



# The Servant's Tale

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**The Servant's Tale** Margaret Frazer

**Sister Frevisse is sinfully good at discerning the mysteries of the soul--and solving the crimes of the human heart in this charming series.**

It's Christmastime, and the sisters of St. Frideswide cannot turn away travellers, even the players knocking at the nunnery door. But along with the motley troupe comes the grievously wounded husband of the cloister's scullery maid, Meg. They swear they found the drunken wastrel in a ditch, but the tale sounds like another song and dance. Especially when two dead bodies are waiting in the wings....

Now Sister Frevisse must find out if one of the actors is a murderer in masquerade--or face a very unmerry Yuletide season.

## The Servant's Tale Details

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Author : Margaret Frazer

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# From Reader Review *The Servant's Tale* for online ebook

## Mary Kay says

I loved this book, for the scads of historical information, and for the deep humanity of the story.

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## Kathy Davie says

An Edgar Award-nominee, it's second in the Sister Frevisse medieval mystery series based in a nunnery, St. Frideswide, near Prior Byfield outside Oxfordshire. The story revolves around Dame Frevisse, one of the nuns in the year of Our Lord 1434 at Christmastide.

Interestingly enough, Basset and his traveling troupe appear in this installment (from her Joliffe the Player series that begins with *A Play of Isaac* ).

## My Take

It's a woman's worries about her family. Keeping them safe. It's ignorance about the world, about oneself.

Another very good story from Frazer even if the killer was too obvious. Frazer does such a beautiful job of the language and setting a medieval scene. This one provides a more in-depth look at the everyday life of a villein and the constrictions on their movements as well as how they see such "godless", landless men as...gasp...players!

The feudal system has its pluses and minuses. In this story, it's rather like a factory job with built-in nepotism. The system keeps carrying you along until the man of the house really screws up. If he dies, his oldest son, if he's old enough or strong enough, inherits and carries on. It's also interesting to read of the horror people tied to the land have of those who are not. Say what you will about our current society and our lack of security, I'd rather this with its freedoms than the ignorance of medieval serfs bound to one small area.

I did enjoy Dame Frevisse's moves to get around Montfort, although I don't think this story had the dramatic depth as the first one.

## The Story

It's been a struggle for years, Meg having to cope with Barnaby and his boasts, his drinking. This job at the priory is her own secret. The profits hoarded to fund her dream of freedom for her youngest. Now if only her children would cooperate. Help around the cottage. Only Sym is too much like his father with his boasting, quickness to fight, and preference for ale.

And Barnaby is on Lord Lovel's short list. If he can complete this errand successfully, the family has a chance of being kept on...if not...

But it seems that Meg and her family's luck may be out when a troupe of players shows up at the priory with a sorely injured Barnaby. And the presence of the players brings out strong feelings on many sides. Feelings that are taken advantage of by a murderer, or murderers, as one by one, people die. Sym's fight with Joliffe at the tavern after Sym and Ellis' altercation on the green. Hewe is spending too much time with the players

with an interest in following them. The sister's pain and feelings of joy for God. All contribute to the deaths.

The good is the joy Dame Frevisse derives from conversation with intelligent people who have traveled the roads as she did with her parents. The bad is the fear of the unknown, of loss...taking the easy way out when Montfort arrives.

– *That phrase comes to mind... "he can't handle the truth". And, boy, if that ain't the truth about Montfort...!*

### The Characters

**Dame Frevisse** is in charge of the guesthouse. **Domina Edith** heads up this order of Benedictine nuns.

**Dame Claire** is their healer. **Sister Amicia** is frivolous and gossipy. **Sister Thomasine** is a nun with a true calling (see *The Novice's Tale*).

**Dame Alys** is the cellarer in charge of the kitchens and Domina Edith's second-in-command. Not the best choice as she hasn't any patience and a strong preference for complaining. **Dame Perpetua** is in charge of the novices. **Father Henry** is the priory priest. **Sister Juliana**, **Sister Lucy**, **Sister Fiacre** whose brother's perfidious desires lost Bassett his sponsor, and **Sister Emma**.

**Annie Lauder** is the priory's laundress. **Roger Naylor** is the priory's steward; he does his best for the priory but he conflicts with Dame Frevisse.

### *The Villagers:*

**Meg** struggles to survive the fall down the feudal ladder her husband **Barnaby's** alcoholism is pushing her and their family. **Sym** is their oldest son at 16; he seems to be following in daddy's footsteps. **Hewe** is more his mother's son, but he doesn't want to be a priest.

