



Medieval Europe

BY JESSICA TEISCH

In his beloved *Canterbury Tales* (1387–1400), Geoffrey Chaucer introduced 23 pilgrims traveling the long journey from a London inn to Canterbury Cathedral. Along the way, each of the “sundry folk”—among them a carpenter, a cook, a knight, a monk, a prioress, a friar, a haberdasher, a dyer, a clerk, a merchant, a tapestry weaver, a shipman, a physician, a wife, and a miller, all from different walks of life—regales his and her fellow travelers with tales to pass the time. Besides one of the first major works in literature to be written in Middle English instead of French (the custom following the Norman invasion), the satirical *Canterbury Tales* remains significant for its historical insight into the 14th century’s social dynamics, customs and ideologies, class and religious controversies, and gender expectations.

The medieval era, or the Middle Ages, refers to the period that began with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century and ended with the start of the Renaissance in the 15th century. Often considered a period of relative cultural “darkness,” these centuries witnessed major wars (including the series of crusades), plagues, and religious persecution, but also advances in science and medicine, particularly in the rising Islamic world.

Subdivided into various (but not nearly comprehensive) topics focused primarily on Europe, the fiction below brings to life the era’s plundering, court intrigue, class conflicts, and religious dogma—as well as the stuff of myth and legend. For some nonfiction works, see Andrew Benedict-Nelson’s article on the Crusades in our Sept/Oct 2009 issue.

THE VIKINGS AND MEDIEVAL SCANDINAVIA

The Long Ships

By Frans G. Bengtsson, translated from the Swedish by Michael Meyer (1954)

This classic swashbuckling Viking saga follows the adventures of Röde Orm (Red Serpent), who fights and plunders his way through 10th-century Scandinavia and the Mediterranean. After being abducted from his Danish home by a Viking party, he ends up a galley slave to Andalusian Mus-

lims and becomes a mercenary, a raider, and a key player in the fates of various Scandinavian kings and the king of England. After attempting to settle down, he heads off on a quest for gold. Of course, there's lots of rowing, sailing, and fighting as Bengtsson evokes the pleasures and brutality of Viking life. "The literary equivalent of an action- and intrigue-filled adventure movie that won't insult your intelligence," NPR wrote. "Even readers with zero interest in the Europe of a millennium ago will want to keep turning the pages."



Kristin Lavransdatter (Kristin Lavransdatter #1-3)

By Sigrid Undset (1920–22; translated by Tiina Nunnally in 1997)

This epic trilogy (*The Wreath, The Wife, The Cross*), for which its Norwegian author won a Nobel Prize in 1928, narrates the life of Kristin Lavransdatter in 14th-century Norway. Set against the era's social conventions, daily farming life, and political and religious undercurrents—especially the lure of paganism in a society that has not yet fully embraced Christianity—this 1,000-page volume follows a small girl who later experiences first love in defiance of her parents' wishes, marriage, child-rearing, and a devout relationship with God. "This trilogy includes illicit sex, affairs, a church fire, an attempted rape, ocean voyages, rebellious virgins cooped up in a convent, predatory priests, an attempted human sacrifice, floods, fights, murders, violent suicide, a gay king, drunken revelry, the Bubonic Plague, deathbed confessions, and sex," wrote a *Slate* critic. "And yet all the outward drama is deployed in service of a story about an ordinary woman's quietly shifting interior life."



Further Reading

- EATERS OF THE DEAD** | MICHAEL CRICHTON (1976)
- THE GREENLANDERS** | JANE SMILEY (1988)
- THE WHALE ROAD (THE OATHSWORN SERIES #1)** | ROBERT LOW (2007)
- THE HAPPY WARRIORS** | HALLDÓR LAXNESS (1952)
- THE LAST VIKING TRILOGY: THE GOLDEN HORN, THE ROAD OF THE SEA HORSE, AND THE SIGN OF THE RAVEN** | POUL ANDERSON (2017)
- NORSE MYTHOLOGY** | NEIL GAIMAN (★★★★ MAY/JUNE 2017)
- BEOWULF** | UNKNOWN (TRANSLATED BY SEAMUS HEANEY, 1973)
- GREDEL** | JOHN GARDNER (1971)

CELTIC MYTHOLOGY AND THE CELTS IN SCOTLAND, WALES, CORNWALL, AND BRITTANY

The Warlord Chronicles

The Winter King (1995), *Enemy of God* (1996), and *Excalibur* (1997)

