



The Killing Way

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It is the time of Arthur, but this is not his storied epic. Arthur is a young and powerful warrior who some would say stands on the brink of legend. Britain's leaders have come to elect a new supreme king, and Arthur is favored. But when a young woman is brutally murdered and the blame is placed at Merlin's feet, Arthur's reputation is at stake and his enemies are poised to strike. Arthur turns to Malgwyn ap Cuneglas, a man whose knowledge of battle and keen insight into how the human mind works has helped Arthur come to the brink of kingship.

Malgwyn is also the man who hates Arthur most in the world.

After the death of Malgwyn's wife by Saxon hands, he became Mad Malgwyn, killer of Saxons and right-hand lieutenant to the warrior Arthur. Right hand, that is, until a Saxon cut his sword arm off and left him to die on the battlefield. Arthur rescued him. Now a one-armed scribe and a heavy drinker, Malgwyn rejects the half-life that his liege gave him. But loyalty is sometimes stronger than loathing...and Malgwyn is pulled toward a puzzle that he can't walk away from.

The Killing Way Details

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From Reader Review The Killing Way for online ebook

Nikki says

Now I've read a handful of historical mysteries, I'm starting to see trends -- the interest in the physical things surrounding the stories: how this was built or by whom, what purpose this serves, etc. I'm really not so interested in that: I know how castles are built, and often by whom, or at least what particular purpose they've served, and I am far more interested in reading about *people*.

Fortunately, to some extent, I can say that Tony Hays delivers both. He invents the central character, the narrator, Malgwyn, in a way that reminded me a lot of Bernard Cornwell's Derfel in The Winter King et al. A one-armed ex-warrior-cum-scribe, he's bitter toward Arthur for saving his life, still angry at the Saxons who caused his wife's death, and feels himself unworthy of being with his daughter, who he leaves with his brother to be raised by him. Woven around the murder mystery and political plot is his slow realisation that his life isn't over, that he has a family to take care of, and that killing Saxons doesn't satisfy his hatred and pain anymore. This is all reasonably well done, and despite being one-armed, Malgwyn is a capable warrior and, when not drunk, he is a clever man.

Which is, of course, why Arthur saved his life, and why Arthur turns to him when a murder is blamed on someone close to him. Arthur is about to take the throne -- or, as it's framed here, succeed the last Rigotamos, the head chieftain of all the Brythonic tribes -- and he needs to find out the truth of the murder, and fast, as other chieftains attempt to use it against him. The portrayal of Arthur is a familiar one, closer to the Arthur of Geoffrey's Historia or Wace and Layamon's Bruts than to the Arthur of French romance. He's capable, good in war, fair, and a Christian man, with Roman pretensions. Hand in hand with this goes the fact that figures like Lancelot and Galahad are not present.

More unusually, Gawain is not present either, and no relationship to Arthur is stressed. He's referenced a couple of times, but never appears. One of the main figures in the story, other than Malgwyn and Arthur, is Kay, who is treated very well here: he is noble and good-hearted, loyal to his lord, although supposedly he has a temper (which isn't really displayed much). I really enjoyed the portrayal of Kay, who -- like Arthur -- isn't touched by any of the French tradition. That's really what prompted me to give it four stars, despite not being really overwhelmed with the rest of it, which I found to be reasonably standard fare for a historical mystery story.

If you're fond of Tristan, you won't really enjoy his portrayal here. He's allied with traitors, and a coward, and the sort of man who mistreats women. It's an interesting way to choose to portray him, though.

Ultimately, it's easy to read, and kind of interesting to see which characters Tony Hays uses and what he does with them. I'll read the sequel, and likely anything else he writes for this series, but it hasn't even really approached my favourite Arthurian stories.

Whitley Birks says

There wasn't anything particularly wrong with this book. It just dragged on and on and on. I couldn't get into it. The writing was fine, the characters were decent...I guess that's really what was wrong. Everything was just mediocre. Nothing wrong, just nothing good either.

Phair says

For some reason I found this book very soothing despite it being a murder mystery. I felt comfortable with "Mad Malgwyn", the protagonist and I felt in some way included in his adventure and was happy to keep coming back into his world. The story is set in the court of Arthur just prior to his election as high king of the tribes uniting against the invading Saxons. There are only the germs of the familiar Arthurian story here. This is more rooted in possible history than in legend. The perps were fairly obvious from the start but I didn't care. I enjoyed the ride and will come back for more if the author continues the series.

Gretchen says

Not a believer in the myth of King Arthur? Read this book. It just might change your mind. Here is an author who does a brilliant job of stripping down the myth of King Arthur. Remove all of the mystic and what are you left with? A British man who has adopted Roman ways and struggles to maintain order between old ways and new beliefs. Even if you aren't a fan of the Arthur mythology, this book is worth reading for Malgwyn.

