



The Novice's Tale

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When the novice Emma Thorgold goes missing from Godstow Abbey in the summer of 1353, the hunt is on throughout the Oxfordshire countryside. Bookseller Nicholas Elyot and scholar Jordain Brinkylsworth are anxious to help the girl, but her stepfather has other intentions. Why is he so determined to shut her away for life? Or worse? And will she be found unharmed?

The Novice's Tale Details

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From Reader Review The Novice's Tale for online ebook

Diane K. says

This second book of the series is not, strictly speaking, a mystery. The only mystery we have is why the wicked stepfather is so utterly determined to shut Emma--AKA Sister Benedicta--away forever in a convent, and that's easily guessed at without even reading the book. The story is more action-adventure, a race against time, not only to locate the runaway novice before her wicked stepfather does, but to find a way to secure her freedom, because, as is mentioned several times in the book, a legal guardian had a perfect right to lock his ward away in a convent if he felt like it; she, sadly, had absolutely no say in the matter.

The book gives a little background on convent life with the Benedictines, although not nearly so much as you will find with Margaret Frazer's "Dame Frevisse" series. It did, however, bring up a point that had not occurred to me before: namely, that only girls from noble and/or well-to-do families could become nuns, as they were required to bring a "dowry" for their "marriage" to Christ. I am not certain, but I had thought that men wishing to become monks had no such requirement; it was simply a matter of whether the monastery in question had room for them. The story (and the Afterword) also pointed out several different reasons a woman might wish to become a nun. Some, of course, would have a genuine vocation to be close to God. Others would be attracted to the tranquility an haven such a life offered, free from being offered, like a piece of meat, on the marriage market, and safe from the considerable hazards of bearing children. And some (hopefully a minority) were forced into the life because they were an inconvenience at home.

In the first book we learn something of bookmaking, including the making of parchment. Here we learn the art of chandlering--candlemaking. It never occurred to me that professional candlemakers would travel about from place to place, making up a year's supply of candles before moving on. And it's hard to imagine in our time just how vital candles would be for people back then. Poor folk who couldn't afford extra lighting would literally go to bed with the sun, not being able to accomplish anything further once it got too dark to see.

The characters are, as before, excellently drawn. We see much more of Emma, of course, as the title character, but we also get to see more of another character briefly touched on in the first book: Deputy Sheriff Cedric Walden. Cedric is cool. You can see how he got his position. Unlike other lawmen of Oxford, who love to flex their authority until they're actually called upon to exercise it, Cedric listens, comprehends, and acts swiftly and without fuss. He also does not assume that the wealthiest or most noble born person present must be the one telling the truth. (Plus, the little dog introduced in the story takes an instant liking to him, so you KNOW he's one of the good guys!)

The wicked stepfather is delightfully named: Malaliver. This can be very loosely translated as "Bad liver", meaning either that he lives badly, or his internal organs are out of whack. Either way, it explains a lot, doesn't it?

The book is fast-paced, and can leave you chewing your nails with anxiety, as it swings from the hectic searching on Nicholas' part, to Emma's slower pace as she heads for Oxford. Emma, while aware that people will be searching for her, has no idea of her imminent and frightful peril.

The only disappointing thing I found is that you're left not knowing if true justice will be dispensed in the end.

I'm already into the third book, and it's looking great!

Lisa Brantly says

These are really good! I've just ordered #3 from Amazon.

Ken Hines says

This series gets better all the time

I really loved how this book picked up from the one before. I really loved how Nicolas and Emma's love affair started at the Abby and continued on in the story. I hope that they end up together.

I also am a loved of Ann Swinfen's books she is a great author and when I finish this series I will had read both series. I really miss Lot's adventurous life. This series I hope grows more also.

Kim says

Very suspenseful! I wanted to savor it but I had to find out what happened next! Terrible villain.

