



Belladonna at Belstone

Michael Jecks

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It is 1321, and Lady Elizabeth of Topsham, prioress of St. Mary's, is fighting to retain her position in the face of devastating opposition. She has been accused by Sister Margherita, St. Mary's treasurer, of giving much-needed funds to the new vicar, a man she often sees alone at night. Many of the nuns are convinced that Margherita would make a better prioress—especially now that it is certain that Moll, a young nun, was murdered in her sick bed. Sir Baldwin Furnhill, Keeper of the King's Peace, together with his old friend Simon Puttock, are summoned to investigate. There is no doubt that the threefold vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty are being broken with alarming frequency. Then, when a second nun is murdered, they find themselves facing their most difficult case yet.

Belladonna at Belstone Details

Date : Published June 1st 2000 by Headline Book Publishing (first published December 2nd 1999)

ISBN : 9780747263616

Author : Michael Jecks

Format : Paperback 332 pages

Genre : Mystery, Historical, Historical Fiction, Historical Mystery, Medieval, Fiction

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From Reader Review Belladonna at Belstone for online ebook

Clare O'Beara says

Not the author's best but worth a read to keep up with the series and some role reversals for the characters.

A novice has been killed at a shambles of a convent on Dartmoor and the local bishop asks a trustworthy landowner and lawgiver to look into the matter.

The book does show up the idiocy of getting up at midnight to pray in the freezing chapel and returning regularly to do so again at set intervals throughout the day. Think of the all the time and energy wasted when the good people could have been producing food and goods or mending the crumbling buildings. Also it's pointed out that the Rule was established for religious people in the warm Mediterranean. As the nuns and lay workers, male and female, are so poorly fed, they need to imbibe ale to increase the calorie and vitamin content of their diet.

The author goes overboard on the sinning and indulging and lusting. I could see no chance that so much money could be embezzled when people would have a good idea of what money was coming in and where it needed to be spent. We also see manure around the drying green, so any dropped clothing is fouled and has to be re-washed; what woman would allow this to go on when she could ask a man to put up a few hurdles or do it herself?

Some rather gruesome scenes mean this isn't for the tender, but that's medieval amputation for you. I like the detail of a favourite fireside chair riddled with woodworm.

KC says

Every possible medieval stereotype presented in a traditional mystery format. This kind of book is my crack: the high is brief and it doesn't exactly deliver any nourishment. The best/most ridiculous part is that the usual modern detective story lingo is simply juxtaposed onto the medieval *The Name of the Rose*-type vocabulary, ie "The investigator considered the case before him. 'We have to treat the cellarer and the blood-letter as suspects in this murder,' he said, adjusting his woolen tunic and taking a deep draught of his quart of ale."

David Serxner says

I get Michael Jeck's books sent to me from by my family in England, as I do not know if you can get them in the States. He does his research. The books are excellent--very well written. I like a good mystery, and these most certainly are!

Alberto says

the narrative is not always engaging but the plot is well built with some nice twists at the end. been a

pleasant read.

Andy Millen says

Once again, Michael Jecks comes up trumps with this belter of a Mystery. Kept me guessing right until the end.

Well plotted, researched and dispelling a few myths about Nuns in the period too. Sweetness and light? hmm Looking forward to the next one now.

Johnny says

In the historical mysteries of Michael Jecks, the author seems determined to show all of the faith (positive, indifferent, or cynically negative), filth, fear, frustration, and failures of 14th century England. *Belladonna at Belstone* takes Jecks' ongoing protagonist, Sir Baldwin de Furnstill, former Templar and current Keeper of the King's Peace for his area, to a dysfunctional convent where a rumored murder of a novice has occurred. Naturally, the aura around ecclesiastical sovereignty in a monastery or convent in that era would normally preclude a secular authority from investigating a murder in a convent. However, de Furnstill's ongoing relationship with Bishop Stapledon (Bishop of Exeter and King's Treasurer) gives the Bishop a chance to ask de Furnstill to assist in the investigation so he can, hopefully, keep rumors from destroying the convent's reputation *and* ensure that another bishop, an ambitious one, doesn't carry out a biased investigation to carry out his own agenda to disgrace his rival bishop.

Belstone is a run-down, poor and struggling convent on a barren moor in Devonshire. Some characters in the novel feel like this fact is a result of God's judgment on the priory. It is a fictitious convent which Jecks conjured from research into medieval abbeys and priories and his own imaginative injection of "Murphy's Law" into the Rule of the Order. With so much detail involved, the book features a glossary of architectural features and a sample schedule of the "day" for these devout (If a person entered one of these "chaste" communities because they were lazy and thought it would be restful, said person needed to think again). Also, even though the venue of the novel is fictitious, Jecks draws from an authentic experience to color the backgrounds of several characters in the story.

As happens in many mysteries, the investigation into one murder appears to trigger other murders and attempted murders. Not even the investigators are immune from the danger in this priory where it seems like everyone has broken vows in some way. If one gets the idea that this mystery will be solved as easily as finding a hypocritical religious obedientary where the danger of exposure will be a simple matter, this review has misled you. Broken vows appear to be the norm in this particular priory and, they go to both high and low levels. Yet, in the midst of murder and mayhem, there is a certain amount of forgiveness and grace.

