



# The Returning

*Christine Hinwood*

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## **The Returning** Christine Hinwood

An intense story of love, loss and turmoil in the aftermath of war. A first novel by a uniquely talented author.

Vivid, compassionate and totally absorbing, Bloodflower follows the fortunes of young Cam Attling and all those whose fates entwine with his.

Cam has a hunger, an always-hunger; it drives him from home, to war, from north to south. When he returns from war alone - all his fellow soldiers slain - suspicion swirls around him. He's damaged in body and soul, yet he rides a fine horse and speaks well of his foes. What has he witnessed? Where does his true allegiance lie? How will life unfold for his little sister, his closest friend, his betrothed, his community, and even the enemy Lord who maimed him?

With extraordinary insight and literary skill, Hinwood weaves their stories to create a tale of romance, adventure and everyday life in croft and manor house and castle. Her style is unique. Her characters will hijack your heart.

## **The Returning Details**

Date : Published April 14th 2011 by Dial (first published June 1st 2009)

ISBN :

Author : Christine Hinwood

Format : Hardcover 302 pages

Genre : Fantasy, Young Adult, Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, War

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## From Reader Review The Returning for online ebook

### oliviasbooks says

Although the average rating of 3.25 stars strongly indicated „Beware, this book is *not* for everyone”, I never would have guessed that I might be one of those unlucky specimen the book prefers not to talk to. My conviction (which even resulted in my ordering the book in spite of my friend Arlene’s offer to include me in her book tour) that Bloodflower and I would be very compatible had been sustained by several powerful factors:

- A) The cover is so very beautiful – but in a different way than some suspicion arousing young adult covers that have no connection to plot or characters whatsoever: The richly patterned red cloth in the background and that strong, callused and sexily dirty arm encased in leather armor which clearly belongs to Cam, the young main character recently returned from a war, made me want to *own* exactly *this* edition and not the pastel-colored one by the other publisher.
- B) Melina Marchetta, one of the authors whose work I *adore* and who does not throw around blurbs and praise and advertisement about all her peers’ or tour mates’ work like it has become the custom among young adult novelists, wrote *“I can’t tell you how much I loved this novel. I cried through the whole last chapter from the sheer beauty of these characters and their world.”* which made me want to go on reading until the end so I could wring out my tear ducts in the same way that she did, since in my experience life-like and likable characters are the main ingredient in the majority of those books which made me love them. I wanted to love the book and the world and I even glimpsed the shadows of the characters’ ability to become endearing to the reader in the very first chapter. The first word which comes to mind when I think about Cam and his family and how they treat each other is “tenderness”. Cam’s small sister Pin, who usually does not allow her family members to cuddle and pet her, isn’t shy at all around her big brother whom she barely knows and who everybody keeps his or her distance from since he returned from the war without his right arm and without all the other men from the village. Her unconditional adoration and love is unspeakably cute. Yet. The point of view switches soon from the Atlings to Cam’s betrothed Graceling, the twelve-years old daughter of the ruthless Fenister family, and from there to a young boy whose dog is shot by a farmer and then to Cam’s best friend Ban, who is secretly in love with Cam or maybe only lusts after him and then to ... I forgot, because it changed so often and so spontaneously. At first I hoped the story would lead me quickly back into Cam’s or Pin’s mind, but after a while I gradually lost interest and became rather bored, although
- C) The subject of the book is such an important and interesting one: It shows in detail how war affects and changes both the soldiers who went out to fight and the families, who stayed and hoped and went on with their daily lives as well as possible: Cam has lost his arm and gained a war horse. His lower limb count lowers his worth on the marriage market and the long-standing betrothal is revoked. Nobody understands why he wants to avoid talking about the various ways the other villagers died during the six-years-long war. Thus when the pestering about Uncle X and Sweetheart Y remains unsuccessful, resentful suspicions make the round: How did Cam manage to stay alive when everybody else did not? Graceful had thought the only uncertain things about her future were the day of her death and the number of her children, but suddenly she does not even know anymore whom she will marry. Graceful’s greedy father uses the war and the new overlord’s taste for fine silk as an excuse to push his property’s boundaries into the woods, the home of a nomad tribe and the game they live on. Acton has become an war-orphan and his dog turns into a farmer’s nuisance whose nerves wear so thin that he finally pulls the trigger ...

I have stopped reading after 75 pages and I will never find out whether the end would have moved me to tears or not. But I do not really care. A story with characters as wonderful as Marchetta's would never have failed to keep my attention. Therefore in my opinion "Bloodflower" must be lacking in aspects that *do* matter. But do not be disheartened. It might be just me and not the book. I am positive that Melina Marchetta's falling in love with it happened on grounds that might work for others, too.

