheless, the Dark Warrior is keeping Lady Saisho in little more than a hovel, and members of the court who have disagreed with the general seem to be dying in record numbers. Fearing for the reputation of Lady Saisho and sensing that a menace has invaded the Court, Lady Aoi takes matters into her own hands and decides to investigate.

I (ngrid) J Parker has also written about medieval Japan. Her main protagonist is Sugawara Akitada a twenty-five year old impoverished noble man who serves as a clerk in the Ministry of Justice. The first short story featuring Akitada won the Shamus Short Story Award from the Private Eye Writers of America in 2001. The first book in the series is *Rashomon Gate* and sees Akitada becoming a temporary lecturer at the Imperial University in Heian at the request of his old mentor. One of the lecturers is being blackmailed and he is asked to look into the matter. At the same time, Akitada is sidetracked by the murder of a young woman and the mysterious disappearance of a student's grandfather. The other two books so far in this outstanding series are *The Hell Screen* and *The Dragon Scroll*.

It is understood that Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* is considered to a seminal work on medieval crime fiction. Written in 1980, the main line of the story-which takes place in the 14th century-deals with William of Baskerville's endeavour to solve a series of crimes that have taken place in a monastery. The name of the central character, William of Baskerville, alludes both to the fictional detective Sherlock Holmes and to William of Ockham who first put forward the principle known as Ockham's Razor: that one should always accept the simplest explanation that covers the facts.

Set in 1327, it is a compelling murder mystery, as young narrator Adso of Elk named after the Benedictine abbey Sift Melk (who narrates the story many years later) accompanies the wise William of Baskerville as he uses logic and semiotics to not only solve a murder mystery, but to decipher labyrinths and hidden secrets of the vast monastery library. Franciscans in a wealthy Italian abbey are suspected of heresy. Interwoven with the murder mystery is a virtual course on philosophy and late Middle Ages religion, as Eco provides detailed accounts of the histories of various sects, includes scholarly debate on topics such as the poverty of Christ, and a history of the Catholic Church leading to the establishment of a papacy in Avignon, France.

The murders take place at roughly one a day, each one more gruesome than the last. William and Adso are able to figure out that the murders all seem to be connected with the abbey's library, one of the richest and oldest in the Western world at the time. However, unfortunately, the library is off-bounds, as per the abbot's instructions, and even when they do manage to enter the forbidden areas; the library reveals itself to be a labyrinth, filled with danger, mystery, and knowledge

One is reminded of Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson as William and Adso use logic and determination to piece together numerous bizarre deaths and occurrences at the Abbey, while encountering obstacles and outright hostility by the Abbot and his librarian, to name a couple.

Apart from Umberto Eco, there have been a number of other authors that have written medieval crime novels set in Italy. For example, M E Cooper has written two books set in 15th century Bologna, Italy featuring Avisia Baglatoni a young widow who is also a locksmith. In *Key Deceptions* Jews are prohibited under the penalty of death from becoming locksmith. When Baglatoni befriends a young Jewish lad Bernardo, she finds herself in peril. The mayor's nephew Ippolito desires Avisia and does not trust or like Bernardo. When the city's treasure is stolen, it is up to Avisia to discover the truth. The follow-up book is *Key Confrontations* and Avisia finds herself taking refuge in a convent where she finds herself involved in a mystery when a travelling troubadour's efforts to elope with a gently born young lady.

One of the most amusing series to come along set in medieval Italy is the series by George Herman featuring the unlikely duo of Leonardo da Vinci and a young dwarf with a photographic memory known as Niccolo de Pavia. *A Comedy of Murders* is set in the autumn of 1498 and the court of the Duke of Milan is in turmoil. A mysterious individual known as the Griffin is operating a ring of assassins with the court. When an attempt is made on the Duke's life during a hunting party visit to a monastery in Pavia, the plot is thwarted by Niccolo. When a score of cardinals attached to the court also lose their lives, it is up to Da Vinci and Niccolo to attempt to untangle the motives and methods of assassinations, vendettas and simple murders. In the sequel, *The Tears of the Madonna* a courier carrying a fabulous diamond necklace is killed and the necklace is stolen. It is called "The Tears of the Madonna" because of its tear shaped diamonds. Meanwhile, the French have captured Milan causing Da Vinci to flee to the Marquesa of Mantua's opulent court to paint her picture. The Marquesa the real owner of the necklace who lost it when she defaulted on a bank loan is suspected of orchestrating its latest disappearance. Da Vinci and Niccolo are persuaded to look into the matter and confusion reigns when similar necklaces are seen on the throats of Lucrezia Borgia in Rome, Caterina Sforza in Imola and the devious Marquesa. Leonardo's discovery of the necklace takes him to Venice at the time of the carnival and puts him and Niccolo in the middle of an assassination plot.

