



The Crusader

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A knight possessed by demons, an ambitious monk skilled in exorcism, and a bloody Crusade that ends in a terrible siege lie at the heart of Michael Alexander Eisner's action-packed medieval adventure of Christian warriors and Muslim infidels in the Holy Land.

Francisco de Montcada, the young Spanish heir to a vast family fortune, returns from the Crusades a gaunt shell of a man, rendered speechless by the horrors he has witnessed. As his friend Brother Lucas draws out his story, Francisco relates a gripping tale of fierce battles, cruel betrayals, and religious zealots. A first-rate novel of disquieting contemporary relevance, *The Crusader* captures with impressive style and historical authenticity the ghastly deeds men pursue in the name of God.

The Crusader Details

Date : Published January 7th 2003 by Anchor (first published May 19th 1999)

ISBN : 9780385721417

Author : Michael Alexander Eisner

Format : Paperback 336 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Medieval, War, Novels

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From Reader Review The Crusader for online ebook

Helena Schrader says

This is a melancholy, not to say morbid book. While well written with unusual characters, I found myself just wanting to get it over with. The construction of the novel, a monk recording a "confession," has many intriguing advantages, but knowing from the start that the hero returned from the crusade a wreck suffering from "demons" made me dread reading the next chapter. I knew there was bound to be even worse to come. In retrospect, I also found the villain too evil.

That said, this book does make you think, and the narrators are excellently drawn. This book even has a spark of genius in it. It is more than just a story, more than adventure or romance or mystery. It was definitely a Spanish book -- albeit other readers have pointed out some serious anachronisms. Nevertheless, I could see, hear and smell Spain in the pages, and readers who have an affinity to Spanish culture may like it better than I.

Yet it was too unremittingly depressing to satisfy me as a reader. Maybe I've just been lucky, but my experience of life is of shadow -- and light, of ugliness and beauty, and of good as well as evil. The light, the beauty and the good gets too little space in this book.

David says

This is a novel of contradictions.

There are the holy and the unholy.

There are courageous heroes and cowardly dogs.

There are men of honor and men who lack honor.

Here's the premise. Francisco returns from the Crusades a broken man. He had endured the extreme violence of medieval combat and finally spent time in a Muslim prison. Tortured and starved, when he is finally ransomed he refuses to speak to anyone-- Obviously suffering from what we call today Post Traumatic Stress syndrome.. Battle Fatigue. but in this old world mentality this means he has become demon possessed and will die outside of grace and therefore be denied access into heaven. An exorcist is called upon, but the wealthy father asks that his case be dealt with by another priest with a different approach-- one that doesn't use Fire and torture to drive out the demonic influence.

For years, Brother Lucas has been learning at the feet of an older and more experienced priest. His approach to exorcism is much more like modern day psychotherapy. After more than a month, Francisco begins to speak and tell his story. His story is harrowing and at times terrifying. At other times it is heart-rending...

Francisco tells his story in increments and finally we hear the horrifying secret that has tormented him. In between segments, Brother Lucas is tormented by his own selfish desire for advancement in the church, and some doctrinal issues. He becomes reflective on his own attitudes.

One minor problem I had was the reference to "leaks" regarding people sharing information that was supposed to be kept secret. I could be wrong, but that seemed like a more modern reference to me.

Other than that, I felt that the author did an excellent job of exploring the mindset and mixed reasons why a young noble would go on a crusade to begin with. The author seemed very well-versed in ancient combat and siege methods... This was a great novel with a compelling story.

Paula says

This is another bookswap experience, because I'm not really a big reader of 'straight' historical fiction. However the fact that our protagonists are Spanish crusaders added to a degree of interest in reading this book.

The Crusader is about two men, the ambitious low-born cleric Brother Lucas and Francisco de Montcada, heir to a massive estate. The two men first meet when Francisco is sent for his education to the monastery where Lucas has grown up. After Francisco leaves, he becomes a crusader in one of the orders of knights, and it's on his return to Spain that the two men cross paths again, as Francisco is meant to be possessed. It's Lucas' job to heal him, in order that the church can get its hands on a massive financial payment from Francisco's grateful father.

First off, I should probably say that the fact this book is all told in the first person is always going to be an issue for me. Having been to some of the places the book talks about, there's certainly an element of the local atmosphere about *The Crusader*, but sadly Eisner very much telegraphs the shock-horror revelation he has planned and it therefore loses much of its impact.

Julie says

This great historical novel is a sweeping narrative about the Holy War in the 13th Century and the effects it had on those who fought for the cross. Brother Lucas is charged with exorcising Francisco's demons upon his return to Spain from the Crusades. When Brother Lucas first encounters his old friend, Francisco is speechless, but before long, he unburdens himself to Brother Lucas in a disturbing tale of battle and betrayal.