**Gilbey Dunn** is their neighbor and has been agitating to be given Barnaby's strips of land. Now he seeks them through Meg.

### *The Players:*

**Thomas Bassett** is the leader of this group of players and well understands how unwelcome his type is in any decent house. His daughter **Rose** tumbles to attract audiences and helps to collect money. Her young son **Piers** plays angels, demons, and young ones in their performances. **Ellis** and **Joliffe** who plays the female roles round out the remaining members of this smaller troupe. **Tisbe** is with them and has thrown out a shoe.

**Thomas Chaucer**, Dame Frevisse's uncle-by-marriage, is mentioned. **Master Montfort** is the king's crowner. He must see the body and ask the questions to determine how someone died and, if someone did it. Hopefully, someone will take him by the hand and lead him to the truth...he prefers the easiest choice.

### The Cover and Title

The cover is a repeat of that from *The Novice's Tale* but with turquoise marble panels. The view through the window is of a leather-covered table showcasing an orange with a knife through it.

The title reflects the main character around whom this tale revolves, *The Servant's Tale*.

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**Amy Bradley says**

The second in the series was by turns engaging and numbing. The resolution of the mystery comes at the very end and felt somewhat like it came out of left field unseen, until the explanation came. Rich in details.

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### **Andrew Doohan says**

The title should have given it away but I was quite surprised at the revelation of the perpetrator of the horrible crimes portrayed in this book.

Again, Frazer captures the nature of the late medieval Benedictine priory well, and weaves the advent of murder and its resolution into that setting. The broader societal polity - class, villeinage, etc - is also well described and captured in the grand narrative that is the setting for Dame Frevisse's intervention.

Although only the second of the series - there are many more to go - I am impressed by the writing style of Frazer and the way in which she crafts her story. I am also impressed by the primary protagonist and the way in which Frazer continues to develop her character, along with that of her sisters of the priory, as the series unfolds.

I look forward to the next book in the series.

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### **Margaret says**

Well written, late medieval (England) setting. More rumbles of English politics in the background before the real civil fighting starts. Atypical for me, I did figure out the whodunit before it was revealed; still, an enjoyable book.

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### **Pamela Shropshire says**

Book 2 of the series involves a series of 3 suspicious deaths. The first one appears to be an accidental death: a villager, brought to the priory after being injured in a cart accident, appears to be recovering but dies in the night. Dame Claire reasons that he must have had internal bleeding. The man's wife, Meg, works part-time in the priory kitchen; she and the deceased have two sons.

The deceased wasn't very reliable as a husband and provider. He shirked his duty owed to the local lord and drank too much. Their oldest son, Sym, is following in his father's footsteps and has a foul temper to boot. This temper causes a fight with a group of players, the same ones that found his father on the road and brought him to the priory. Sym accuses, without any evidence at all, the players of causing his father's injuries.

Then Sym is killed - dead of a stab wound. He had been drinking in the local ale house and when one of the players began flirting with a village girl that Sym liked, Sym pulled a knife. They scuffled over the knife and Sym went home. According to his mother, Sym became frightened when he saw the stab wound, so she left to get help and when she returned, he was dead.

The final death was a nun who was suffering from breast cancer. She was bashed in the back of the head

while at her prayers in the church.

Dame Frevisse knows the crowner will take the easy solution and determine that the player who quarreled with Sym is the guilty one. His name is Joliffe; she likes him and doesn't want him to be guilty. \*Although she never suspects the real killer until too late to prevent the fourth and final murder, I knew "whodunit" immediately after the first one. That didn't spoil my pleasure in the book, although I thought this was weaker than the first book of the series.

\*edited - I fell asleep in mid-sentence so I had to clean up and complete this review.

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### **Amanda Meggs says**

Once again the characters are interesting and clearly made. The players were a good addition to the seasons happenings, discovering the husband of Meg in a ditch, crushed under the cart he was bringing back to his neighbour, and bringing him to the nunnery for help. Unfortunately, I found that the mystery wasn't much of a surprise - the writing is still good and I certainly enjoyed the book.

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### **JodiP says**

I am rereading the whole series, with the hope of actually finishing at this time around. A woman from the village, Meg, is working in the kitchen at the convent. Her husband dies in a accident while drunk. Her two sons are subsequently murdered. Dame Frevisse figures it all out, and you can see how extreme religious belief can make people do very bad Things. Meg killed them all for her own twisted reasons.

