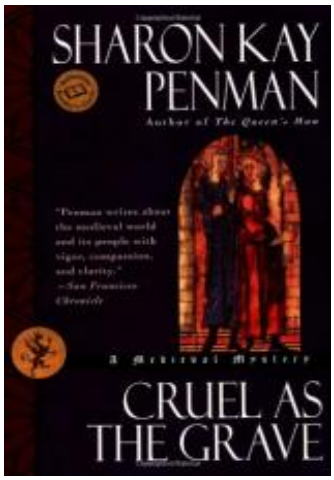
ReadingGroupGuides
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Cruel as the Grave

by Sharon Kay Penman



About the Book

April 1193. England's King Richard Lionheart languishes in a German prison, and treason scents the air. Richard's younger brother, John, seizes Windsor Castle, and Dowager Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine summons her trusted personal "queen's man," Justin de Quincy, to do the impossible--mediate a truce with her rebel son.

Amid such fateful events, the murder of a Welsh peddler's daughter seems small. But the cruel demise of the beautiful Melangell so troubles Justin that not even a threatened French invasion can keep him from investigating her death. Yet can he bring Melangell's craven killer to justice?

Discussion Guide

1.What do you predict will be Justin's next adventure? What would you like to see happen to him and the other characters?

2. Which characters did you find to be the most compelling and why? Did you find that you have a preference for either the fictional or real-life characters?

3. What characters would you like to hear from again?

4. Did you solve this mystery or did the ending surprise you?

5. What do you think are the necessary ingredients in crafting a good mystery?

6. If you were to create your own mystery series, what kind of characters would you build it around? Where would it be set?

7. Did the line between the fictional and historically accurate components of this novel seem clear to you? What do you think are the merits as well as the potential problems of the genre of historical fiction?

8. What aspects of medieval English history did this novel inspire you to learn more about? What did you learn that most surprised or interested you about life in these times?

9. This story raises important questions about human nature and the nature of human society. How has the world changed since the Middle Ages? What do you think has changed (or not), for better and for worse?

10. Discuss the barriers of class, ethnicity, and so forth that thwart many of the relationships in this novel. Do these hierarchies still exist? How did they operate in the Middle Ages and how do they operate today?

11. Discuss the many complicated familial relationships in this novel. Why is the parent-child relationship fraught with so many problems? Do you think human beings have made any progress over the intervening centuries in working out this bond?

12. Eleanor of Aquitaine is a remarkable female figure in history who juggled a whole host of roles as queen, general, prisoner, mother, wif,e and so forth. What challenges did she face in trying to balance her duties as a queen with her duties as a mother? In which role(s) would you judge her most successful?

13. Did you find the nature of Justin's parentage to be shocking? Do you think the identity of his father might be more shocking and scandalous today than it was in medieval England?

14. How do you understand Geoffrey's and his father Humphrey Aston's decisions to remain silent? What are their motives?

15. According to his aunt Agnes, "Daniel has never seemed to blame Geoffrey for being the chosen one." Do you think this is an accurate assessment? Why or why not?

16. What do you think will happen with Claudine and Justin? Discuss the irony of the situation that Justin now finds himself in.

17. Do you find the bond between Eleanor of Aquitaine and Justin de Quincy to be convincing? Why might this queen choose to bond with such a young man?

18. Discuss the impact of a sexual double standard on the characters in this novel. Who benefits and who is punished for their sexual adventures and why?

19. Given the role that unplanned pregnancies play in this novel, what impact do you think the twentieth-century development of safe and effective birth control has had on society?

20. Discuss why Justin came to care so deeply about bringing Melangell's murderer to justice. Why were others, such as

Tobias, not so invested in finding the killer? Was justice served in this case? Do you think English and other Western justice systems work more effectively today?

21. Why did your group choose to read this particular work? How does this novel compare with other works your group has read? What are you planning to read next?

Author Bio

Sharon Kay Penman is the author of seven critically acclaimed historical novels: THE SUNNE IN SPLENDOUR, HERE BE DRAGONS, FALLS THE SHADOW, THE RECKONING, WHEN CHRIST AND HIS SAINTS SLEPT, TIME AND CHANCE and DEVIL'S BROOD. She has also written four medieval mysteries. Her first was THE QUEEN'S MAN, the queen in question being Eleanor of Aquitaine, a finalist for an Edgar Award for Best First Mystery from the Mystery Writers of America. Her other mysteries are CRUEL AS THE GRAVE, DRAGON'S LAIR and PRINCE OF DARKNESS. She lives in New Jersey.

Critical Praise

"Penman transports the reader into the sights, sounds, and smells of the 1100s. The queen's man is a perceptive young man who puts justice before all else. "

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