Francisco departs for war with his cousin, Andres, and they encounter gruesome battles against the infidels. They are at odds with the illegitimate son of the King, Don Fernando, who has no qualms about slaughtering innocent women and children and other unscrupulous behavior, before finally betraying Francisco and Andre, who end up in a Muslim prison. Their fight for survival in this dungeon is perhaps the most chilling part of the book. But Francisco's eventual release and return to Spain comes at a cost. He returns without Andres and has to justify his survival and his cousin's demise to Andres' sister Isabel, who is also Francisco's love interest. His confession to Brother Lucas and Isabel seems to release him from his demons, but a final confrontation with Don Fernando is the culmination of all of Francisco's internal conflict.

The Crusader delivers an action-packed historical account with vivid battle scenes and depictions of the Middle East. The novel even has a touch of *The Name of the Rose* with its account of monastic life. The first person narrative from both Brother Lucas and Francisco are rich with detail and emotion. This is a true prize

for historical fiction fans.

Sergio says

It's a very good story. The flow of narration is intriguing and balanced, the characters believable, the language is good. The book still keeps me thinking of those times, with hardships of travel, with the absurdity and brutality of war.

I'd recommend it, the more if you are into the things medieval.

Jane says

A somber book and its bleakness not easily forgotten, this novel was a story of the 8th Crusade. Young Spanish nobleman Francisco de Montcada has been sent to a monastery for exorcism of demons -- we might call his condition PTSD today. He had been broken in spirit by his horrendous experiences as a knight of the Order of Calatrava in the Holy Land. He finally narrates his story to a monk, Brother Lucas. He decides to take the cross in reparation for his brother, who, on the way to the Crusades himself, was drowned; Francisco really doesn't have the personality of a soldier but goes anyway. He and his cousin, Andres, fight together in the Levant. There are exciting battles, one won by the Crusaders then the fall of Krak des Chevaliers and capture by the Muslims. But the thrust of the story is of Francesco's fragile hold to life through the ugliness of war and his time of imprisonment in an obliette. Brother Lucas has gotten him to talk through his experiences and feelings. A thoughtful anti-war novel; one can almost parallel it to today's events; the author was involved in Near East Peace negotiations in our time. The history was somewhat manipulated to create a good story with many anachronisms, but the author made his point. I do wish he had included an Author's note.

Highly recommended.

Bryn Hammond says

This is a grim novel, much more concerned with how war ruins lives than with adventure or guts & glory. When you see that the author was involved in the Middle East peace process you nod as if you knew. He doesn't use outright anachronism to draw an analogy between those times and these. But you can sense the present and you wonder how far we've come.

I took to our mains straight away. I cared about them. Francisco won't lie down for an injustice, but he never thinks he's active enough, either. He has a cruel life, and has seen things to stagger faith in God and man. He's the crusader of the title, who comes home a casualty of war: insane, or in the church's terms, possessed. The talking cure wasn't unknown in earlier centuries; at any rate, one exorcist has had success with it, and rescues Francisco from the church's more hands-on methods. So we listen to his story.

We get Francisco's story from his own lips, and otherwise we have the record of the Cistercian who executes his cure. He's a toad and you watch his hypocrisy at work as he convinces himself: this causes a few laughs

at the irony. But he doesn't always choose the dark side and that leaves you with suspense – since Francisco is in his hands.

What Francisco witnessed on crusade has sent him into mental withdrawal: atrocity; feuds whereby his captain, Uncle Ramon to his troops (you might want to call him uncle too) is dispatched by his own side; a year in a dungeon where people behave like an exaggerated crazy-mirror of what they are in the free world above.

Francisco wasn't made to be a novice – he spends his late teens in a Cistercian abbey – and he wasn't made to be a soldier: he goes to the crusades on behalf of his dead brother. Even though he's from a high noble family his life is brutish, nasty and too short. He finds no consolation in God, who capsized his brave brother's crusader ship within Francisco's sight – he scarcely got off shore. Against this negativity, there are good people for him to love and live for; his cousin, less introspective than Francisco, more your soldier; his cousin's sister who also lives with death and understands Francisco; Uncle Ramon.

The writing: well above average, I thought. Then again I thought it misfired, even frequently. Make of that what you can.

