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Book review of Ariana Franklin's Mistress of the Art of Death. New York: Berkley Trade, 1996. 432 Pages. (Paperback, \$15). ISBN-10: 0425219259

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Book Review: Ariana Franklin's *Mistress of the Art of Death*. New York: Berkley Trade, 1996. 432 Pages. (Paperback, \$15). ISBN-10: 0425219259.

By Diana Dominguez

I will confess that I was skeptical about whether I would like Ariana Franklin's *The Mistress of the Art of Death*. I've read too many historical mysteries (of any era, but especially medieval) whose authors claimed to have included "historically-authentic" facts and social circumstances only to be disappointed and even angered by glaring anachronistic elements or outright inaccuracies before I reached the end of the first chapter. The premise of Franklin's novel had all the makings of such a disappointing read: Adelia Aguilar, a coroner educated in a Salerno, Italy, medical school travels to Henry II's England with a Jewish scholar and a Muslim eunuch to help solve the seeming serial killings of four children – can anyone say CSI: Cambridge? I was expecting a grossly anachronistic tale full of 20th century social ideologies overlaid onto a Hollywoodesque version of medieval England.

Ecstatically, however, I was hooked early into the first chapter by Franklin's wry humor and historical authenticity woven in seamlessly into a murder mystery worthy of Sherlock Holmes or Agatha Christie. The 12th-century England that Adelia and her companions travel to is vividly and accurately depicted, as are Adelia, Henry II, and the other characters we meet during Adelia's investigation to catch the killer. As a medieval scholar whose particular specialty is women in 12th century England, I can say that I have some basis on which to make this claim. Intrigued by the authenticity, I did a bit of research on the author; it turns out she's also a medieval historian whose favorite century is the 12th century, for many of the same reasons I find that century particularly fascinating.

The medical school Adelia hails from is not fictional, nor is the fact that it trained women to be physicians. In fact, a female physician from Salerno named Trotula, who wrote several medical texts about women's health issues, actually existed during the late 11th and early 12th centuries. The medical and forensic descriptions in *Mistress* are spine-tingling because they are accurately depicted. The mystery Adelia must solve is chilling, but Franklin does not make her protagonist a super-sleuth who instantly "knows" how to solve it. Her surprise at who the killer is echoes the surprise I felt when the criminal finally came to light. Adelia is an intriguing and endearing character: outspoken, not particularly beautiful, short-tempered, scientifically-minded, self-sufficient, but ultimately very human. She is a fish out of water when she first arrives in Cambridge, but learns to sympathize and even like the people among whom she finds herself

living. Both the mystery and Adelia's own personal adventure end on a satisfying note that I didn't find at odds with the time the story was set in.

Franklin has written a novel that serves many purposes: it is a well-plotted mystery with enough twists that an avid mystery reader will be kept guessing until almost the very end; it is a great character-driven story that introduces us to unforgettable characters, especially Adelia; and it is a dynamic history lesson (that doesn't reek of scholarly preaching) about one of the most tumultuous periods in European history. In short, it was a rousing good read – CSI: Cambridge, indeed!

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