



## The King's Hounds

*Martin Jensen*

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## **The King's Hounds** Martin Jensen

The first in the bestselling Danish series of historical mysteries

The newly crowned King Cnut of Denmark has conquered England and rules his new empire from Oxford. The year is 1018 and the war is finally over, but the unified kingdom is far from peaceful.

Halfdan's mixed lineage—half Danish, half Saxon—has made him a pauper in the new kingdom. His father, his brother, and the land he should have inherited were all taken by the new king's men. He lost everything to the war but his sense of humor. Once a proud nobleman, Halfdan now wanders the country aimlessly, powered only by his considerable charm and some petty theft. When he finds an unlikely ally in Winston, a former monk, he sees no reason not to accept his strange invitation to travel together to Oxford. Winston has been commissioned to paint a portrait of the king at the invitation of his new wife, and the protection of a clever man like Halfdan is well worth its price in wine and bread.

But when the pair's arrival in court coincides with news of a murder, the king has a brilliant idea: Why not enlist the newly arrived womanizing half-Dane and the Saxon intellectual to defuse a politically explosive situation? The pair represents both sides of the conflict and seem to have crime-solving skills to boot. In their search for the killer, Halfdan and Winston find seduction, adventure, and scandal in the wild early days of Cnut's rule.

## **The King's Hounds Details**

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## From Reader Review The King's Hounds for online ebook

### eyes.2c says

I'm addicted!

Ok, I'm addicted already to this series. Certainly I hope for more translations to follow. King Cnut is in Oxford to hold a Witenagemot (a National council assembly of the King, nobles and bishops) trying to bring the various English peoples now under his command (Angles, Jutes, Saxons, Danes, most recently, Vikings) together as one people. King Cnut wants this to move forward. But a well known South Saxon thane, Osfrid, has been murdered. A man who was known to be Cnut's enemy. King Cnut wants the murder solved so that his plans for unity, peace and kingship aren't thwarted. Winston the Illuminater has been commissioned by the King's consort, Lady Aelfgifu, to paint Cnut's portrait. Halfdan an ex half Danish nobleman (his father chose the wrong side) is here to seek a living or more certainly, the main chance. The two met on the road and travelled to Oxford together having a couple of adventures enroute. Cnut chooses Winston and Halfdan to conduct the murder investigation. He gives them three days to find the guilty party. As the two move forward with their investigation the singular murder is suddenly crowded with bodies and potential suspects...and the list just keeps growing. There's betrayed wives, hints of treason, angered landholders and more. The action moves smartly along aided by an excellent translation from Danish into English by Tara Chace. She is to be applauded in enabling the smooth flowing and very readable dialogue. The novel gives a credible insight into the life and times of this period in English History. A very enjoyable and often humorous read. Bring on the next in the series.

A NetGalley ARC

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### Susan says

This historical mystery is set in 1018 and features Winston, a respected Saxon illuminator, and Halfdan, a half Danish and half Saxon former nobleman, who lost his father's estate in the recent upheavals which have left Cnut as King of England – although that fact is not undisputed. Winston and Halfdan meet up on the road - Winston is headed for Oxford, where the first wife of Cnut has requested his services. However, when they arrive they happen to present when a Saxon nobleman, who has recently had an altercation with Cnut, is murdered. When Winston makes some observant comments about the crime, Cnut enlists his help to discover the murderer. For Cnut is in Oxford for a reason - he is waiting to be paid the huge amount of heregald, before he agrees to meet the Witenageniot and the Thing. With Saxon, Jutes, Angles, Danes and Vikings assembled for the Witenageniot and the murdered Saxon thanes widow accusing him of murder, Cnut reasons that asking for help from one Saxon and one Dane will mean that he is showing he wants the truth uncovered. For he is precariously ruling a divided land and he has to show that he is upholding the laws. Will Winston and Halfdan manage to discover the murder or will they be in danger of uncovering a more dangerous plot? Cnut is a man who can finally bring a measure of peace to a divided and fractious country and, although a Saxon, Winston is willing to help if he can.