Miroslav says

It's an okay book, but there is much better historical fiction available out there. The middle part of the book contains several long, almost documentary sequences - and the pacing (that is already very slow) turns almost to a crawl. While historical research is important for books like this one, the way the author presents the historical facts is also important - and several scenes were turning into history textbook at one point. There are also problems with the structure - some of Francisco's flashbacks are too long and the narrator, as a character seems a bit underutilized to me. Also, I would not mind seeing a bit more tension, because the atmosphere is a bit flat. The final duel with the villain seems out of place (the bad-guy talk becomes ridiculous at one point).

The overall tone, the story idea, the setting and the gradual transformation of the narrator and his beliefs are things that I liked. It's a decent historical fiction, but that's all.

Macx says

Great look at the time period told through an very good novel.

Sara says

"An adventure story", claim the blurbs on the back cover, "a swashbuckling tale". I beg to differ. Though there may be adventure and swashbuckling, this is a tale of soul searching, so any readers expecting a medieval adventure tale will find themselves disappointed.

The book itself is presented as the diary of a monk, written while rescuing a knight possessed by demons through exorcism. It opens vividly with the monk visiting the knight and then delves into the past, back

when, then teenagers, monk and knight had been colleagues, even friends. Afterwards the book proceeds to clarify how, after knight and monk follow their different paths, the monk precociously grows into positions of greater authority and enters the meanders of exorcism.

At this point, I can say that the monk is well portrayed throughout the book, including his unfaltering devotion side by side with the growth of his ambition, his sense of what he can and should have, while at the same time maintaining a naïveté which blinds him to the unwholesome corruption that plagues the real world, outside his monastery.

And then the knight starts his narrative, which takes several days.

At the beginning, the narrative is interrupted by passages in italics where the monk denotes actions happening before him and his immediate thoughts to the tale. Soon, though, the monk is heard only in between their sessions, leaving the knight's narrative uninterrupted. Occasionally, too occasionally, the knight talks directly to the monk.

The character of the knight is presented faultlessly, just as the evolution of his emotional burdens, or demons. However, I found the writing style less than faultless. First of all, the sentence structure is very similar: the author favours short, simple sentences that transmit a sense of restrain and coldness which fit in with the monk's point of view but not the knight's, whose narrative paints dark, bloody, emotionally scarring situations. The atrocities - precisely because the knight-narrator sees them as atrocities - lose some of its emotional impact when the language is so carefully measured and crafted into a steady and rational, rather than emotional, rhythm. One cannot feel all the anger, repulse and frustration that we're told are there.

I also believe that the knight's narrative would have benefitted from a greater presence of the monk. Not that the monk should have had a greater presence with italic passages, such as in the beginning, but the knight ought to have spoken directly at the monk more often, resorting to more rhetorical questions (because he does use them, but only occasionally). I am certain the strength of his narrative would have been greater, since the few rhetorical questions tended to underline the knight's grief.

Still on the point of style, I found the dialogues a bit stifled: they were rather short, the names (brother X, brother Y) often repeated, and the speech usually followed by 'he said'. I would have preferred a greater variety in reporting verbs to spice up the reading.

I felt the ending was a bit lukewarm. The final confrontation between the knight and the man behind his demons was believable, unavoidable and even necessary, but there was also a nod towards Hollywoodesque film endings that kept me from fully enjoying it. Fortunately, the book didn't end there and offered an epilogue which painted a fuller picture of the monk: and this ending satisfied me immensely since it was a realistically happy ending for him, with the culmination of his efforts to unite devotion to God and ambition.

As for historical accuracy, it seemed accurate enough, aside one mention of seconds (during a military exercise where the instructor counts the seconds the trainees take) and the constant insistence on having a noble maiden going about her father's estate and travelling beyond it without any type of escort (except later on for her brother) or even a female company (apparently she was the only woman in the castle, not even having a governess, former nanny, or a maid-in-waiting).

In conclusion, I awarded the book four stars because I could feel the mentality of a bygone era far better than in other novels, and if not for the unemotional style and the solitary noble lady I would have surely given it five stars.

Johnny says

When Michael Alexander Eisner saw the cover copy on this paperback edition of *The Crusader*, he must have grimaced because it refers to a protagonist who leaves “Spain” in the 13th century. Naturally, the Iberian Peninsula of the 13th century was no more a country called “Spain” than the European Community is a country called “Europe” or the “Holy Roman Empire” was “Roman.” Iberia, as is well-presented in *The Crusader*, was a loose alliance of so-called Christian kingdoms and, at that point in time, there wasn’t even a dominant “Spanish” dialect. Eisner is quite correct to portray this because his “heroes” from Aragon and Barcelona do not speak the dialect of Castile that we generally associate with “Spanish.”