By Bernard Cornwell

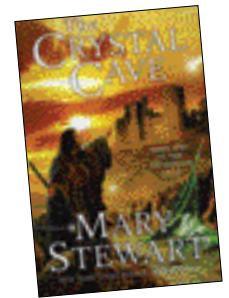
Cornwell mixes historical fiction and Arthurian mythology in his tale of Arthur, the Once and Future King, in a Britain at the start of the Dark Ages—one divided by Britons and Saxons, Christians, Druids, and pagans. Derfel Cadarn, one of Arthur's great warlords and now an elderly man living in an abbey long after Arthur's death, relates the "true" story of Arthur. Ironically, his "accurate" account includes Merlin and Lancelot but then becomes twisted by an interpreter who spices up the dull parts into the myth we know today. The series, which contains ample conflict, also conveys the ruin of the great Roman Empire. "With the art of a truly inspiring writer, the author seems to let the story guide him without letting it take over entirely," noted the *SF Site* critic. "Maybe the story of Arthur is so archetypal that it tells itself, but in this incarnation of the story, the credit belongs entirely to Cornwell."



The Arthurian Saga

By Mary Stewart

The first three novels in Stewart's Arthurian quintet bring to life the Arthurian legend through the first person perspective of Merlin, born Myrddin Emrys, bastard son of a South Wales princess in 5th-century Britain. In *The Crystal Cave* (1970), Merlin learns the art of sorcery and comes of age against the backdrop of invasion, wars, and conquest. *The Hollow Hills* (1973) chronicles the young Arthur Pendragon's development, while Merlin embarks on a quest for the fabled sword that can lead Arthur to the throne. Finally, Arthur faces sinister powers against Camelot as Merlin grows old and mad in *The Last Enchantment* (1979). Two later books, *The Wicked Day* (1983), which focuses on Mordred, Arthur's illegitimate son, and *The Prince and the Pilgrim* (1995), also set in the Arthurian era, are also a blend of fantasy and historical realism. Not to be missed.



Macbeth the King

By Nigel Tranter (1978)

Eschewing Shakespeare's unforgettable portrayal of the King of Scotland as a murderous tyrant, Tranter limns a more historically accurate portrait of a young, brave, thoughtful, and well-liked hero and king (no witches and daggers here). Covering the years between 1032 and 1057, the author re-creates Macbeth's struggle to create and unify Scotland, his devotion to his lovely, strong-willed wife, and the the terrible battles they waged. This sweeping novel, which stretches from Scotland to Rome to Norway, is rich in historical detail, including the mix of pagan and Christian, Norse and Scottish traditions, as well as insight into Scotland's last days as a great Celtic nation. "Tranter's popularity," wrote *Historical Novels Review*, "lies in his knack of making historical events immediate and exciting."



Further Reading

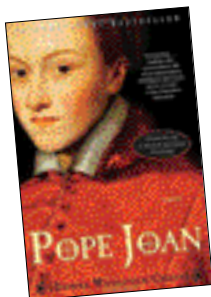
LADY MACBETH | SUSAN FRASER KING (2008)
HOOD (KING RAVEN TRILOGY #1) | STEPHEN LAWHEAD (2006)
LION OF IRELAND | MORGAN LLYWELYN (1980)
THE MISTS OF AVALON | MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY (1983, ♦ LOCUS AWARD)
A CONNECTICUT YANKEE IN KING ARTHUR'S COURT | MARK TWAIN (1889)
THE ONCE AND FUTURE KING | T. H. WHITE (1958)
CAMULOD CHRONICLES | JACK WHYTE (1992-2004)
THE ROAD TO AVALON (DARK AGES OF BRITAIN #1) | JOAN WOLF (1988)
THE BURIED GIANT | KAZUO ISHIGURO (★★★★ SELECTION May/June 2015)

ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND, BEFORE AND AFTER ALFRED THE GREAT

Pope Joan

By Donna Woolfolk Cross (1996)

In popular legend, Pope Joan, born in 814 to an English father and a Saxon mother, reigned as pope for two years—the only woman ever to occupy the old St. Peter's Basilica—by defying social strictures and disguising herself as a man. Cross reimagines the major points in Joan's life: the thirst for knowledge that leads to unusual religious schooling; her love for the soldier Gerold; the Viking raid that leaves her brother dead and Joan free to assume his identity; and the meandering path that



culminates in her election as Pope John Anglicus. Cross weaves a harrowing tale of love, passion, duplicity, violence, and politics, and her "masterful use of anticipation, as well as the sweeping historical landscape of the story, keep *Pope Joan* intriguing," wrote the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "An exciting journey through history as it's being made."