This is an interesting mystery, which is –as other reviewers have pointed out – let down by a poor and unsympathetic translation. Words such as “dumb guy” and “scooted” do not belong in a novel set in 1018. I enjoyed the characters, but hope that the next instalment will have a more realistic feeling, especially in the dialogue between characters. Saying that, the author himself is not responsible for the translation and the actual pace of the mystery and characters of Winston and Halfdan are well written. I would give the next book a try, but seriously hope that a new translator is found and that modern, jarring words are left out of the text.

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## **Leah G says**

I have discovered a new affection for British early medieval detective fiction! (When King Cnut ruled, that's called early medieval right?)

Here we have a lapsed not-quite-ever-a-monk, a noble younger son who's lost his lands, a suspicious murder, and political scandal and conflict between Danish thegns, Vikings, Jutes, and deposed Saxon lords. The depth of the historical research delighted my history-major heart, and it's never cloyingly packing with details in your face but rather subtly and naturally worked into the narrative to make the setting a solid one. I didn't even notice that the book was translated, it was that smooth and effective, and I am extremely picky about and sensitive to that sort of thing (having actually studied it in college). So good job, translator.

The plot! King Cnut wants the land to actually become peaceful, but he's like a man holding a flaming torch while walking on a kerosene-soaked box with fireworks inside, so to speak. He might be the all-powerful conquering tyrant, but Vettinari-style, just because he is a tyrant doesn't mean he can do whatever he wants. He needs to not offend people enough into starting another uprising- even if he could win it, he wants to rule a kingdom that actually works instead of one that's tearing itself apart, if you'll excuse me mixing my metaphors.

So when a crime is committed that the king would have had ample motivation to have committed, but he claims that he hasn't done it. He's able to get out of it legally if he needs to by something I hadn't heard of before, a provision of medieval law called compurgation (which I promptly researched, quite fascinating, it fell into disuse but never went off the books entirely until the 1800s!) just getting 12 men to swear they believe your oath of innocence and you're covered.

BUT. To keep peace in the realm he needs to make people believe he truly hasn't ordered the murder. So he needs two expendable people, unknowns who aren't connected to any of the political sides in his encampment so they won't look biased.

And guess who has wandered into the hall at just the right moment!

Halfdan is half-Dane (ha ha, but is his name supposed to mean that? It was never specified) who lost his lands and his family to a battle and has been living on the lam ever since, doing whatever it takes to get something to eat and survive for another day.

It was a little lot disgusting the way he viewed women, talk about objectification. His mental processes are pretty gross. But when he needed to be brave and save someone he would do it, even if he was still definitely a scoundrel you still want to applaud when he cleverly gets out of yet another scrape.

His relationship with Winston, his traveling-companion/employer, is done perfectly, they start to have a rapport despite being very, very different people and manage to work together to solve the crime. But will they solve it in time? The king gave them only 3 days until the Wizenga- sorry! The Wittengamot! (I had no idea that was a real thing outside HP.) so they have to put together all the clues in a hurry or lose the king's favor. That is not something you will lose for very long.

As they go around town interviewing all the people involved in the case, there are fraught conversations, where anything might be a complete lie and all your senses as a reader must remain sharp or you won't know who to believe. Tiny details can conceal an important connection when investigating such a crucial case. There are some clever deductions, and also stupid mistakes like letting one suspect warn another in time to run away, whooops.(hey, they're an ex-noble thief and a lapsed-non-monk illuminator, what do they know about being detectives! But they do learn fast.)

Also gotta watch out for the politics- which is more important, the truth as the king wants it, the truth as the widow wants it, or the truth as it actually is?

Can't wait for the sequel! Translate it fast.

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### **Samantha says**

This was a fun, easy to listen to audiobook mystery. Some annoying anachronistic words were sprinkled throughout, but I assumed that was due to it being a translation and was forgiving regarding them.