Debbi says

Not nearly as good as the first book. It seemed like it's only purpose was to further the story-line between Nicholas and Emma. It was pretty obvious in the first book that there would be more to their relationship, and this book solidifies that. But, that's really all it was. Not much of a mystery. Glad this wasn't the first book or I might not have read any more. But, I think I'll give it one more chance given how much I enjoyed the first book.

Ivor Armistead says

This second book in the Oxford Medieval Mystery series by Ann Swinfen is utterly charming. Perhaps less of a "mystery" than the first book, but Ms Swinfen's characters and strong portrayal of time and place make the book delightful. Her use of archaic English words may occasionally send you to your dictionary, but they add an historic texture to the stories that increases their appeal.

If you are a reader and book lover (and you most likely are if you're reading this review), what more could you ask for: scriveners, illuminators, booksellers and scholars in medieval Oxford confronting the evil and unjust. There is even an increasingly likable librarian/lawyer in the mix of characters. Splendid!

I hope Ms Swinfen will continue the series. I want more, please.

C.P. Lesley says

Even better than book 1 (and for what I thought about that, see my contribution to "Books We Loved, Dec. 2016").

Emma, the reluctant novice of The Bookseller's Tale, is facing even greater pressure to take her final vows as a nun. Nicholas Elyot, for reasons he hesitates to examine too closely, offers to help her, but she escapes before he has a chance. She knows any attempt on his part will only lead to further restrictions on her movements. Soon her wicked stepfather is on the trail. But what drives her stepfather to hunt Emma down, can Nicholas act quickly enough to stop him, and what will happen to his half-formed hopes if he succeeds?

annapi says

I was not impressed with book 1 of this series - I thought it started slow and I only warmed to the protagonist in the second half of the book. But the end of that made me want to read the next one, to see if he would develop a relationship with the young novice who was forced into the nunnery against her will.

Book 2 was much better. Emma Thorgold is soon to take her vows but she is vehemently opposed to doing so. Nicholas, intrigued by the young woman with a talent for drawing, seeks to help her by providing the services of his friend Phillip Olney, who is well versed in the law. But although Emma manages to escape, her stepfather seems intent on not only finding her, but perhaps seeing her dead as well in order to seize her inheritance.

This book was much better paced, particularly with the suspense of the search for Emma, and the final showdown with her stepfather was much better than the anticlimactic ending of book 1. I will definitely be continuing with the series.

Kathleen says

A very marvelous book that took up where the first left off.. with greater character depth and intricate plot line. Subsequent books in a series sometimes are that way..is it the reader or the writer or both? The first book was very good but this one surely surpassed it.

I found myself gasping at certain events just like it was happening before my eyes. Nicholas rescuing Emma from her stepfather's attack dogs was one such moment! Of course I did not want it to end and I am anxious for a sequel.

The history is unique and the period details are just superb. The candle-makers and the deputy sheriff were brought into the storyline very skillfully and all added strength to the plot.I have read and enjoyed 'This Rough Ocean' so now will try others by Ann Swinfen

Hart says

I enjoyed this book just as much as the first! I am so happy to have found this series.

The blurb is misleading; it does explain Nicholas' view of the unfolding story, but we also see Emma's point-of-view. So, there is no real mystery, since we know what's going on with her. And her sections were great - she's as engaging of a character as Nicholas.

I've seen a phrase that we measure a hero's strength by what he accomplishes, while we measure a heroine's strength by what she can survive. I'm sure there are many great books that fall in the latter category, but I don't usually enjoy reading about women surviving horrible things. I was afraid, early on, that this book would be about Emma's suffering. She definitely does face hardship, but instead of the narrative excessively punishing her, this is primarily a story about a woman taking charge of her own destiny. Nicholas helps her and the other women in the story, but his goal is to give them the means to choose their own paths, not to make decisions for them, even in this remote time.

There are again a lot of details about daily medieval life, including a couple of sections about candle-making, which were interesting, although they seemed somewhat oddly placed near the climax of the story. I also really liked the visit to the lord's manor; having spent so much time in this series seeing how Nicholas, the nuns, and the college employees live, it was nice to see a version of medieval wealth.