*P.S.: I am giving away my copy. If you are interested, inform me via comment on this review or on my profile until October 8th 2011. I will let an internet program pick a winner randomly.*

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## **Chachic says**

Originally posted here.

I ordered a copy of *The Returning* by Christine Hinwood because it's blubbed by two of my favorite authors: Megan Whalen Turner and Melina Marchetta. Of course, I had to read it! It also recently received the Printz Honor. Plus, both the premise and the cover looked intriguing.

The writing is certainly different from anything that I've ever read. I'm not even sure what genre *The Returning* falls under - I feel like it's a mix of both fantasy and historical fiction. Fantasy because it's set in a different world (made up locations). Historical fiction because aside from the setting, I feel like it could be a story set in the past. There's no magic in *The Returning*. The whole book focuses on the aftermath of the war between Uplanders and Downlanders and how it affects the various characters. I had a mixed reaction to this book: I'm glad I got to read it because I was intrigued but I didn't end up loving it as I expected. It took me a while to get into the writing because of the shifting points of view. I felt like I couldn't hold on to one character long enough for me to like him or her. Also, it's a quiet kind of novel in the sense that nothing big or dramatic occurs. After all, we're getting a glimpse of what life is like AFTER the war.

Overall, I think it's a good book but I'm afraid it's not something that every reader will enjoy. Like I said, I'm not a fan of the shifting POVs. At the start of the novel, I felt like every chapter was narrated by a different character (I think there were four or five various POVs). Just when I was starting to root for a character, the POV changes. I did like how everything came together in the second half of the novel but I was surprised at how fast the latter chapters moved in comparison to the earlier ones. The first half spanned months while the second half jumped a couple of years ahead. I liked that it's a complex novel and that Christine Hinwood created so many layers to the story - we see what it's like for a veteran soldier to go home, what it feels like for the family he left behind, how hard it is for him to make friends. I also liked the bit of romance weaved into the story but it felt underdeveloped. I think the narrative would have worked if the novel was longer because readers would get to know the characters more. As it is, I liked the book a lot more before I read it because it had so much promise. I feel bad because I could have fallen in love with *The Returning* but didn't. If you're curious about this book, I recommend that you still give it a try because you might end up liking it a lot more than I did. I've seen mixed reviews for Christine Hinwood's debut novel - some loved it while it didn't work for others - so I guess it really depends on the reader.

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## Tatiana says

4.5 stars

I understand many readers don't like stories that stray away from formula or predictable fantasy narrative structures, but 3.13 stars average for this lovely collection of vignettes about the effects of war on people's lives? It hurts! This is hardly an experimental, hard-to-comprehend book. I personally loved that stories felt so intimate and small while being at the same time so large in scope when taken as one whole. Masterfully done, IMO. Why isn't Christine Hinwood writing anything else?

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## Laura says

It took nearly half the book for me to figure out what direction the author was taking: was it a book about class? about returning from war? about life in the vaguely Middle Ages? about love (both heterosexual and implied homosexual)? about culture clashes? That it took that long doesn't usually bode well for the ending. There were too many characters introduced, with chapters all from their different points of view - this added to the confusion. A couple of the characters at first appeared important, but then virtually disappeared later on.

Set in a mash-up of Japan and Scandinavia, *The Returning* takes place shortly after a war in which the Uplanders defeated the Downlanders. Cam returns to his village, the only one from there that does return - so of course there's that tension (why him? why only him? what happened to the others?). We meet his sister, Pin, along with his family, his soon-to-be-ex-fiancée, his boyhood friend and others. We also meet his new Lord, Ryuū, and his son Gyaar, who for some reason saved Cam's life and offered him a position within his household. See what I mean by confusing?

Ultimately the strands intertwine, but by then I was reading only to see if they would, not because I was really invested in the story.

ARC provided by publishers.

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## Maja (The Nocturnal Library) says

5 stars for quality, 3 stars for personal enjoyment.

The Returning isn't a book I would normally choose to read, because a) I try to avoid historical fiction as much as I can; and b) as a former literature student, I've read my fair share of literary fiction and, unless it was written by Coetzee, I have no desire to read any more in the next five years or so. Historical + literary usually means I'd rather eat dirt, thank you very much. However, this isn't just any book. Aside from being a Printz Honor, it was blurbed by both Megan Whalen Turner and Melina Marchetta. Here's what they wrote:

**"I loved this novel. I cried through the whole last chapter from the sheer beauty of these characters and their world."**

**-Melina Marchetta, author of *Jellicoe Road*, Printz Medal winner**

**"A beautiful examination of the complexities of love and loyalty in the aftermath of war."**

- Megan Whalen Turner, author of *The Thief*, Newberry Honor winner

Obviously, with words like that, these two could persuade me to read a math textbook and actually enjoy it. And I did enjoy *The Returning* for the most part. The beauty of its prose, the skillfully crafted web in which so many characters were entangled, the extraordinary use of language – outdated to enhance the historical feel, but slightly alien to match the non-existent land... all those things were even better than I expected. And yet, Hinwood didn't quite reach me on an emotional level, not like an author endorsed by Marchetta and Turner should have.

