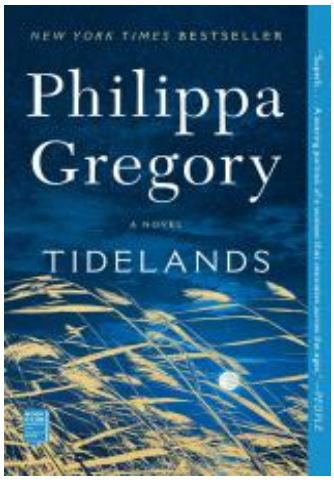
Tidelands

by Philippa Gregory



About the Book

The #1 *New York Times* bestselling author and ?one of the great storytellers of our time? (*San Francisco Book Review*) turns from the glamour of the royal courts to tell the story of an ordinary woman, Alinor, who cannot bear to conform to the life that lies before her.

Midsummer?s Eve, 1648, England is in the grip of a civil war between renegade king and rebellious parliament. The struggle reaches every corner of the kingdom, even the remote tidelands --- the marshy landscape of the south coast.

Alinor, a descendant of wisewomen, trapped in poverty and superstition, waits in the graveyard under the full moon for a ghost who will declare her free from her abusive husband. Instead, she meets James, a young man on the run, and shows him the secret ways across the treacherous marsh, not knowing that she is leading disaster into the heart of her life.

Suspected of possessing dark secrets in superstitious times, Alinor?s ambition and determination mark her out from her neighbors. This is the time of witch mania, and Alinor, a woman without a husband, skilled with herbs, suddenly enriched, arouses envy in her rivals and fear among the villagers, who are ready to take lethal action into their own hands.

It is dangerous for a woman to be different.

Discussion Guide

1. From the opening page, the reader is immediately pulled into the unique setting of the book. Alinor lives in an ever-changing physical landscape known to outsiders as Foulmire. How much does this in-between geography shape the people who live there? How much is it a reflection of the personalities that can manage the ever-changing conditions of the tidelands? Why do you think the author used this setting for a book that takes place during England?s Civil War?

2. At their first parting, James tells Alinor, ??I did not know that there could be a woman like you, in a place like this.?? That sentence is repeated throughout the book but with changing meanings. Alinor even rephrases it at the moment she is considering suicide. Ultimately, what kind of woman does James see Alinor as? How does she come to see herself?

3. The story is told in the third person, but alternates between Alinor?s perspective and James?. When King Charles refuses to be rescued, the reader feels how deeply James is shaken, losing his faith and his sense of purpose in life. But with the third-person perspective, can the reader see anything James has gained? What else can we see that he has lost by the end of the novel?

4. Ned is a foil for James, in both his political convictions and social status. But neither man is able to help Alinor in her hour of greatest need. Can you defend either of their actions during Alinor?s trial for witchcraft? Do you think either of them loves Alinor as much as they claim?

5. When we first meet Alys, she appears to be a good child and an obedient daughter. How does she change throughout the novel? When she argues for Alinor to try to abort her baby, do you think Alys makes a fair case?

6. Alys steals money for her dowry and lets her mother pay for the crime. How do you think Alys justifies this to herself? As a reader, do you find this forgivable? Do you think contemporary readers can fairly judge a woman of the 17th century?

7. Mrs. Miller is never portrayed as a kind or generous woman. But when she finds Jane?s dowry purse filled with old and valueless coins, is her reaction fair? Given all the events leading to Alinor?s witch trial, is Mrs. Miller more to blame than anyone else?

8. In 17th-century England, infant mortality was estimated at about 18 percent, and childbirth was often fatal for the mother. But Alinor enjoys her job as a midwife. How do we see childbirth through her eyes? How do we see the women of the tidelands as she interacts with them?

9. Through Rob?s placement as a companion for Master Walter, we get to see the inner workings of the wealthiest house on the island. How do Mr. Tudeley and Mrs. Wheatley compare to Mr. and Mrs. Miller? Mr. and Mrs. Stoney? In a world of such rigid class distinctions, do you think Cromwell can really bring about the changes men like Ned want?

10. Characters like Sir William show how the upper class of England had to handle the rise of Cromwell and his New Model Army. Men like Ned believe this adherence to the Protestant faith and new political beliefs will benefit everyone. But as we see more common citizens of the area, is there anything to be said for the old faith? Is the ?old faith? Catholicism or something even older?

11. The oldest superstitions on the island help lead to Alinor?s trial. The causes of these trials are hard for modern readers to imagine. But given that they were described as an ?epidemic? in mid-16th- through mid-17th-century Europe, does this novel help 21st-century readers understand why?

12. The novel ends with King Charles executed and parliament in power. But the political tides are still turning in England. How do you imagine women like Alinor and Alys will fare in this world where so much is changing?

Author Bio

Dr. Philippa Gregory is an internationally renowned historian and novelist. She holds a PhD in 18th-century literature at the University of Edinburgh and is a fellow of the Royal Historical Society and the Universities of Sussex and Cardiff, an honorary research fellow at Birkbeck University of London and she was awarded a CBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours for her services to literature and to charity. Her novels have been adapted for stage and screen, and in 2023 she published her groundbreaking history book, NORMAL WOMEN: 900 Years of Making History, which also was released as a podcast, a teen edition and a series for young children.

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