Beorn says

Rather than being the Arthurian epic of battle, intrigue and bloodshed that I was expecting, it feels a lot more like a standard fare modern murder mystery pattern but dressed up in a Dark Ages costume.

A slightly irritating routine also becomes apparent that the author attempted to cover up this relatively simple mechanism by trying to make the dialogue more wordy but more sounding pretentious than poetic, like a script you'd expect to hear at a Renaissance Fair play rather than an articulate spell-weaving novel.

Don't get me wrong, there is undeniable promise here for the author's abilities, the plot development and other essential vehicles are entirely enjoyable and credible. It is just that those aforementioned problems - the thin veil of a Dark Ages costume and the irritating approach to trying to sound more wordy than it needs to - that lets the book down the most.

Two out of five stars seems harsh but that is based purely on their annotations for each star rating. This could have been so much better if it wasn't for the annoyingly pretentious dialogue.

Susan (aka Just My Op) says

This Arthurian mystery is told from the perspective of "Mad Malgwyn," a former soldier who became a drunken disgrace after he lost his wife and after Lord Arthur saved him on the battlefield. Malgwyn hated Arthur for saving his life after his arm was severed, believing death is preferable to life as a one-armed man. Despite his downfall, he is chosen to investigate the murder of a servant girl, using his 6th century forensic knowledge. Of course, nothing is quite as it seems, and the murder of a lowly servant seems to point to a

much more complex political plot.

Although I liked this book, I wanted and expected to like it more than I did. Quite a few characters were introduced early on, and I had to get used to the names and keep them straight, but that didn't take long. The mysteries to be solved did not engage me as much as I would have liked and the story occasionally moved a bit slowly for my taste. While Malgwyn often spoke of his hatred for Arthur, the emotions didn't seem to have real depth, and I would have appreciated some of the other characters to have a little more depth as well. Still it was a pleasant read and I would have given it a higher rating if not for one thing that grated on my nerves. The protagonist lost half an arm in battle. To mention that when it is important to the story is fine, but it was repeated so often it became tiresome and predictable.

The two maps at the beginning of the book helped me trace some of the action. There is a "Glossary and Gazetteer" at the back of the book, but most of the terms were explained as they were used so it was nice to have but not entirely necessary. The author's notes at the end of the book were quite interesting.

(Edit: I failed to mention that the author included details about the day-to-day life of the period, including the importance of good teeth and the personal hygiene that was somewhat spotty. I appreciated those details.)

Ranting Dragon says

<http://www.rantingdragon.com/the-kill...>

The Killing Way by Tony Hays is marked "an Arthurian mystery" on the front cover, a brilliant concept that immediately drew my attention. More of a historical mystery than a fantasy — though with Druidic magic still at the forefront of everyone's minds — The Killing Way begins the story of Malgwyn ap Cuneglas, Arthur's most trusted friend. Malgwyn reluctantly becomes embroiled in a murder mystery involving all of Arthur's court and a dangerous plot to overthrow the king.

Well researched and original

Tony Hays clearly knows his stuff; the Author's Note at the end of the book offers a clear explanation of all Hays' choices concerning the historical context. In the book proper, hardly a paragraph goes by where some new Roman, British or Saxon habit isn't introduced, but Hays could have provided these historical tidbits more naturally. Malgwyn's first-person narration frequently pauses in the middle of conversation to give the reader an explanation of one thing or another, but many of those explanations were unnecessary given the helpful context. I wonder whether Hays fell prey to the "Look at all the research I've done!" form of over-sharing that is common to fantasy and historical fiction writers alike.

That said, Hays's vision of Arthur is unique and refreshing. There is no Camelot, only a grim, wartorn Britannia on the brink of collapse. The vicious murder of a servant girl casts a critical light on the hypocrisy of knighthood, and, for that matter, the knights themselves are cruel and far from perfect. Mixing murder mysteries and Arthurian romance is an unusual choice, but The Killing Way shows that it can be done.

Familiar characters and some great new ones

Later additions to the Arthurian myth such as Lancelot and Galahad aren't found in The Killing Way, but Hays made the happy decision to include Guinevere, Merlin, Kay and a host of others you'll recognize if

you're familiar with the legend. By the time the story starts, Merlin is a forgetful old man whose magic, if he ever had any, seems pretty well vanished. Guinevere is a beautiful nun whose relationship with Arthur has shamed her in the face of everyone at court and prevents Arthur from ever marrying her. Kay is a lovable knight whose personal connection to the murder at the novel's heart makes *The Killing Way* more than an impersonal mystery, but an important and emotional journey to find closure.