The Last Kingdom

By Bernard Cornwell (2004)

Cornwell's best-selling Saxon Chronicles relates the Danish plunder of British soil, the rise of Alfred the Great and his descendants, and the creation of England. In the first novel, Saxon-born Uhtred Ragnarson (based partly on the 11th century's Uhtred the Bold) is kidnapped by raiding Danes in 9th-century Northumbria and grows up to be an aggressive warrior. Uhtred narrates, from the camps and dragon-boats of the pagan Northmen, the struggle for England. Caught between two cultures and loyalties, he eventually signs on to serve the Wessexian king (who becomes Alfred the Great). But if King Alfred cannot defend his last kingdom, the course of history will waver. "Cornwell's no-fail mix of historic tidbits and good-humored action makes the usually gloomy ninth century sound like a hell of a lot of fun" (*Kirkus*).



Further Reading

HILD (THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD TRILOGY) | NICOLA GRIFFITH (2013)
NAKED: A NOVEL OF LADY GODIVA | ELIZA REDGOLD (2015)
DEATH OF KINGS (SAXON TALES #6) | BERNARD CORNWELL (2012)

THE TIMES OF THE CRUSADES (1095–1272)

The Ruby in Her Navel

A Novel of Love and Intrigue Set in the 12th Century

By Barry Unsworth (2006)

♦ BOOKER PRIZE LONG LIST

In mid-12th century Sicily, following the calamitous Second Crusade, French-speaking Norman knights rule over Greeks and Arabs, Jews and Muslims, in an unusual display of religious and cultural tolerance. But this will soon change. Thurstan Beauchamp, a young Christian Norman raised in Sicily, works for the Muslim chief financial officer to Norman King Roger II, organizing royal pleasures



while doubling as a spy. The novel follows Thurstan's picaresque adventures of love, betrayals, power politics, and conspiracies during a tumultuous era, as his deepest loyalties are tested. "He is clearly an avid researcher with a taste for the colourful backdrops—architectural and cultural—of the past," noted the *Independent*. "An entertaining story of sexual temptation, forbidden love, crazy monks and treacherous Christians: a riotous period soap opera."

Further Reading

LIONHEART (PLANTAGENETS #4) | SHARON KAY PENMAN (2011)

DEUS LO VOLT!: CHRONICLE OF THE CRUSADES | EVAN S. CONNELL (2000)

THE JESTER | JAMES PATTERSON AND ANDREW GROSS (2003)

KNIGHTS OF THE BLACK AND WHITE (TEMPLAR TRILOGY #1) | JACK WHYTE (2006)

THE SARACEN BLADE | FRANK YERBY (1952)

BAUDOLINO | UMBERTO ECO (2000) (SEE ALSO ECO'S *THE NAME OF THE ROSE* [1980], SET IN 1327 ITALY.)

THE HEIRS OF THE KINGDOM | ZOÉ OLDENBOURG (1970)

THE MOSAIC OF SHADOWS (DEMETRIOS ASKIATES, #1) | TOM HARPER (2003)

ENGLAND DURING AND AFTER THE NORMAN CONQUEST (1066–)

A Morbid Taste for Bones

By Ellis Peters (1977)

This acclaimed novel, the first in The Chronicles of Brother Cadfael, launched the sleuthing career of Brother Cadfael, former First Crusader turned Benedictine monk and resident herbalist (a skill learned from the Muslims in the Holy Land) at Shrewsbury Abbey on the Welsh border. In 1137, during the civil wars between King Stephen and Empress Matilda (part of the war known as The Anarchy), the final resting place of St. Winifred's bones serves as the catalyst for murder. Twenty more volumes follow (the final one is 1994's *Brother Cadfael's Penance*, set in 1145), and Brother Cadfael's responsibilities to his order bring him into contact with murders more frequently than one might expect. "A pleasing, and unusual, mixture of suspense and historical fiction" (*London Evening Standard*).