In *The Florentine Murders* the assassination of the young husband of Lucrezia Borgia, bring the Borgia's in conflict with the exiled Medici family in Rome. Meanwhile a group of mysterious "mourners" in Florence supposedly following the dictates of their late leader Savonarola mutilate the works by Donatello, Uccello, and Botticelli. Da Vinci and Niccolo find themselves exploring what drives vandals to desecrate artefacts and what would also bring Da Vinci into the service of the warlord Cesare Borgia. Derek Wilson has also written a book that involves the Borgia's and Savonarola. In *The Swarm of Heaven* while in pursuit of a private vendetta, the young Niccolo Machiavelli leaves Florence in the grip of the fanatical friar, Savonarola and goes to Rome. Lured into working for the appalling Borgia pope Alexander VI and his power-crazed son Cesare, Niccolo finds himself investigating the death of the Sultan of Turkey's brother. It is an investigation that puts his own life in danger and the only way to survive is to out scheme the schemers.

C J Stevermer has written two books featuring Alchemist Nicholas Coffin both books are set in Italy. The first book is called *The Alchemist: Death of a Borgia* where Coffin is apparently attempting to manufacture gold, but seems far more interested in anatomy. He gives in to temptation and dissects the corpse of Ercole Borgia after his murder. Cesare Borgia, to avert any suspicion that he killed his brother, must find the real murderer, or a suitable substitute. Having carved Ercole up, Coffin is the obvious scapegoat, and is stuck with finding who really did the deed. The second book is called *The Duke and the Veil*.

Barbara Cherne's novel *Bella Donna* is set in Florence, Italy during 1494. When a noble lady is killed, it is her sister in law Bella who is accused of the crime. Everybody believes that Bella committed the offence especially since her necklace was found beside the body. Guiditta, the heroine and sleuth of *Bella Donna* sets out to prove Bella's innocence and along the way finds that the family has more than its fair share of dark secrets and hidden alliances.

Regrettably, Jane Heritage only wrote one book featuring Marcello D'Estari an agent of the Republic of Venice. In *Set Fire to Sicily*, the Venetian Council is worried. The Emperor of Byzantium aware that Venice and Charles of Anjou are planning an invasion is rumoured to be fomenting rebellion in Charles's dominions. Marcello D'Estari is given his new assignment: Sicily. The island hell from which he escaped only a few years before, and to which he had hoped never to return. Marcello has misgivings from the start, but even he can't foresee the chaos, heartbreak, and slaughter that lie in wake for him on the island of Sicily.

John Sack's *The Franciscan Conspiracy* is due to be published in 2005 and is set in the 13th century. Why was the body of St. Francis stolen and hidden This multilayered, intricately plotted, historical tale investigates what caused the Franciscan Order to destroy all early biographies of Francis by his closest disciples in favour of a sanitized biography of the powerful St. Bonaventure. The story begins 30 years after Francis death, when Father Leo, Francis' closest friend, is dying. Bound to a vow of silence, Leo sends a cryptic message to Conrad, his own favourite student, connecting him with an unlikely companion, 16-year old Sister Amata. The two begin to search for the truth about St. Francis-- a truth that will shake the foundation of the Franciscan Order and the faith of the masses.

One of the best series written about medieval France is the Catherine LeVendeur series written by Sharan Newman. This excellent and absorbing series has won a number of awards. The first book *Death Comes as Epiphany* won the Macavity for Best First Mystery in 1993 and was nominated for the Anthony and Agatha Awards. In *Death Comes as Epiphany* Catherine a young novice and scholar at the Convent of the Paraclete is sent by the Abbess Heloise to seek out who is trying to destroy the reputation of the convent as well as that of the Abbess's one time lover and patron the theologian Peter Abelard. Further complicating matters is not only the death of Garnulf the master stonemason of Saint-Denis but also Catherine's attraction to the Saxon Edgar Garnulf mysterious apprentice. The latest book in the series is *The Witch in the Well* and the reader sees the valiant Catherine along with the rest of her family summoned to the castle of her aged grandfather. According to the legend when the well runs dry all the branches of the family will die. As members of her extended family begin to die one by one, Catherine finds that she must uncover the secrets of the witch in the well.