The best character of all, of course, is Malgwyn himself, and you won't find him in any traditional Arthurian lore. His wife butchered by the Saxons, his arm lopped off in battle afterwards, Malgwyn is a bitter man soaked in alcohol whose most fervent wish is that Arthur had just let him die on the field instead of bringing him to safety. Malgwyn is not a perfect character, though, and in a few scenes he's downright annoying. His worst character trait is his headlong descent into damp sentimentality any time he thinks on his daughter, and his few attempts at sarcastic humor leave a lot wanting. But Malgwyn is the grim and realistic foil to Arthur's idealism and self-righteousness, and I look forward to seeing how the men's relationship develops.

Stiff, unnatural prose

Unfortunately, *The Killing Way* has a serious flaw: unwieldy, pompous prose and dialogue. The novel's blurb says that Malgwyn "looks more like a CSI investigator than a scholarly Brother Cadfael," but Malgwyn's narration isn't nearly as fast-paced, funny, or human as a CSI show — and for those of you who've seen CSI, you know that's a pretty damning criticism of the book. Hays has only to pick up any high fantasy novel to see that fiction set in the Dark Ages need not adopt the same regal formality of the time period. And if one does choose to use regal formality and pseudo-medieval sentence phrasing, it had better be downright beautiful — but Hays fails on that score, too.

And what about the mystery?

For a book that calls itself an "Arthurian mystery," the mystery side of things is only so-so. It's clear from the start that the culprit is one of Arthur's political enemies, and it doesn't seem to matter which one of those enemies it is. The uncomplicated mystery didn't bother me too much, though, since I found the real story was Malgwyn's slow redemption and growing relationship with his family.

Why should you read this book?

Do you love Arthurian legend? Then you've got to read this book. Even though the writing is stiff, the concept and characters are still worth sinking your teeth into — if only to see whether you'll want to continue the series. But if you don't share my love for the Matter of Britain, I think there are better ways to spend your time.

Bradley says

I enjoyed this gritty, historically-plausible version of a Dark Ages Arthur and his court. These "knights of the round table" aren't concerned with abstract quests for mystical damozels or holy grails; they're dealing with the politics, military threats, and everyday life of a precarious federation of quarrelsome petty kingdoms, barely holding together under the leadership of an elected Rigotamos, or military warlord, against the threat of Saxon invaders, the tensions of competing religions, and the bickering of their own disunited, ambitious leaders. Hays closely follows the conclusions of historian Geoffrey Ashe, portraying Arthur as a Romanized Briton trying to preserve peace and order in a violent and chaotic age. The discipline and unity once imposed by Rome have disappeared with its legions, and both present and future are murky.

In this dangerous world, on the eve of a critical political meeting which will determine the fate of Arthur and

the federation of Celtic tribes he seeks to defend, a young woman of the court is murdered. Not just murdered, but butchered in a manner that suggests occult practices, her body left publicly displayed in a way calculated to undermine Arthur's authority and shatter the fragile alliance he seeks to command.

Such a crime clearly demands an investigator, but Arthur puts to that task a strange choice: a dissipated, drunken, crippled ex-soldier called Mad Malgwyn. Who, incidentally, hates Arthur for saving his life when he'd rather have died. But Arthur, it seems, may actually know what he's doing. For Mad Malgwyn was once Smiling Malgwyn, famed for his singleminded campaign of revenge against the Saxons who killed his wife. And the murdered girl was also family to him.

I found the mystery part of the plot only moderately compelling, but I was fascinated by the sense of being immersed in a believable version of the chaotic Dark Ages in which a Roman-influenced Celtic warlord, trying to unite a collection of squabbling tribes and kingdoms against an ever-growing threat, could have provided the seed that later developed into the Arthurian legends we know. (There are a number of easter-eggs for the attentive reader -- casual comments from our narrator, Malgwyn, that reveal the possible sources of later legend and lore.) It will be interesting to see how Malgwyn and the other men and women of this Arthur's precarious realm develop in later stories.

Kathy Doll says

Sorry, this book didn't stand out in any way, shape or form, for me. I give it a general review of 'meh'.

Told from the viewpoint of Malgwyn, who once was a soldier in Arthur's army, but since the loss of an arm in battle, is now a self pitying drunk. Maidens are killed in the village, and Malgwyn gets to the bottom of the mystery of how they died by the end of the book.

The story itself is good enough, but I was much annoyed by the dialogue throughout. Too many 'Twas's, 'Tis's, Aye's and other affectations that are meant to make the dialogue seem British and ancient. Also, I was unable to find the motivations for some of the surrounding characters doing what they did.

I read it very quickly and maybe I should have taken more time. I will try the second book in the series though The Divine Sacrifice - just so I don't write this author off completely.