The Pillars of the Earth (1989)

By Ken Follett

The first novel in the epic Kingsbridge series (before *World Without End* [★★★★ Jan/Feb 2008], set 150 years later, and

A Column of Fire [2017]), starts with a public hanging in 1123, in a politically tense England. Nominally about the quest to build the greatest Gothic cathedral ever known in the fictional town of Kingsbridge, the novel follows the intertwined ambitions of different men over several decades of great social and political upheaval, as church politics and greed threaten to destroy the great structure. "Follett's impeccable pacing builds suspense in a balanced narrative that offers action, intrigue, violence and passion as well as the step-by-step description of an edifice rising in slow stages," wrote *Publishers Weekly*. "Follett has written a novel that entertains, instructs and satisfies on a grand scale."



Mistress of the Art of Death

By Ariana Franklin (2007)

In 12th-century Cambridge, four Christian children are murdered. The town's Christians blame the Jews, and a bloody riot ensues. King Henry II—unwilling to lose the tax revenues from the Jews, yet seeking justice—turns to his cousin, the King of Sicily, to conduct a forensic investigation into the murders. From Sicily's Salerno School of Medicine arrive coroner Adelia, the school's "best mistress of death"; her Muslim bodyguard; and a Jewish investigator. As Adelia searches for the culprits, she understands the high stakes. "[A] morbidly entertaining novel that outdoes the competition in depicting the perversities of human cruelty," noted the *New York Times Book Review*. "[The] lonely figure who truly stands out in Franklin's vibrant tapestry of medieval life is King Henry—an enlightened monarch condemned to live in dark times." (★★★★ **SELECTION** May/June 2007)



Here Be Dragons

By Sharon Kay Penman (1985)

The first in the Welsh Princes trilogy featuring the Plantagenet Kings takes place in 13th-century Wales and England under the rule of the ruthless King John, of Magna Carta fame. John negotiates a truce with Wales by marrying his illegitimate daughter, Joanna, to the Welsh king Llewelyn. Penman tells the story of John and his times—the wars, bloodshed, power shifts, and

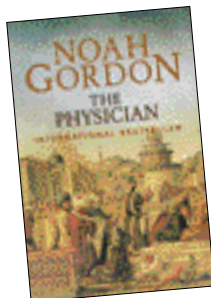


interdynastic marriages—by juxtaposing the love story between Joanna and Llewelyn the Great with the turbulent conflict between the English and the Welsh. “A weighty (over 700 pages) but accessible royal portrait, an agreeable love story, and a painstaking reconstruction of some virtuoso medieval wheeling and dealing,” wrote *Kirkus*. Next in the series: *Falls the Shadow* (1988) and *The Reckoning* (1988). See also the first of Penman’s Plantagenet trilogy, *When Christ and His Saints Slept* (1994).

The Physician

By Noah Gordon (1986)

The first in the Cole Family Trilogy, which continues with *Shaman* (1992) and *Matters of Choice* (1995), starts in poverty-ridden 11th-century London. When the young Rob Cole is orphaned, he apprentices to a traveling barber-surgeon-snake-oil salesman. Healing becomes his near-magical destiny, and Rob, wishing to leave the barbaric practice of medicine in England, embarks on a perilous journey to the Near East disguised as a Jew so he can study with the world’s most renowned physician, Avicenna, in Persia. “The portrayal of Bagdad and Persia as the center of advanced medicine is intriguing,” wrote the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. “Vivid descriptions permeate throughout the book such that one gets the feeling of actually being in the dusty streets of ancient Isfahan skirting legless beggars and camel dung. An insightful and unforgettable read.”



Further Reading

- THE NEEDLE IN THE BLOOD** | SARAH BOWER (2007)
- THE CONQUEROR** | GEORGETTE HEYER (1931)
- THE WAKE** | PAUL KINGSNORTH (2015)
- SHERWOOD** | PARKE GODWIN (1991)
- HAWK QUEST** | ROBERT LYNDON (2012)
- THE BASTARD KING (THE NORMAN TRILOGY, #1)** | JEAN PLAIDY (1974)
- IVANHOE** | SIR WALTER SCOTT (1820)
- THE ELEANOR OF AQUITAINE TRILOGY** | ELIZABETH CHADWICK (2013–2016)

THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR (1337–1453)

Joan of Arc

By Mark Twain (1895)