The residents of Kayforl in Downlands are living a quiet, hardworking life. Several years earlier, six healthy men marched to war against the Uplanders, but only young Cam Attling, who looks suspiciously like an Uplander himself, returned. Their former enemy is now their new Lord and nobody failed to notice how highly Cam Attling speaks of him.

Cam Attling hasn't really been welcomed back by anyone but his family and his best friend Ban who is hopelessly in love with him. He's lost an arm in the war and he suffers from survivor's guilt, but he is unable to settle down. His betrothal to young Graceful Fenister was broken by her father and Cam feels useless and unaccepted, even by Ban.

Ban is struggling with his feelings for Cam and his responsibility towards his large family. He is worried that his brothers are right and that Cam really is a bad influence, but he is unable to stay away.

As Cam leaves Kayforl for the second time, he causes more pain and heartbreak than he could ever have imagined.

*The Returning* clearly isn't for everyone: it requires a lot of patience and it has to be read slowly, carefully, to truly appreciate all the layers, the beauty and the heartbreak it has to offer. I'm very glad I decided to read it and I might even reread it at some point. I'm convinced it will be even better the second time.

*A copy of this book was kindly provided by the publisher via Netgalley for review purposes.*

Also posted at The Nocturnal Library

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## Joy says

I tend to be cynical about promotional blurbs on a book cover; I see enough of them to start noticing when a circle of writer friends gets caught in the endless "let me blurb your book" cycle! But this book caught my attention because it had blurbs from Melina Marchetta and Megan Whalen Turner, two of my favorite YA authors...and two who don't blurb every other book that shows up on the new shelf.

It's sort of an odd duck of a book. It follows Cam Attling, who survived a war but lost his arm, as he tries to settle into his old life...and failing at that, goes off to seek a new one. That could be a fairly simple story, but Hinwood chooses to tell this one in an unusual way, from multiple points-of-view. There's Pin, Cam's younger sister; Graceful Fenister, his betrothed; Gyaar, the Uplander lord who cut off Cam's arm but spared his life; and so on.

I love books that ask the question "what happens when the war is over?" and I have a lot of patience for narrative tricks, so you might think this book was perfect for me. Not quite. I found it very readable--I went through it on one sitting on a sunny Sunday afternoon--but I never became emotionally engaged in the lives of these characters. (Marchetta's work offers a good contrast here--her books reliably leave me in tears by

their ends.)

I think I was distanced from the story partly because I wasn't sure what to make of the backstory and worldbuilding here. Cam is the survivor of a war between the Uplanders and the Downlanders. The Downlanders are vaguely based on pre-industrial European cultures, and the the Uplanders vaguely based on East Asian cultures (I suspect mostly Japan). Neither of the cultures felt entirely authentic to me, but that was especially true of the Uplanders, and I am so, so tired of people co-opting Asian cultural details to do lazy worldbuilding.

Anyway, an interesting effort, but not something I feel like I can strongly recommend.

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### **Maria Kramer says**

This series of loose, poetic vignettes covers a span of years after Cam Attling comes home from war, the only survivor of those from his village. Though he tries to re-acustom himself to his old life, he can't -- he has to find out why he survived. While Cam goes back North, to Dorn-Lannet and Lord Ryuu, the enemy who spared his life, his family, friends and entire village change in unexpected ways.

This book is just beautiful, more a series of prose poems than a novel. The emotional depth that the author creates in her characters is amazing. Even though the book doesn't spend a long time on any one character, you still care about all of them deeply. There are so many books about war, but not many about what it means to come home from one and live. Pick up this one!

Recommended for fans of:

The Scorpio Races

Always Coming Home by Ursula K. LeGuin

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### **Adele says**

Bloodflower ... is difficult to put into words. It's a beautiful read, full of complexity, meaningful themes and natural character development. Set in a country recovering from war, turmoil and grief still aplenty with citizens displaced and a new ruler on the throne. Cam returns to his family psychologically and physically scarred from his wartime adventures and the town of Kayforl is wracked with tall tales of his supposed betrayal.

