Canticle

by Janet Rich Edwards



About the Book

A masterful debut novel following a spirited young woman?s explorations of faith, agency and love in 13th-century Bruges.

Aleys is 16 years old and prone to religious visions. She and her only friend, Finn, have been learning Latin together in secret. But just as she thinks their connection might become something more, everything unravels. When her father promises her in marriage to a merchant she doesn?t love, she runs away from home, finding shelter among the beguines, a fiercely independent community of religious women who refuse to answer to the Church.

Among these hardworking and strong-willed women, Aleys glimpses for the first time the joys of belonging: a life of song, meaning and friendship in the markets and along the canals of Bruges. But forces both mystical and political are at work. Illegal translations of scripture, the women?s independence, and a sudden rash of miracles all draw the attention of an ambitious bishop --- and bring Aleys and those around her into ever-increasing danger, a danger that will push Aleys to a new understanding of love and sacrifice.

Grounded in the little-told stories of medieval women --- mystics, saints, anchoresses and beguines --- and introducing a major new talent, CANTICLE is a luminous work of historical fiction, vividly evoking a world on the verge of transformation.

Discussion Guide

1. Aleys and Finn each have dreams of their own. In your opinion, do they achieve them? Do you think they could have achieved them if they?d married instead of entering religious life?

2. In the Middle Ages, women either married or became ?enclosed? as nuns (if they could pay the dowry required by

convents). Faced with this, women throughout Europe began forming their own independent communities. What do you see as the pros and cons of these options for women? What would you choose if you were faced with a marriage you didn?t want?

3. Early in the story, Sophia advises Aleys, ?Try to be simple.? What does Sophia mean? How does Aleys grow to understand Sophia?s meaning?

4. How do you feel about Friar Lukas? In what ways are the things he and Aleys seek the same? How do they differ?

5. Sophia states of her relationship with God, ?I am more his hausfrau than his lover.? Reflect on how our ambitions can change with age and experience.

6. Aleys? lifestyle of religious seclusion is in sharp contrast with life in the 21st century. Is there any corner of the anchoritic life that intrigues you?

7. In medieval Europe, the merchant class began to read and write in local languages to engage in the new trade opportunities that were opening up. In 1300, when CANTICLE is set, there would have been little for people to read other than contracts and courtly love poems. Reflect on the growing desire of people in the Middle Ages to translate and read the Bible for themselves.

8. When Aleys suddenly begins healing people at the hospital, she?s unsure whether to believe it or not. What would be your own reaction if you suddenly suspected you might be a vessel for miracles?

9. In the 13th century, there were several channels for religious life: the ?secular? organized church with its hierarchy of priests and bishops who minister to congregations; the monks who lead scholarly (but not enclosed) lives in monasteries; new orders of friars who preach on street corners and take vows of poverty; nuns enclosed in convents; anchoresses who provide prayers and spiritual advice to townspeople; and mystics who might be embedded in or independent of these institutions. What kinds of religious power or authority are held by the Bishop? By Lukas? Sophia? Aleys? How do the centers of power shift over the course of the novel?

10. At the end of the novel, the narrator states, ?She lives for those that choose; she is dead for those that choose.? Why do you think the author left the ending ambiguous? What do you think happened?

Author Bio

Janet Rich Edwards is a graduate of GrubStreet?s yearlong, MFA-level Novel Incubator program. A professor of epidemiology at Harvard, Janet had written more than 300 papers for scientific journals, but she was left wondering if she could convey more truth, or at least different truths, through story. When she?s not sneaking hours to write fiction, Janet is researching facts about women?s health. She lives outside of Boston with her husband and never more than two cats. CANTICLE is her first novel.

Canticle

by Janet Rich Edwards

Publication Date: December 2, 2025
Genres: Fiction, Historical Fiction
Hardcover: 368 pages
Publisher: Spiegel & Grau
ISBN-10: 1966302053
ISBN-13: 9781966302056