Viviane Moore has also written an excellent series set in Chartres. Each title has a colour in it. The first one in the series is called *Blue Blood* and features a dashing young Breton knight, the Chevalier Galeran de Lesneven. Set In 1134, a fire destroys the town, and ten years later, the culprit has still never been found. While passing through Chartres, Galeran is drawn into the mystery surrounding the drowning of a man, which curiously harks back to the fire ten years earlier. He lives among the master craftsmen and artisans who are painstakingly rebuilding the cathedral in an effort to discover the truth. He also falls in love with a beautiful redhead, Dame Ausanne, the local female physician. The book is filled with the most exquisite and meticulous detail, including maps and recipes, with not a hint or sound of the modern world. A seamless and faithful translation unfolds a compelling and engrossing story of murder, betrayal, and revenge, with a goriness and cruelty peculiar to the Middle Ages. The other books in the series are *Black Romance*, *The Darkest Red*, and *The White Path*.

Two darker books set in medieval France are by Australian author Catherine Jinks. The *Inquisitor* is a record of the events that took place around the city of Lazet and relating to the assassination of the venerable Brother Augustin Duese in 1318. Brother Bernard Peyre of Prouille an inquisitor and friar of the order of preachers narrates the story. At a time when heresy is a most heinous crime/offence, routed out with ruthless determination, Brother Bernard is accustomed to dispensing harsh justice. Nevertheless, as he makes attempts to make sense of this most shocking crime he finds himself becoming the object of prosecution thanks to his passionate involvement with a mysterious suspect and her beautiful daughter. Pursued as a heretic, implicated, as a murderer Bernard must now face his accusers. This is a well-crafted tale of murder, forbidden lust, and betrayal.

The second book *The Notary* is also set in the same period and region as *The Inquisitor* and is narrated by the main protagonist. In this case, it is Raymond Maillot a young notary. Maillot is a lustful young notary who much prefers wine, women, and song to the pursuit of professional renown. His life begins to change when he is employed by Father Amiel a sober Dominican monk charged with investigating a particular shocking murder. Raymond now finds himself torn between his taste for irresponsible pleasures and his desire to find refuge in the Church. Raymond's journey of self-discovery however begins with a severed penis and his quest to find solace actually plunges him into a psychological maelstrom of obsession, lust, and envy. *The Notary* is a tantalising cryptic tale of dismemberment, debauchery, and demonic visitation.

Spain is also another country where books during the medieval period have been set. One of the most well known series is the Chronicles of Isaac of Girona by Caroline Roe. The books are set in 14th century Spain and feature blind Jewish physician, Isaac and his most prominent patient, the Bishop of Girona. In the first book, *Remedy for Treason* the date is 1353, shortly after the plague that devastated Europe. Isaac is called to treat the ailing illegitimate daughter of King Don Pedro. However, when an attendant to the queen is murdered in mysterious circumstances Isaac is called upon to help determine the strange circumstances of her death. So far, there have been over half a dozen books in this series.

Scholarium by German author Claudia Gross is another medieval crime book, this time set in Cologne, Germany. Set in 1413 the death of Frederico Casall, a Master of the Seven Liberal Arts and an impassioned champion of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas leaves everyone

mystified. While Casall was not universally liked, there was no obvious reason for him to be killed. It is up to Konrad Steiner, a Master in the Arts faculty of a Scholarium in Cologne, Germany to solve the riddles that the murderer is leaving and discover the identity of the murderer.

The Mediterranean is also another area within medieval crime fiction. Sheri Holman's novel *A Stolen Tongue* is set in 1483 and is a dark surreal fascinating novel. Narrated by Father Felix Fabri of the Dominican Preaching Brothers in Ulm it follows his 15th century pilgrimage from Germany to Mount Sinai where he is going to venerate the relics of the spiritual bride he took when he first swore his vows, the martyr Saint Katherine of Alexandria. Following a tempestuous sea voyage, Felix comes ashore to pay homage and celebrate Katherine's life in Greece and Palestine. However, each time they come to worship, though, they find that the remains of Katherine's body are being stolen in bits and pieces. Desperate to discover the thief and save his saint from such a brutal fate, Felix is thrust into a deep and strange mystery that takes him across the desert. The plot is based on fact and uses some of the actual writings of Father Felix Fabri.

The Byzantine era has produced a number of books as well. Eric Mayer and Mary Reed have a series that features Lord Chamberlain John the Eunuch. Set in 6th century Constantinople the first book in the series is *One for Sorrow*. John, the Emperor's Lord Chamberlain, discovers the murdered corpse of his close friend Leukos in a side alley. Leukos appears to have no known family and John takes it upon himself to investigate the murder and avenge his friend's death.

The city contains many a rogue and villain and John's plight is exacerbated by a knight of the round table from Britain questing for the holy grail, an enigmatic, mystical soothsayer and two women who bring up painful memories from John's troubled past.