There are many characters, including Cam, that are interwoven throughout this novel in a series of vignettes. Initially this is a concept that easily confuses, the combination of a Middle Ages-derived setting with a plethora of people and places, can muddle the brain. Slowly and surely, the tales of these characters, from across the country, start unravelling, their connections breaking and reforming with others. Hinwood has created a truly absorbing read that has the power to move and entrance the reader.

The characters are easy to invest in with their distinct voices, perspectives and cultural rhythms. Expertly crafted, these well rounded, complex and driven individuals bounce off one another in intriguing ways. Whilst Cam is the sun in which the other characters revolve, it is his betrothed, Graceful, that entrapped me. She's an unbecoming and particularly dour character for a majority of the novel, however there is something

so relatable about her stubbornness that I found myself very invested in her future. Hinwood's characterisation is top notch and slightly reminiscent of fellow Australian author (and endorser) Melina Marchetta.

Bloodflower is intriguing, perplexing and emotionally rich. Hinwood has debuted with a quality work that explores the strength of the human spirit, the tenuousness of relationships and the lengths in which we strive for connection. A distinct voice with beautiful language and rich characters, Bloodflower is a fantastic fantastical read.

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### **Brandy Painter says**

Review originally posted here.

I did something with The Returning by Christine Hinwood that I never do with debut novels. I preordered it. Why? Well, if you look at the back of the US hardcover you will find quotes by two authors who praise highly the characters and themes of the story. Those two authors are Megan Whalen Turner and Melina Marchetta. Little wonder I wanted to read it. I can see why the book would appeal to these two. Hinwood has the same ability to convey much with few words and create fascinating characters that both of them have.

It is certainly a gripping novel. Megan Whalen Turner also has a quote on the front cover which says, "Every detail evokes a fully realized world." I would agree. Hinwood did this in the way I like too, presenting it as it is and not explaining it. It is rich in detail, tradition, and custom. There is a sense that these people have a history that is bigger than them or this story.

The style of the book is unique and it took me a while to get in the rhythm of it. The first eight chapters are episodic, a series of shorts on the lives of different characters. If you are a reader to whom plot is the most essential part of a story, you may have a problem with this. There is no plot or common action binding the characters of these chapters together. The one thing they all have in common is Cam. This is an interesting way of introducing a central character. The reader sees him from many perspectives before seeing from his own. The book is essentially about how an individual, family, community, country recovers from war, and all the characters play a part in telling that story. I found myself caring very much what happened to them, but was frustrated sometimes at how the story moved around so often. This also made it difficult to truly connect with or fully understand the characters. The middle part of the book that focuses on Cam, and then Graceful, was my favorite part because I finally felt like I could settle in and get to know these characters. I was a tad disappointed when the final chapter jumped ahead several years and switched perspectives again. Also that information regarding Cam was so light in this chapter.

I don't really know what genre label to put on this one. The kingdom they live in is made up, but other than it's not having actually existed by the name given in this book, there is really nothing that makes the story a fantasy. There is a religious system in place and the characters practice its traditions but the supernatural never makes its presence known in the story. So, I'm labeling it as both historical and fantasy.

Note on Content: The Returning is marketed YA, but is one of those that could also be an adult novel. (I'm labeling it as both.) There is strong language, and, in the last chapter, a couple sex scenes. I personally did not feel like these scenes added much to the plot or character development, but they are short (yet descriptive) and not a lot of space was wasted on them.

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## Crowinator says

This is one of those books that is deceptively simple on the surface, but is actually quite complex when it comes time to describe or classify it. I put it on the "historical" and "fantasy" shelf, though it doesn't really fit on either of those shelves. It doesn't fit on any of my genre shelves, actually, and it reminds me quite strongly of Meg Rosoff's *How I Live Now* in many ways; not in its language, of course, but in its themes of war, loss, and family, as well as its timelessness. Rosoff's book takes place in the real world, but the rural farmhouse in England could almost be anywhere, and the war described could be any war (we don't even find out who the invading army is or why they're invading), and that's the point; so it is with this book, which takes place in a non-magical agrarian world that *isn't* our world, but at least to me, strongly evokes its past. They both resonate on the same frequency and make me think about and feel the same things, and they both have sadness and hope in the way the war's survivors are portrayed; of course the extremely different ways they are written mean that people who love one won't necessarily be enamored of the other, but I think they make for an extremely rich comparison.

Once I am not so buried, I will try to write a longer review, and maybe I will go reread *How I Live Now* when I do so, but in the meantime, I don't think this slow-moving, odd but beautiful book will appeal to a wide audience (especially among teens), but those who have the patience for it to unfold will find a lot to think about. I'm glad I didn't give up after the first 70-some pages but I can't fault anyone who did; it's a niche book, but a good one.

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