The mystery, which our lovable protagonists have no good reason to be in charge of solving, involves the murder of a nobleman just as Cnut is gathering them to confirm his kingship. How inconvenient. The unlikely pair find their way into plenty of trouble, prove their womanizing skills, and even solve the murder. It is all a bit meandering but in good fun. This isn't a edge of your seat suspense novel, but an enjoyable diversion.

The skilled narrator really kept this one a 4-star for me. Considering it is free through Kindle Unlimited, this is a worthwhile selection.

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### **Pamela says**

An interesting murder mystery set in medieval Oxford as Cnut aims to unify Saxons, Vikings, and other assorted groups, and impose peace on a war torn England. The Saxon illustrator Winston and impoverished half-Danish nobleman Halfdan join forces to investigate a violent death, and soon find their own lives in danger.

The tone of this novel is pleasantly light-hearted, and Winston and Halfdan make an amusing couple of sleuths. Their friendship doesn't develop as fully as I would have liked in this book, but it offers scope for that to happen in later books. The plot is intriguing, it unfolds quite slowly but there are plenty of twists and turns, and some exciting moments of danger. The setting of medieval Oxford is conveyed well, descriptions of buildings and camps, smells and sounds evoke the dirt and chaos of the time and place, and the political considerations of this turbulent time are fascinating to read about.

There are a few modern Americanisms which do jar at times - I found 'worst case scenario' and 'for sure you're fresh' sounded particularly odd in the context of medieval England - but on the whole the translation works quite well.

I would recommend this to anyone who enjoys a quirky medieval mystery with a light hearted feel.

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### **Elizabeth Grieve says**

Found this fairly interesting, with some vivid descriptions of life in those tumultuous times in England's history. However, I felt the story was a little marred by the often anachronistic terms used, and particularly the modern-day 'Americanisms' - although this may be down to the translator. Obviously, the USA is a much bigger market, but one would think that Americans who choose to read historical novels set in England would not object to a more authentic 'British English' translation which better suits the subject matter.

Reviewed in exchange for a preview Kindle copy.

<http://ebookproofreader.wordpress.com/>

<http://easyturkishforbeginners.wordpr...>

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### **Vanessa Delamare says**

I loved it! An excellent book, very pleasant, very nice, very funny.

I completely fell for Halfdan - who tells the story in the first person - even if he sometimes lacks in moral sense. When we meet him, he's about to rob Winston to steal his food and he's considering it without qualm. Add to that that he's a real womanizer and that he does not hesitate to use violence if necessary. I don't know if it's his humor or the fact that he's sometimes unlucky or clumsy, but he's a very likable character that one quickly appreciates. Winston, the brain of the pair is also a great character: former monk, an intelligence based on the thoroughness and details, he has a sense of his superiority. He regularly highlights the fact that he was the first one to understand one thing and that Halfdan could have done the same by thinking. Winston and Halfdan are a bit like Holmes and Watson, although Watson in this book is a little more crafty and womanizer. Do not forget the donkey, Atheling, which provides some very funny and light scenes, especially when in the presence of Halfdan.

The plot is well done. It a classic whodunit, the number of potential suspects is known quickly, all that is to know is which one did it. The elements are revealed one after the other, in a chain of events that leads logically to the killer. It is easy to know who killed before the end, but the overall context of the book makes that story interesting until the end. We also learn more about judgment and how people defended themselves at the time (and thankfully that has changed!)

I enjoyed getting to know the life in England at the time, which makes this book very interesting from the historical side. It's also nice to discover the historical side of the history of England from the perspective of a Danish. Here, the Danes or Vikings are not the bad guys just because they have invaded the country.

Finally, Halfdan and Winston have three days to discover the murderer so the pace is fast, you won't get bored. There's action, especially as Cnut want to solve the problem as soon as possible, meetings more or less pleasant and characters that bring a lot of freshness. And icing on the cake, this book is the first in a series.