The story unfolds to reveal excitement, passion, intrigue and pain in a setting that is painted in great historical detail allowing the reader to picture the city and the times without having any previous knowledge of Byzantium. The latest book in the series is *Five for Silver*.

Alan Gordon's delightful series starts with *Thirteenth Night* an historical mystery set in the thirteenth century in the mythical Duchy of Orsino on the Adriatic Coast (i.e. Dalmatia, part of the former Yugoslavia) and featuring characters of Shakespeare's play *Twelfth Night*. Twelve years after the events of the play, the Duke of Orsino has been murdered and the duchy is in a state of political turmoil. Feste (the fool), believing he sees the hand of Malvolio in all of this is sent by the Fool's Guild to stabilise the political situation and uncover who is responsible. *An Antic Disposition* is the most recent title.

One of the most recent books to be written about the medieval Byzantine era is the *Mosaic of Shadows* by Tom Harper. Murder and intrigue in the palaces and trading halls of Byzantium. Reaching its peak in 1025, under Basil II, Byzantium has perpetuated the legacy of the Roman Empire since the fall of the West. However, in its now weakened position, it faces serious threats from the Turks. In response to these threats Alexios Komnenos, the dynamic young successor to the imperial throne, has petitioned the Pope for support for his armies. His request is met by the Pope's preaching of the first crusade. Meanwhile, in Constantinople, a soldier has

died from a bolt through his chest whilst standing only inches away from the emperor. In secrecy, Demetrios the Apokalyptor is commissioned to investigate the murder before the assassin can strike again. His search leads him through the slums of Constantinople where he finds Thomas, a Frankish youth who is recently orphaned. On discovering that it was Thomas who fired the bolt, Demetrios decides to protect Thomas and use him to discover the identity of the foreigner, known only as 'the monk', who commissioned Thomas to kill. Believing that there must be foreign involvement, Demetrios takes his quest into the cutthroat world of Italian and Frankish merchants vying for large slices of the transcontinental trade, which passes through Byzantium. Little does he expect to find a thread that will lead him into the heart of a conspiracy spanning two continents and decades of history.

The sequel to this excellent novel is called *Knights of the Cross*. In 1098 having settled their differences with the Byzantine Emperor, the armies of the First Crusade race across Asia Minor, routing the Turks and reclaiming the land for Christendom. Nevertheless, on the Syrian border, their advance is halted before the impregnable walls of Antioch. The entire crusade is on the verge of collapse. In the midst of this misery, a Norman knight, Drogo, is found murdered. Drogo's lord, the ruthlessly ambitious Bohemond, charges Demetrios Askiates to find the killer, suspecting it may have been a follower of Bohemond's rival Count Raymond. However, as Demetrios investigates, the trail seems to lead ever deeper into the vipers' nest of jealousy, betrayal, and fanaticism, which lies at the heart of the crusade.

There are also a number of books that have been written that span both the medieval period and present day. The most recognisable of these is of course Josephine Tey's 1951 novel *The Daughter of Time* which is set in both medieval England and the twentieth century and in which Inspector Alan Grant investigates from his hospital bed the 15th century murders of Richard III's nephews in the Tower of London. Ann Benson has also written a number of books that alternate between the past and the present. *The Plague Tale* is a novel that has two parallel stories woven together. 14th century physician Alejandro Canches is caught performing an autopsy in Spain and flees across Europe during the Black Death to escape persecution of what is considered to be a heretical deed. When he arrives in the papal city of Avignon, he is conscripted against his will to serve as plague doctor in the court of Edward III. The counterpart of the story is that of an American medical archaeologist Janie Crowe in the UK who digs up a medieval artefact as part of her research and unwittingly releases the deadly plague bacteria on an unprepared world. Her second book *The Burning Road* once again sees court physician Alejandro Canches and American neurosurgeon Janie Crowe join forces. *The Thief of Souls* which is the third book written by Ann Benson is set in the City of Nantes in the year 1440 and Los Angeles in the year 2002.

Tracy Chevalier's *Virgin Blue* can also be included in this as it is set in both 1490 and 1990 England. Best selling Spanish novelist Arturo Pérez-Reverte has also written a novel that falls into this category. *The Flanders Panel* is set in both 1471 and 1990s Spain. It is an extremely intriguing tale set amongst the European art community and revolves around the restoration of a painting by a Flemish painter.

What is evident is that the medieval period has provided a wide range of stories for lovers of historical crime fiction. It also belies the feeling that the genre is not widely read. Historical

crime novels may not be automatic bestsellers, but they certainly give you an insight to another world.

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