When all is revealed and the punishments established, some readers will feel very content but other readers may feel that some of those who misbehaved got off too lightly. I had ambivalent feelings.

Yet, since variety is always to be welcomed, I truly enjoyed that this was a mystery with one crime interwoven into another and another such that there were varying crimes and various suspects. If I were considering the life of a contemplative, I might be disillusioned with those serving in Belstone, but since I am not, it's simply a target-rich environment. When my candidate for the ultimate villain was cleared of being the murderer, I was completely fooled. But I won't tell you who I was considering because there are so

many delicious red herrings and complications that you should be allowed to choose poorly, as well. I did zero in on the prime miscreant early in the book, but certain behavior made me look a different direction.

In short, *Belladonna at Belstone* is everything a historical memory should be. It features a context true to the historical setting and based, at least partially, on historical behavior, but it also entertains with a fascinating mix of events and misdirection.

Michael Jecks says

I spent a long time researching this book, and it was quite a startling investigation!

There are many in America who have complained that I have something against the Church because I am so unkind to the nuns at this convent. Some have decried my writing as a result. Well, all I can say is, when I write, you get the story warts and all. Every instance I mention in this book happened to nuns in one of two convents in the Bishopric of Devon and Cornwall. They were taken from the visitation reports of Bishop Walter II and Bishop Grandisson, both in the first half of the 1300s.

It's how the convents were.

This book does bring the convent to life, with all the petty intrigues, the corruption and flagrant behaviour of some of the inmates (I use the term intentionally!).

Primitive passions, secret ambitions and company politics abound in this tale of death and murder.

Great fun!

Mirjam says

A very exciting read! Lots of sinners, intrigue and killers in a nunnery. Baldwin is having a hard time, but luckily Simon is there to help him out. I greatly enjoyed this whodunit and applaud Jecks for yet another wonderful addition to the Knights Templar series.

Florence says

Normaal gezien kies ik niet snel voor detectiveverhalen maar de achterflap van dit boek sprak mij wel sterk aan. Vooral dan door het feit dat het zich in een middeleeuws klooster afspeelt vond ik dat ik toch (als fan van historische literatuur) dit boek moest gelezen hebben.

Dit is de eerste keer dat ik een boek van Jecks lees, en het smaakt wel naar meer: Goede beschrijvingen en spanning opbouwend met interessante plottwisten.

Ik heb genoten van dit boek!

Wazz says

Carmen says

Another great installment of Michael Jeck's medieval mystery series. this book is not only entertaining, but I believe I am really understanding the culture of the times.

Susan says

Skipped books 5, 6 & 7 as I read them some years ago & have only just managed to find this volume. Excellent so far

Janneke says

Het eerste avontuur van Sir Baldwin en Simon Puttock waarbij ik een vermoeden kreeg wie de dader was van de moorden in het klooster van St. Mary's en de aanslag op Sir Baldwin. Door deze aanslag is Sir Baldwin uitgeschakeld en moet Baljuw Simon Puttock alleen de dader ontmaskeren. Toch ook weer een boeiende geschiedenis waarin je een, helaas niet zo'n positieve, blik kunt werpen op het kloosterleven.

Chris says

Just didn't do it for me. I just didn't care about anyone in the story for some reason.

Simon Mcleish says

Originally published on my blog [here](#) in October 2000.

In this series, Michael Jecks has certainly been keen to show readers some of the negative aspects of medieval institutions; we've had a leper hospital, now it's a convent where lax morality is accompanied by poverty. Not all monastic establishments were hugely rich, though that is the obvious impression to be gained from what has survived - the huge scale of ruins like St Augustine's Priory, Canterbury, Thetford Priory, Fountains and Rievaulx Abbeys make it obvious what the financial reasons were which prompted the Dissolution. The establishments which have left no trace were generally far more modest, particularly convents of nuns. (Rich benefactors tended to endow establishments of men, for women would be unable to perform masses for their souls.) Belstone, a fictional abbey in a real Devonshire setting, is a place like this, a collection of dilapidated buildings upon bleak moorland.

Belstone in fact has more immediately serious problems than its poverty. The prioress, noblewoman Lady Elizabeth, and treasurer Margherita are at loggerheads and Margherita is embezzling from the priory. There are rumours of lax moral behaviour - nuns wantonly sleeping with the men who work the priory's lands and

even the priest who conducts their services - which have some basis in fact. (This kind of gossip often surrounded communities of nuns, as is clear from the stories in Boccaccio's *Decameron*.) Then one of the novices is killed, and Margherita writes a letter to the Bishop of Exeter accusing Lady Elizabeth of murder. This prompts an investigation involving the detective partners who are the central characters of Jecks' series, Baldwin Furnhill and Simon Puttock.

The combination of the various abuses going on in Belstone priory is perhaps a little unlikely, and Jecks is a good enough writer to add some background to motivate it. In fact, *Belladonna at Belstone* is a very competently constructed novel. With as truly a medieval background as the rest of the series, it keeps up the high standard.
