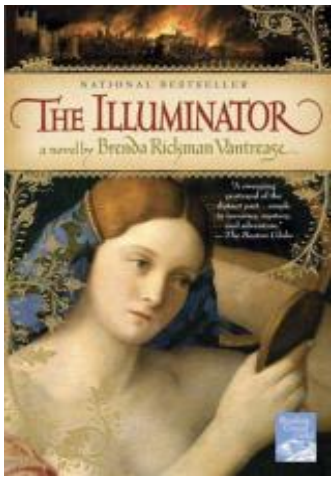
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The Illuminator

by Brenda Rickman Vantrease



About the Book

It is England, in the late fourteenth century, a time when the old feudal order is starting to crack, but the whim of a lord or the pleasure of a bishop still has the power to seal nearly anyone's fate. The printing press has yet to be invented; books are rare and costly, painstakingly lettered and illuminated with exquisite paintings.

For Lady Kathryn of Blackingham Manor, a widow and mother trying desperately to safeguard her holdings without the dubious protection of her late husband, it is a time made both sweeter and more perilous by the arrival of a master illuminator called Finn. Caught between the King's taxes and the Church's tithes, Kathryn strikes a bargain with the local abbot: she will take Finn and his pretty young daughter into her household in exchange for the monastery's protection.

Finn is working not only on approved church texts, but secretly --- and dangerously --- on a forbidden English translation of the Bible. As the hesitant friendship between Kathryn and Finn grows into a passionate alliance, wonderful new storyteller Brenda Rickman Vantrease brings us a glorious novel of love, treachery, faith, and redemption on the eve of the Renaissance.

Discussion Guide

1. Do you regard **The Illuminator** as primarily Kathryn's story or Finn's?

2. What do you think about Kathryn? Is she a good mother? In what ways do she and her sons, Colin and Alfred, help and hurt each other?

3. The author has said that she created Finn as a kind of ideal hero who doesn't exist in real life. How close does he come to your own ideal?

4. Agnes and her husband are caught in the shift between feudalism, when farmers were inextricably bound to the land where they were born, and the life of an itinerant worker. How do you regard Agnes's decision to stay with Kathryn, both before and after her husband's death?

5. The strict feudal class system exerts great pressure on the lives of other characters as well. For example, how does it affect Alfred's opportunities, and what choices does Half-Tom have open to him about his future? To what extent does class consciousness continue to influence our lives today?

6. Some have called the *Revelations of Divine Love*by Julian of Norwich feminist in her concept of Jesus as "Mother God." How do you view this interpretation? In light of the troubled times in which she lived, what do you think Julian means when she says "all will be well"?

7. Faith is obviously central to Julian's existence. What role does it play in other characters' lives? For example, how does Kathryn's faith change in the course of the novel? How important are Colin's religious beliefs to him?

8. What do you think about Magda? In what ways does her mysticism seem similar to, and different from, Julian's? What role does mysticism play in spirituality, and is that role greater during tumultuous periods in history?

9. What is the symbolism of the two necklaces described in the novel?

10. The Illuminator >is set at a time of great corruption in the Catholic Church. What do you think accounts for corruption not only in religion, but also in other established institutions such as government, capitalist corporations, large philanthropic organizations, etc? Is that corruption inevitable?

11. Discuss how the social and political climate of the period brought Finn and Kathryn together while simultaneously pulling them apart. How could the actions of their children have led to a different outcome for their relationship?

12. The novel ends where it begins: Half-Tom meets Finn on the road outside Norwich and hands off another vulnerable child to him. How satisfying is the ending?

Author Bio

Brenda Rickman Vantrease is a former English teacher and librarian who has traveled extensively in Europe and lives in Nashville, Tennessee. Her first novel, THE ILLUMINATOR, was translated into fifteen languages and chosen as a Book Sense 2006-2007 Reading Group Pick.

Critical Praise

"A luminescent and very readable portrait of a dark time in history."

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