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### **Alison says**

Shifting focus to the village, the book is effective at contrasting the very difficult lives of the indentured villagers to those of the nuns and the well-to-do. As can often be a casualty in this genre, the overall effect of the story is to somewhat imply that this plight turns people into murderous and slightly insane types, but I'm not sure how you avoid that.

My main complaint was that the plot twists were so obvious, our clever nun appeared positively dense.

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### **Bonnie says**

Murder and prayers at the nunnery

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### **Janet says**

Frazer's clues were so obvious I was certain she was tossing out a red herring. As it turns out...she's just that obvious folks. The ending was 100% predictable. What Frazer lacks in imagination she makes up for with

her finely drawn characters.

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### **Karen Brooks says**

I quite enjoyed this medieval murder mystery, part of a series written by Frazer and featuring the clever and intrepid nun, Sister Frevisse who, it happens, was a great-niece of Geoffrey Chaucer. Though this is the second book in the series, it's the first I've read and it stands alone nicely.

Steeped in historic detail that deposits you in the period easily (approx 1430s), the pace of life and religiosity of not only the nuns who share the nunnery with Frevisse, but the villagers as well is described. It's Christmas time, and a group of travelling players seek the hospitality of the Nunnery as the only child among them is sick. So, we discover, are many of the nuns who have succumbed to the time of year, the bitter temperatures, drafty halls and lack of warmth and a lurgy that spreads. Coughs and sneezes punctuate prayers and hymns and Frevisse herself is fighting off a malady and finds the constant sickness of her peers (and herself) frustrating.

It's just as well then that, halfway through the book, something happens to distract her. A young villager, Sym, the son of one of the nunnery's servants, dies after a fight in a tavern. When she examines the body, which is brought to the nunnery for the rites, the sister discovers that it wasn't the fight in the tavern that killed this feisty, disagreeable sixteen year old, but another, deeper and deliberate wound.

Determined to get to the bottom of this case before the Crowner arrives to investigate, what Sister Frevisse doesn't expect is the body count to rise – but it does. Suspicion naturally falls on the travelling players, but Sister Frevisse isn't convinced. Can she overcome the biases of the Crowner and the villagers and see justice done? Or will the travellers pay for a crime they didn't commit? Or did they? Can she discover the perpetrator before even more people die?

This was an easy to read book that was also a little slow. Setting the scene and time took pages and pages – and while the writing is tight and the characters wonderfully drawn, nothing actually happened till almost the halfway point in the book. After that, the action was swifter, but only by comparison. If a reader is looking for a murder mystery (as the book is advertised), they might be disappointed. As an historical novel, however, the book is excellent.

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### **Ann says**

I've been spoiled by the excellent medieval historical novels , Brother Cadfael Mysteries. I read book #2 hopeful that the second book would be better than the first ... alas, I was disappointed. I find that the writing style feels less than professional and the mystery, while engaging, turned out to be disappointing too. The murderer turned out to be less than believable ... or maybe it was just that when the murderer was revealed, I wanted to throw the book out the window because I felt that it just wasn't believable enough for this person to have murdered anyone. Needless to say, I will not be reading the rest of the series !!

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### **Ram Kaushik says**

Sister Frevisse is rather a bit too much of a female Brother Cadfael but if you put that aside, it's a readable medieval mystery.

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## **Laura Edwards says**

Another excellent installment in the series. Of course, this is only book two, but my hope is the series continues along at its high standard.

Once again, the mystery is complex and the culprit not immediately obvious. Only when Sister Fiacre was killed did the light go on and I guessed who and the motivation for the killings. Sad, really.

I love the detail of the cloister and the nuns duties and routines. Margaret Frazer really did a good job of immersing the reader in time and place. (For those, like me, who really enjoy visualizing a scene, there are a couple of maps of St. Frideswide on Margaret Frazer's website which you might want to check out.) She also possessed a gift for making a simple scene quite poignant. The whole scene with Meg and Barnaby and the orange had me tearing up.

The only annoyance in the entire book was, again, Montfort. But he is meant to be annoying, so Margaret Frazer did her job there. I only hope Dame Frevisse does not have to put up with his ignorance in every single book. I've already ordered the next title and I can't wait for it to get here.

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