Miles says

It is the time of Arthur, but this is not his storied epic. Arthur is a young and powerful warrior who some would say stands on the brink of legend. Britain's leaders have come to elect a new supreme king, and Arthur is favored. But when a young woman is brutally murdered and the blame is placed at Merlin's feet, Arthur's reputation is at stake and his enemies are poised to strike. Arthur turns to Malgwyn ap Cuneglas, a man whose knowledge of battle and keen insight into how the human mind works have helped Arthur to the brink of kingship. Malgwyn is also the man who hates Arthur most in the world. After the death of Malgwyn's wife at Saxon hands, he became Mad Malgwyn, killer of Saxons and right-hand lieutenant to the warrior Arthur. Right hand, that is, until a Saxon cut his sword arm off and left him to die on the battlefield. Arthur rescued him. Now a one-armed scribe and a heavy drinker, Malgwyn rejects the half-life that his liege gave him. But loyalty is sometimes stronger than loathing...and Malgwyn is pulled toward a puzzle that he can't ignore.

Reading as many books as I do each month one of the fundamental requests I have from an author is that the work of fiction is entertaining, flows well and has a story that is strong enough to hold my imagination and concentration until the very end. For the most part *The Killing Way* by Anthony Hays succeeded in keeping me glued to the book, reading it over two very busy days, and once I'd made my way through the initial pages – struggling to come to terms with numerous characters and language – I settled into a rhythm and found myself warming to the narrator and protagonist Mad Malgwyn.

I know very little about the Arthurian legend, save for what I've seen in the films but then they were never made to be anything other than entertaining! One thing I was surprised with was the portrayal of Merlin – a mad old man – and first appearances weren't positive for me at least. Although a close friend to Lord Arthur he didn't strike me as the wizard I've come to know and love. However, and this is where the author does well with his storytelling, my perceptions of Merlin changed as the story progressed. He wasn't as central a character as I expected when I began reading the book but this may come in further adventures for I certainly see mileage in Malgwyn's detection skills.

Full review on my blog

Massanutten Regional Library says

Andrew, Central circulation staff, August 2017, 3 stars:

An interesting look at Ancient England during the time of Arthur, Guinevere, Kay, Bedevere, and Merlin. When murder is committed to cover up a rebellious conspiracy, only one man may be able uncover the truth before it's too late.

Al Lock says

Well written and very enjoyable. Uses a murder mystery to draw the environment of Arthur becoming King of the Britons and illustrate the intrigue that might have surrounded such an event. The author draws on a great deal of the historic possibilities that might have provided for the real Arthur (if such a person did exist) and at the same time, writes a compelling and entertaining tale.

Richard Lee says

An author to watch. It's a good concept to have murder mysteries set in Arthur's time, and the 'damaged' hero is memorable. I found this one a bit first-novel-ish (I'm not completely certain it was his first novel, but there were places where it was thin). I'll probably pick up a couple more books in and then want to read back!

Nikki says

A reread in preparation for my dissertation. I remembered Tony Hays' betrayal of Kay -- very human, noble

and capable, without any influence from the later traditions. He isn't much of a seneschal figure here, but given that Arthur is an active king and not set dressing, it makes sense that Kay (always so closely linked to him) is active and capable too.

Overall, it's an interesting enough story and easy to read: it kept my attention despite being a reread, and it's full of interesting characters and interesting interpretations of characters. Some things bothered me (like the simile "nagged at me like a wife" -- thanks, yes, all wives are horrible nags, *obviously*) but for the most part it all fit in with the setting and the narrator.

I'm glad there's a personal thread throughout this -- Kay's love for Eleonore, Malgwyn's love for his wife and concern for his brother's family, Malgwyn's personal development from self-pitying drunk to functional member of society. The Arthuriana is all very well, but it wasn't enough to give the story life.

Forrest says

This was an exceptionally well written book, and I blew through it pretty quickly. It was definitely an interesting concept, a story billed as "An Arthurian Mystery". I have to admit that with the rather dull cover artwork (library edition), I would have given this a pass if it had not mentioned the "Arthurian mystery" bit on it.

Also, I have to be perfectly candid about one thing. This book felt like the author took most of the characters and background from the various Arthur books that attempt to portray the character as a Roman, or someone who was raised during a time of Roman occupation. These, he mixed only slightly with a few other characters more familiar from Sir Malory's work. Kay, Mordred, Bedevere, Tristan, and a few others put in appearances (aside from Arthur), then we're back to the unknown or unfamiliar sounding characters who haven't ever been in any Arthurian book I've read (including the main character Malgwyn).

Having said that, I'm aware that different authors tend to make up new characters to fit into an established mythos when writing their Arthur stories, but this one just felt a bit odd. These familiarly named characters running around, and it felt very much like the author had thrown them in just to garner the "Arthurian" aspect. Really, this story could have been written about ANY medieval ruler and his court, and it would have held up.

All in all, it's not a bad story, although the ending was a bit contrived. It's not a book that I would purchase, having read it. But if you are able to find it at your local library I would recommend checking it out.
