



The Altarpiece

Sarah Kennedy

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It is 1535 and in the tumultuous years of King Henry VIII's break from Rome, the religious houses of England are being seized by force. Twenty-year-old Catherine Havens is a foundling and the adopted daughter of the prioress of the Priory of Mount Grace in a small Yorkshire village. Catherine, like her adoptive mother, has a gift for healing, and she is widely sought and admired for her knowledge.

Catherine's hopes for a place at court have been dashed by the king's divorce, and she has reluctantly taken the veil. In the remote North, the nuns enjoy the freedoms unavailable to other women. England is their home, but the times have changed, and now the few remaining nuns dread the arrival of the priory's new owner, Robert Overton. When the priory's costly altarpiece goes missing, Catherine and her friend Ann Smith find themselves under increased suspicion.

Only the illness of Robert's brother, William, preserves the nuns from immediate expulsion and arrest. Catherine heals him, and when she undertakes a quest across England, he offers to accompany her and Ann. They visit the deposed queen, and during their journey to uncover the truth, Catherine begins to doubt her church and her God. She finds herself drawn to William, even though he has spoken his oath to the crown and serves her greatest enemy.

King Henry VIII's soldiers have not had their fill of destruction, and when they return to Mount Grace to destroy the priory, Catherine must choose between the sacred calling of her past and the man who may represent her country's future.

The Altarpiece Details

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Author : Sarah Kennedy

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From Reader Review The Altarpiece for online ebook

Brenda Haven says

This novel is set in 1535 when England is still involved in the struggle over the break with the Church of Rome and the acceptance of the Church of England and King Henry as the Supreme Head of the Church. The country is in turmoil as the monasteries and priories are forcibly shut down and the monks and nuns are brutally assaulted and turned out with nowhere to go. This is the story of twenty year old Catherine Havens, a nun at the Priory of Mount Grace, who is the adopted daughter of the Prioress. A very expensive and rare wooden, painted altarpiece has disappeared at the same time as the nobleman, Robert Overton, has come to claim the priory as his property given to him by King Henry. Only the sudden, very serious illness of Lord Robert's younger brother William saves the priory and the nuns from immediate destruction and expulsion. Catherine, who is a healer, saves William from death and he in turn sets out on the quest with her to solve the mystery of the missing altarpiece as well as several mysterious deaths that have occurred after the disappearance of the altarpiece. The brutality and the hopelessness of the period are very accurately portrayed in this novel. The author has done a fantastic job of portraying the brutality of the 1500's and that time of great upheaval in England. It is interesting to see the growth and awareness in Catherine as she struggles to understand herself and her feelings towards William as she searches for the missing altarpiece. The ending leaves so many interesting choices for new adventures that I look forward to reading the next book in the series. There are also several other interesting and likable characters from the village that I look forward to seeing in future books.

Annie McDonnell says

I was given a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

I love historical fictions, and this book delivers!! It is 1535 in Tudor England and King Henry VIII is creating the Church of England and his soldiers are overtaking the Catholic Churches, and Catherine Havens is hiding all of the important papers and other items that she does not want to be taken from Mount Grace (the Convent that she is raised in). This scavenging is how we are introduced to this story...and, it is exciting from the first page!

An altarpiece is missing, but there is much more to this story, than the Madonna and the baby statue...

Not only does Sarah Kennedy know her history, she also creates a story that will stay with you. I was in awe of Catherine and her dignity, and honor. She is a woman that believes in herbal remedies, and does not want to be taken for a witch. In these times, to have those beliefs is very difficult and Catherine tries to hold her secrets in.

Will she be able to?

Will the Altarpiece be found? And, will there be a personal cost?

Sarah Kennedy is a talented writer, and I am excited to read the other two books in this Cross and Crown Series.

Darlene says

The Altarpiece by Sarah Kennedy is the first in The Cross and The Crown Series and what a fantastic start! I

love reading any novels that take place during the reign of King Henry VIII so of course I was excited to read this one. In this novel we journey to the time when King Henry VIII was a force upon himself declaring war on all religious houses due to his break from Rome. It was a horrific time when religious houses were being subjected to utter destruction and valuable pieces were being taken from them. In *The Altarpiece* we see how this destruction affected the nuns at the Priory of Mount Grace.

As the novel opens we meet a young nun named Catherine Havens. Catherine was adopted by the prioress when she was left abandoned as a baby and brought up at Mount Grace. As a child Catherine had hoped to serve at Catherine of Aragon's court but that was all but impossible when King Henry decided to divorce her and send her away. So Catherine takes the vows and becomes a nun which in some ways works for her as she is a natural healer and this life has given her the opportunity to use her gifts and even be recognized for them. However with King Henry on a rampage this now has become more of a curse than a blessing as anyone using herbs and such to heal is now considered a witch and can be put to death.

It isn't long before the soldiers arrive at Mount Grace and when Catherine and another nun Ann find the altarpiece missing Catherine is sure that one of the king's men must have taken it. Bent on taking the priory whether with cooperation or without the soldiers wreak havoc not caring what they ruin or who they hurt in the process. Just as disturbing though are the long kept secrets that Catherine is just now uncovering and these have the power to change her future forever.