I was very into the sweet and subtle romance between Nicholas and Emma, but I felt it got exactly the right amount of time in this book (very little). This book would be appropriate for just about anyone, even (I think?) an ultra-Christian reader who goes over texts with a fine-toothed comb looking for their version of immorality. Religion is an important part of these characters' lives, and although Emma does not want to be a nun, she never rejects her beliefs. Yet with the strong theme of women's empowerment, it definitely did not offend my own strict moral sensibilities, either.

Warning for animal harm: there are several dogs in the story, and they're frequently hurt and/or in danger. This made certain key scenes really harrowing for me. (view spoiler)

Kathryn says

A wonderfully engaging story of medieval Oxford.

I love this book. I could not put it down. It has an interesting, exciting story, engaging characters and a satisfying conclusion. I am very keen to read more instalments and I hope they come soon.

Samantha says

As I said in my review of The Bookseller's Tale, I was powerless to resist the urge to move on to this second book in Ann Swinfen's Oxford Medieval Mysteries once I had finished the first. I was not disappointed.

While this novel retains the characters and setting that I grew to love in the first book, the author also added

some interesting changes. Instead of solely depending on the first person point of view of Nicholas, this installment moves back and forth between him and our titular novice, Emma Thorgold. She winds up being the center of our second mystery, which this time involves some fraud and deceit rather than murder.

I was torn between adoring these two and becoming frustrated with them as they both worked toward the same end but with different strategies. My desire was to shake Emma and say, 'Just wait! Nicholas will save the day!' However, Emma is not one to wait for her knight in shining armour to save her, which may be all well because I do not believe that sweet, bookish Nicholas has a suit of armour.

The different sort of plot and storytelling made this novel no less captivating than the first. If anything, I am more invested and cheering for Nicholas' success. As the series progresses, we also get to see the characters more deeply developed and their relationships evolve. I particularly enjoyed this little moment of burgeoning friendship between Nicholas and an unexpected ally:

"I have reason to be grateful to you for your' - he searched for the right word.

'Interference? Nosiness into the affairs of others?'

'I was going to say your championship of those less fortunate than yourself.'

This book left me hungry for the next. Nicholas has begun to dream of a future that he believes is out of reach, but he cannot help desiring it all the same. I cannot help but want it for him too, and will have the next book in my hands as soon as it is released.

Michael Stolle says

Excellent research, good and very precise historic background and description of daily life.

Regrettably mostly boring.

I was also a bit irritated by the fact that Emma almost drowned but managed to climb out of the torrents of the river with her book and some clothes still dry - that's what I'd call a divine miracle.

Carolyn says

I'm really enjoying this historical mystery series, although this second book is not so much a mystery but more a continuation of the first novel. The setting is Oxford in 1353, four years after the black death has scourged the country. Bookseller, Nicholas Elyot, lost his young wife and is bringing up his two young children with his sister who lost her husband and children. In the previous book, Nicholas' investigations brought him into contact with Emma Thorgold, a young novice forcibly sent to a convent by a scheming relative who is at the centre of this novel.

What I particularly enjoy about these novels is the description of everyday medieval life - the food, the sights and smells, the daily tasks - as well as the interesting characters. In this case Nicholas and his family and his two young apprentices learning to copy and mend books, as well as the Oxford scholars and the common people Nicholas encounters on his short journeys around Oxford. In the previous novel, I learnt a lot about

the making and illustrating of books and in this one I was fascinated by the descriptions of candle making back in the middle ages.

Leslie says

A fast read but this second book in Ann Swinfen's Oxford Medieval mystery series wasn't a mystery at all. Instead, it was a more of a romantic suspense story involving why Emma Thorgold (whom we met in the first book) was forced into the convent by her stepfather.

I enjoyed the historical fiction (especially the bit with the candle makers) but was disappointed with the direction the series seems to be taking.
