

The Book of the Maidservant



Do you think you've had bad luck being squeezed between two obnoxious air travelers?

Imagine what it was like in the 15th century to be forced to take a religious pilgrimage to Rome with your boss (a fervent woman who screams her prayers out loud) and a fierce man from your English town who threatens you daily. Plus, after an arduous day climbing mountains and fording dangerous rivers, the other pilgrims demand that you cook their evening meal (dried peas, anyone, or how do you skin a rabbit?) Afterwards when the pious folk are resting by the fire, they send you out to do their washing in the nearest frigid stream.

Pity poor Johanna who because of her father's debts and her sister's marriage was forced into service. Her employer is the true to life Dame Margery Kempe who wrote the first autobiography in English. (However, she was illiterate so she had to have it transcribed by a monk.) In this fascinating young adult novel, Anglo-Saxon scholar Rebecca Barnhouse transports us back to the middle ages. After reading Kempe's account of a pilgrimage, Barnhouse wondered about her maidservant, who appeared only peripherally in the account of their journeys. But here, gutsy, intelligent Johanna takes center stage. Subtly, through the pilgrims harsh treatment of this servant, Barnhouse shows that it is often the most religious who treat those around them badly. And with absolutely no self-awareness.

However, all is not bleak on this pilgrimage. Two young scholars on their way to study law in Bologna strike up a friendship with the young girl. One in particular, John Mouse (the author gave her characters authentic names from the period), sings with her on the journey and helps her through her lowest moments.

Eventually, even the pilgrims can no longer stand journeying with Margery Kempe. A friar offers to take her over the Alps and that is when she literally abandons Johanna who has no money and no way to get home. Read what the clever maidservant does in this terrifying situation.

If you want a book that takes you back in time and provides a compelling arm-chair journey replete with period details, you'll enjoy this book. Karen Cushman's Catherine, Called Birdy is another novel about this time period.

Posted by Dory L. on June 22, 2011

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