Perhaps only enthusiasts know that Twain considered his last completed novel, about “The Maid of Orléans,” his best work. A heroine for her role during a phase of the Hundred Years’ War and canonized as a Roman Catholic saint,

Joan of Arc is presented here as the exceptional woman—teenager—she was. Twain presents her life story as a translation of memoirs by Joan of Arc’s page, who covers her peasant childhood in Domrémy, her time as a commander in Charles VII’s army, and her ultimate betrayal. “She was honorable in an age which had forgotten what honor was,” Twain praised, “a rock of convictions in a time when men believed in nothing.” The novel lacks Twain’s trademark humor, and, ironically, Twain was, at this late stage in his career, opposed to institutional religion. Yet *Joan of Arc* remains an accurate fictionalization of the heroine.



Further Reading

- THE GRAIL QUEST SERIES** | BERNARD CORNWELL (2000–2012)
- IN A DARK WOOD WANDERING: A NOVEL OF THE MIDDLE AGES** | HELLA S. HAASSE (1949)
- SIR NIGEL AND THE WHITE COMPANY: A TALE OF THE HUNDRED YEARS WAR** | ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE (2007)
- HENRY V** | WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (CA. 1599)
- BLOOD RED, SISTER ROSE** | THOMAS KENEALLY (1974)
- MORALITY PLAY** | BARRY UNSWORTH (1996)
- THE KING’S WOMEN** | DERYN LAKE (2006)

THE BLACK DEATH (1347–1350)

Company of Liars

A Novel of the Plague

By Karen Maitland (2008)

In 1348 England, a disfigured, itinerant peddler of fake religious relics hopes to hide out in an inland shrine to escape the encroaching plague. He unwittingly takes on eight companions also on the run. The outcasts—each an unreliable and superstitious narrator—have a tale to tell, from the one-armed storyteller to a strange, albino child, two Italian minstrels, a midwife/healer, and a banished painter and his pregnant wife. But as fear, despair, illness, and death start to befall them, the group realizes that there just may be worse things in store for them than the plague. “An ingenious alchemy of history, mystery, and powerful human drama,” wrote the *Book Smugglers* critic. “The fear and paranoia brought by the spreading plague as well as certain medieval customs and beliefs compound



to form with the particular tale of this particular group of people a gripping story.”

Further Reading

- YEAR OF WONDERS** | GERALDINE BROOKS (2001)
- DOOMSDAY BOOK** | CONNIE WILLIS (1992)
- NARCISSUS AND GOLDMUND** | HERMANN HESSE (1930)
- THE DREAM OF SCIPIO** | IAIN PEARNS (2002)
- THE HOUSE ON THE STRAND** | DAPHNE DU MAURIER (1969)

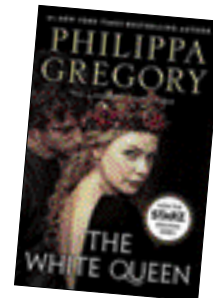
THE WARS OF THE ROSES (1455–1487)

The White Queen

The Plantagenet and Tudor Novels
By Philippa Gregory (2009)

The first in this series occurs during the final years of England’s Wars of the Roses. After her husband dies, the beautiful, scheming commoner Elizabeth Woodville, of the House of Lancaster, secretly marries King Edward IV, of the House of York. The two families remain in violent conflict as Elizabeth fights for her family. Gregory charts the rise of

a common woman and her two sons, who become pawns in the unsolved mystery known as the Princes in the Tower. *The Red Queen* (2010), a companion novel, chronicles the Tudors and Margaret Beaufort. “Gregory has a deft hand with historical imagination, making the most of ancient mysteries, such as the fate of the little princes in the tower, the death of the Duke of Clarence and the enduring rumor that Elizabeth Woodville and her mother were witches,” wrote the *Washington Post*. “The warning is clear: Turning your back on morality for the sake of political gain will come back and bite you in the bum.”



Further Reading

- THE DAUGHTER OF TIME (INSPECTOR ALAN GRANT, #5)** | JOSEPHINE TEY (1951)
- THE SUNNE IN SPLENDOUR** | SHARON KAY PENMAN (1982)
- THE BLACK ARROW: A TALE OF THE TWO ROSES** | ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON (1883)
- STORMBIRD (WARS OF THE ROSES #1)** | CONN IGGULDEN (2013) ■