In a nutshell

A little treasure. The light atmosphere of the book - especially thanks to Halfdan I must say - the plot, the historical context: it's all well written, well done and very enjoyable to read. I highly recommend this book! I give it 4.5 / 5.

My thought on closing the book : Excellent!

(Originally posted at [vanessa-s-bookshelves.blogspot.ca](http://vanessa-s-bookshelves.blogspot.ca))

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**Bettie? says**

Translated by Tara Chace

Description: *The newly crowned King Cnut of Denmark has conquered England and rules his new empire from Oxford. The year is 1018 and the war is finally over, but the unified kingdom is far from peaceful.*

*Halfdan's mixed lineage—half Danish, half Saxon—has made him a pauper in the new kingdom. His father, his brother, and the land he should have inherited were all taken by the new king's men. He lost everything to the war but his sense of humor. Once a proud nobleman, Halfdan now wanders the country aimlessly, powered only by his considerable charm and some petty theft. When he finds an unlikely ally in Winston, a former monk, he sees no reason not to accept his strange invitation to travel together to Oxford. Winston has been commissioned to paint a portrait of the king at the invitation of his new wife, and the protection of a clever man like Halfdan is well worth its price in wine and bread.*

*But when the pair's arrival in court coincides with news of a murder, the king has a brilliant idea: Why not enlist the newly arrived womanizing half-Dane and the Saxon intellectual to defuse a politically explosive situation? The pair represents both sides of the conflict and seem to have crime-solving skills to boot. In their search for the killer, Halfdan and Winston find seduction, adventure, and scandal in the wild early days of Cnut's rule.*

Opening: **The Prior had allowed Winston to have his way.**

Okay, I get it, his name is Winston, now stop bludgeoning me to death with it! A lust-ridden tale written in pedestrian language. If two wooden characters have sex, does that start a fire?

Unfinished.

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## Marita says

This is a thoroughly entertaining medieval mystery.

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## Terri says

This was kind of the literary version of the Seinfeld show - it was a book about nothing. Only the tv series was supposed to be 'a show about nothing' and was still about some things that were a lot of fun.

This book was not fun, it actually was about nothing.

The characters didn't interest me, the writing was clunky and the translation is not good.

There is so much going on in this period. And yet, to me, the author failed to latch on and ride it into a great story.

In theory, the setting *should* be a colourful one and had all the potential to float this story like a bobbing buoy on a surging sea.

It is Britain, 1018. Cnut has conquered parts of England, cultures are clashing, uprisings are plentiful, the slave trade is about to go into overdrive. Settlements are popping up overnight.

But, this book captured none of that to me. If it weren't for the words Vikings and Saxons being thrown around, it could have been devoid of ethnicity and could have been any European country before the Late Middle Ages.

I found the main character, Halfdan, so incredibly annoying and two dimensional and I found his support character, Winston, a poorly forged copy of historical mystery solvers who are already done to perfection in this genre, ie Matthew Shardlake from the C.J. Sansom series. In fact there were a lot of similarities between Winston/Halfdan and Matthew Shardlake/Jack Barak. At times it felt nearly plagiarised, but all it was, was a bad copy.

The translation I think was the story killer here for me. It was a terrible translation. It had been translated too literally and with modern words used frequently. A translator with a better understanding of what is required of an historical fiction translator, may have done a better job. Who knows.

I wish I was fluent in Danish, so that I could read the original to see whether this book was massacred at the hands of the translator more so than the author. I suspect the translation is to blame for a lot of the grievances I have towards this book.

I thought about giving it 3 stars, because there were some chapters that I enjoyed. In hindsight, now I have put some distance between me and this read, I realise those enjoyable parts did not in fact outweigh the overall negative feelings I have towards this book.