The Crusader is a story framed by a unique type of exorcism. It is not the type of exorcism associated with this era where the victim is usually “saved” by being forced to face a righteous death. Rather, it is a type of exorcism more closely associated with the client-centered therapy of the late 20th century. Instead of calling it counseling (where the counselor asks questions to help the counselee solve her or his own problems), it is called confession (where, in this case, the confessor is trying to help the parishioner map out her/his own soul). I enjoyed this structure, particularly because the interludes and interruptions where the reader is allowed inside the head of the confessor/exorcist allow glimpses of the very human (dare we say “carnal”) desires that can even fill the mind of a so-called godly person. No, don’t mistake me and think that this is yet another discourse on priestly sexual abuse. It doesn’t deal with sexual issues with regard to the confessor, but it deals very much with ambition, self-interest, compromise, and doubt—important aspects for everyone.

Another very welcome aspect of *The Crusader* was the fact that it demonstrated how that the history as told by the victor may actually be a convenient alibi for horrible atrocities or as a cover-up for compromise and cowardice. Readers looking for the equivalent of an action-movie will be disappointed in the lack of action/combat sequences in this narrative, but I can assert that the ones the author chose to describe are vivid (at times, gory) and necessary in terms of helping us understand the nature of war and what it does to those who participate in it. I found myself particularly fascinated by the taking of the Castle of Toron (in what is now Lebanon) and the detailed sortie against a catapult during the siege at Krak des Chevaliers. All of these were particularly well-done.

Finally, I feel like the author did a great job of balancing blame for atrocities on both sides. I was fascinated by the heart-breaking story of the Templars who negotiated in good faith with the Muslims who, in turn, slaughtered the caravan [This is not part of the main story, so I’m not counting this as a spoiler.], even as I was horrified at the alleged Christian commander who slaughtered women and children with no remorse, long after the battle was over. Throughout the book, the gritty and realistic feeling was that I was there as a sickened observer in many of the “Crusader” battles I had only read summaries of in the history texts. This book will be highly recommended to my history students when we cover Medieval Iberia.

T K Gilb says

Publisher's description that this book is an "action-packed medieval adventure" is misleading. The main character-a melancholy young man haunted by the death of his older brother-doesn't even reach the Kingdom of Acre until almost halfway through the book. That said, I found this to be an intriguing historical novel that

looks at the Crusades through the eyes of a young crusader knight who is quickly stripped of all his illusions about honor and glory. Though his tale unfolds as a confession told to a Cistercian monk, which puts some distance between the reader and the actual events, the narrative was well written and the supporting characters engaging.

Stuart Aken says

- The Crusader by Michael Eisner, Transworld

315 pps. 13 chaps, epilogue, glossary (unnecessary), 125,000 words

Historical thriller set in 13th century Spain and The Holy Land, written by a monk who transcribes the confession of the eponymous hero, so two first person accounts, often at variance considering the matter under discussion. The spiritual growth of the monk is very well handled and the characters are skilfully drawn. A sub-plot involves the love of the knight for his cousin. Much is made of the intrigue within both the monastery, where the confession takes place, and the world of the crusading armies. The cruelty, hypocrisy, and social injustice of the age are well described and there are many moving passages. The most striking aspect of the writing is the successful depiction of the monk's ambiguity and self-deception, of which he only becomes aware as the story develops. It is a good tale, well written, cleverly paced and clearly based on thorough research. One small criticism; the use of American idiom and sentence structure doesn't sit well with a reader of British English when employed in the mouths of 13th century folk. But, a good read and one I couldn't put down toward the end of the book. Recommended.

Suzanne Vincent says

I enjoy reading a good historical fiction novel on occasion. But this one is da BOMB!

It's well-researched historical fiction without being stereotypical historical fiction. You know what I mean. The long pages of precise details, the lengthy descriptions of costumes and ballrooms, either written for male audiences with swashbuckling blood-and-guts-loving heroes or for female audiences whose prime reason for reading is the steamy romance. I prefer the first, detest the second, but really LOVE a good historical fiction that lets me forget it's historical fiction and just lets me become immersed in the story.

This is one of those.

Excellent!

Marvin says

A spellbinding story narrated by a well-meaning monk who's often blinded by his own self-centered ambition & blind loyalty to a corrupt church whose corruption he is blind to. More heroic are the knight who goes off to fight in the Crusades to redeem his older brother who perished when his ship bound for the Crusades sunk just off the coast of Spain, and the beautiful, smart lady who awaits his return. Much of the story is told in the form of a confession by the knight to the monk as a means of exorcising the knight's demons. In that sense, it's reminiscent of Mary Doria Russell's The Sparrow, though not as rich in characters

or in theological or human depth & insight.
