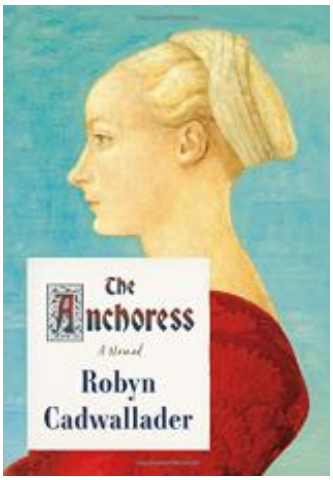
The Anchoress

by Robyn Cadwallader



About the Book

Set in England in 1255, Robyn Cadwallader?s THE ANCHORESS is a startling and strange debut novel about a young girl?s desperate choice to isolate herself from the world.

Sarah is only 17 when she chooses to become an anchoress, a holy woman much like the one who taught Saint Hildegard of Bingen, shut away in a small cell, measuring seven by nine paces, at the side of the village church. Fleeing the grief of losing a much-loved sister in childbirth as well as pressure to marry, she decides to renounce the world --- with all its dangers, desires and temptations --- and commit herself to a life of prayer. But it soon becomes clear that even the thick, unforgiving walls of Sarah?s cell cannot keep the outside world away, and her body and soul are still in great danger.

Cadwallader?s powerful novel tells an absorbing and compulsively readable story of faith, desire, shame, fear and the very human need for connection and touch. Compelling, evocative and haunting, THE ANCHORESS is both quietly heartbreaking and thrillingly unpredictable.

Discussion Guide

1. Why did Sarah decide to be enclosed as an anchoress? Her reasons may be multiple.

2. What choices were available to Sarah?

3. As a child, Sarah longed to fly like Swallow, the jongleur. What use does the story make of the symbol of birds and flying?

4. What does Agnes?s presence in the cell mean for Sarah?

5. Words and stories are important in this book, but each character has a slightly different relationship to them. How do Sarah, Ranaulf, Anna, Avice and Eleanor relate to words and stories?

6. Avice says, ?Afer all, a tree is always a tree, a pot is always a pot, however we say or think on it.? What does she mean, do you think?

7. In the book of Genesis, Eve takes and eats the forbidden fruit, traditionally represented as an apple. There are two apples in THE ANCHORESS. What is their significance?

8. Do you think Sarah should have told Anna that she knew Thomas raped her?

9. The word ?holy? is from the Old English *h?lig*, meaning ?that which must be preserved whole or intact,? and is connected with the Old English word *h?l*, meaning health and wholeness. In current usage it is a word layered with expectations: love of God, niceness, meekness, obedience, piety, and so on. Sarah hopes and prays that she will become holy. Does she? If she does, in what ways?

10. Isabella says very little, but Sarah says she has helped her decide to stay. What do you think Sarah means?

11. The Rule that Sarah follows emphasizes the dangers of the eyes above all of the senses. Think about the significance of sight in the novel. What role does it play? Keep in mind both Sarah and Ranaulf, but also the people in the village.

12. In what ways does Ranaulf change?

13. Sarah describes Father Peter?s gentle care and contrasts it with Father Ranaulf?s stern silences, yet she says she has learned from the spaces between Ranaulf?s words. What does she mean? Does Peter?s care limit her growth in any way? (He says, ?You must learn humility, child. Think of it as submission to me, the man you are sworn to obey.?)

14. How do you think the fire started? Why?

15. The novel is set more than seven hundred years ago; does it have any relevance to women today? How?

16. Geraldine Brooks once said of writing her own historical fiction that times and contexts may be different, but people are still people. Do you agree?

Author Bio

Robyn Cadwallader has published numerous prizewinning short stories and reviews, as well as a book of poetry and a nonfiction book based on her Ph.D. thesis concerning attitudes toward virginity and women in the Middle Ages. She lives among vineyards outside Canberra, Australia, when not traveling to England for research and visiting ancient archaeological sites along the way.

Critical Praise

?Robyn Cadwallader does the real work of historical fiction, creating a detailed, sensuous, and richly imagined shard of the past. She has successfully placed her narrator, the anchoress, in that tantalizing, precarious, delicate realm: convincingly of her own distant era, yet emotionally engaging and vividly present to us in our own.?

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