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## Beth says

As a general rule, if the protagonist of a book is insisting to the reader within the first 20 pages that some

sex he had was totally consensual no matter what the woman he slept with said, there's going to be an uphill battle for me to like the story. This is even more true when the tale is supposed to be a comedy. My dislike of the protagonist colored my enjoyment of the entire story. Being in his point of view was unpleasant, as he walked around in an overconfident swagger, commenting to the reader on the attractiveness of various plot-important women. His perspective also made it impossible for any of the women in the plot to get any character development, as their primary descriptor gravitated to their breast size. I don't get along with people who see women primarily as physical attributes in real life, and it is no less insufferable here.

There was a decent mystery under all the lechery somewhere, and I've come away with an increased interest in King Cnut from the setting. However the protagonist made it a chore to read.

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### **Jane says**

It is the year 1018, and Cnut [Canute] of Denmark, now the ruler of a unified England, wishes a peaceful country, with all peoples living in harmony. This is the first volume in a delightful, highly recommended historical mystery series. It was written by a Dane. The book was well plotted, well written and it flowed along. The translator used such modern colloquialisms as 'guys', 'pals', 'buddies', 'boyfriend' that took some getting used to. The conclusion left room for more mysteries to follow.

A Saxon thane [member of the lower nobility] is murdered and King Cnut tasks Winston, an ex-monk illuminator, and Halfdan, a landless Danish/Saxon noble, to solve the case. The king chooses *them* particularly, because they will be representatives of two different nationalities in his kingdom cooperating and helping each other, a human example of what the king wants his realm to be. The two investigators made a good team. I liked how Winston and Halfdan worked together and processed the clues. I liked the deductive aspect. They divided up tasks in investigation, both were sharp-witted, but Winston was the "bigger brains" of the two and the leader. Halfdan nearly loses his life but defends himself several times against men who want to kill him, whether by fists or sword. In the course of the investigation, there are more murders, which have something to do with the first one. The solution made sense.

I liked Winston's statement to Halfdan early in the novel about detective work: Winston explains that to him it's like illumination of manuscripts: solving one small clue after the other is like illuminating different parts of a manuscript, then finally the big picture emerges. I was curious why the title was The King's Hounds. Towards the end of the novel, one character insults Winston and Halfdan by comparing the duo to the hounds of the king. Winston has a good riposte: "Better the hunter than the hunted. Just like King Cnut's other hounds, once we've picked up the scent we're tenacious to the end." I liked these two men and also the wise Cnut.

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### **Leslie says**

3.5 stars. I might have given this 4 stars if I hadn't been annoyed by a glaring historical inaccuracy in the very beginning -- Winston, the illuminator of manuscripts, was using a graphite pencil. While graphite was discovered (in the early 1500s) much earlier than I had expected when I looked into this, it was still much later than the setting of this novel in 1018. This was the only such inaccuracy that I noticed so it is too bad that it happened so early and tinged my opinion of the book.

This Danish mystery is set in England a few years after King Cnut (Canute was the way I would have spelled it) began ruling. I found this early medieval setting, when Angles, Jutes, Saxons, and Danes (Vikings) were first coming together into a unified country very interesting. While I had heard of King Canute before, I hadn't really realized that there was a time when England (and apparently Ireland too?) was under the rule of the Danes. One thing I would have liked that was missing was an appendix with definitions of some of the historical terms (such as housecarls, Witenagemot, etc.). Most of the meanings became clear from the context but it would have been a nice addition to the book.

I liked the use of the Saxon Winston coupled with Halfdan, a young dispossessed nobleman -- whose mother was Danish and father Saxon -- as main characters. Not only do the two provide a way to see different ethnicities but Winston had a background in the religious life (monasteries and abbeys) while Halfdan knew more about the "wild" side of life from his days of living hand-to-mouth. The murder investigation by these two was fine with the caveat that this was not a mystery that the reader could solve before the 'detectives'. I will be reading more from this series.

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### **Mary Ronan Drew says**

What a treat this historical mystery has turned out to be. It's the story of the murder of a Saxon thane on the eve of King Cnut's 1018 meetings in Oxford of the proto-parliamentary Witenagemot (Saxon) and Ting (Danish.) He wants these former enemies to agree to the same laws for the entire country of England, enforced by himself.

I don't think I'm leaking any spoilers when I reveal that Cnut's plan does work and except for the lamentable incident of William the Norman 50 years later the peace that Cnut established lasted 200 years.

But that peace is in danger if Cnut doesn't find out who has murdered Osfrid the Saxon. Whom can he possibly find to investigate for him? Neither Saxons nor Danes will trust the results of anyone from the other side.

At just this ticklish moment two men wander into town. Winston is a failed monk, the country's best illuminator who has been hired by Queen Emma to paint a picture of her husband, Cnut. Halfdan is the younger son of a Saxon nobleman who backed Edmund and not Cnut. When Edmund died he lost his estates and Halfdan, Danish on his mother's side and Saxon on his father's, is scraping by with handouts and what he can steal.

They meet on the road one night when Winston has set up camp and Halfdan, who has been living off what he could steal, is deciding how to go about attacking the seemingly vulnerable man. But a pair of thugs attack Winston before Halfdan can do so and he comes to the monk's aid. The well-provisioned illustrator thankfully shares his roast leg of lamb with rosemary and they decide to travel together.

It turns out Queen Emma is out of town but King Cnut sees an opportunity to get himself out of a fix. He orders the two men to undertake a bit of sleuthing on his behalf. If they find a Dane killed Osfrid, the Danes will be satisfied that one of the investigators was at half Danish. And if a Saxon is discovered to be the murderer their Saxon background will save them from being accused of favoritism by the English.

And should they fail to discover the culprit Cnut can always banish them and say he did his best.

These are pre-feudal times when every nobleman defends himself and his land with a private army, and the king's housecarls intervene only when violence becomes impossible to ignore. It's dangerous to walk the streets of Oxford or to wander among the tents pitched by the noblemen who have come to the Witan and the Ting. Halfdan provides some protection to Winston, who is older and wiser and more observant.

I've recently been doing a lot of reading about post-Roman times in Britain and the colorful world of the Saxons. The author obviously knows his cultural history, although he makes no attempt to lecture the reader. The characters who people this story are wonderful: Tonild, the infuriated Saxon wife of the dead Osfrid; her truculent brother Ranulf; Godskalk, Cnut's head of security; Baldwin, the king's accountant; Wulfstan, the archbishop of York; and the fearsome Viking, Thorkell the Tall. The last two are historical characters.

And the murderer? It takes Winston and Halfdan a while to figure out who would benefit from the brutal and very public murder of this Saxon nobleman at just this crucial moment. But an illustrator by necessity pays close attention to detail and the young and impetuous Halfdan is intelligent and enthusiastic. Cnut is pleased with their work and the reader will be too.

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### **Val says**

This book worked much better as a mystery than a historical novel. This mystery is suitably complicated without being too far-fetched.

I did not get a strong sense of the time period, although the bare facts of the historical events are true. The author is Danish and it is one of the few times when Danish and English history are entwined. I suppose he knows about as much about the major historical figures as it is possible to know and I have no problem with authors filling out a historical character. There are other books which get a much better feel of the times than this one and there are some which are a lot worse. It is not full of annoying anachronisms, but if we were not being constantly told that King Cnut is trying to get the Witangemot and the Thing to meet at the same time, it could be almost any feudal time and country. I don't think the dialogue helps set the time very well. The whole historical setting is vague.

It is an an enjoyable mystery and I enjoyed reading it, but it does not score very highly on the historical setting for me.

I think the relationship between Winston and Halfdan worked and people did band together to travel. As Cheryl says the clever detective with less bright sidekick is well used. It is not particularly innovative, apart from the historical setting, which did not work very well.

Although I did enjoy reading the book, I did not enjoy it enough to read more in the series.

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