The Altarpiece is a great historical read. Of course I knew of the priories and monasteries being taken by force by King Henry's men but I've never read anything that focused on any one house so I found this very interesting. The author very vividly takes you back to this time period and you can practically feel the brutality and hopelessness of the situation being portrayed. For certain I will be anxiously awaiting the next novel in *The Cross and The Crown Series* called *The City of Ladies*!

Donna says

1535 and King Henry VIII breaks relationships with Rome. Now the religious convents and houses England are being seized. The call is for the religious sect to take an oath for the King and leave all religious life behind.

At Mount Grace priory the nuns are fighting against this. Catherine has a gift for healing as does her adoptive "mother" Christina. She is always being asked to help with illnesses and other ailments for healing.

Suddenly, one day the Altarpiece in the chapel goes missing. The carpenter and the church sexton seem to be the culprits until the sexton turns up dead and the carpenter is now missing. Catherine and her friend Ann are trying very hard to locate the missing Altarpiece.

It seems the priory belongs to the Overton family and they are going to take whatever they want from the place and close it up, throwing the nuns out.

I just loved this book and couldn't wait to see what was happening next. So many are accused of the death and the stealing of the valuable Altarpiece. Where is it? How will they figure out who took it and why? Catherine, herself, gets caught up in having unfamiliar stirrings in her body for one of the Overton brothers, William. Will she go off with him and leave the church. So much happens at the convent and many people are hurt or killed.

You will have to read this great book by Sarah Kennedy and I cannot wait for the sequel.

I won this book through the Goodreads Giveaway and am glad I did. Thank you, thank you.

The Idle Woman says

This first instalment in a series offers a rare perspective on Tudor history, through the eyes of those who suffered the results of Henry VIII's religious reform. The nuns of the Yorkshire convent of Mount Grace find themselves besieged by the men of their local lord Robert Overton, keen to carry off their wealth and spoils for Overton's own house. While many of the sisters flee, the prioress Christina and her inner circle remain firm in their defiance, believing that if they hold out long enough the king will come to his senses. In any case, Overton has been thwarted: a valuable altarpiece from the convent, which he desired for his own, has vanished. And, to make matters worse, one of the convent's servants has fled; another dies, apparently poisoned. As the community descends into suspicion and division, and as the summer brings the pox in its train, the nuns gradually find themselves being made scapegoats for treachery, witchcraft and, most horrifying, murder. It is down to their youngest member, the sensible Catherine, to attempt to solve the mysteries: to discover the location of the missing altarpiece and to find the identity of the murderer.

This is an interesting glimpse of history from an unusual perspective and I enjoyed the characters of Catherine and her wonderfully no-nonsense friend Ann. The mystery aspects of the plot weren't quite as successful for me, because there were slightly too many clues, which enabled me to figure out the denouement at a relatively early stage of the book. I also felt that some of the characterisation, particularly of Christina, could have been a little more complex. Overall, however, it's a solid debut and I'll be interested to see how Kennedy develops her craft in the sequel, due to be published in October 2014.

For a full review, please see my blog:
<http://theidlewoman.blogspot.co.uk/20...>

RoloPoloBookBlog says

The Altarpiece by Sarah Kennedy

(The Cross and Crown Series)

Source: Knox Publishing

Rating: 3/5 stars

I dove into Sarah Kennedys' The Altarpiece with all kinds of enthusiasm; this is a book that should have been tailor-made for an art historian with a passion for the period. Sadly, for this art historian with a passion for the period, this book fell short of my expectations.

The Altarpiece opens in 1535 at Mount Grace Priory in England where the good sisters in residence have been told that Henry Tudor's reforms are shutting them down. Furthermore, each and every one among them must make a vow to disavow the old ways, Rome and, fall in line with the new faith as determined by Henry Tudor. Oh, and they get to accept the new heir to the throne, Elizabeth and turn over anything and everything of value in their beloved priory to the crown. For some among the sisters, the choice to leave behind the priory is an easy one as they like their lives far more than anything else. For Ann, Veronica, Christina and

Catherine, the choice is far, far harder and among the four, they vow to protect that which is theirs and what they believe in no matter the cost.

Christina is the aged Prioress of Mount Grace and the most vocal of the four; Veronica is also an aged member of the group and likely the most devout among them; Ann is a feisty bird who is absolutely devout yet also rather worldly despite having been in the priory for years and finally, there is Catherine, the youngest of the group and the one all turn to for healing when the need arises. Though they don't always see eye-to-eye, the women care for one another and want only to be left alone to continue on as they always have, caring for their priory and the people of the village they live in. As we all know, there was no place for the Catholic houses in Henry Tudors' England and the wolves were soon gathering at the door.

Of chief importance, the women of Mount Grace want to protect their beloved altarpiece, a work depicting the Blessed Virgin Mary and her son. Unfortunately, the altarpiece has gone missing and the women have no idea where it has gone to. The missing altarpiece is a grave misstep and as Henry Tudors' men begin to ride into the village the problems mount for the sisters. There is a strange death in the village and a local man is both accused of the death and suspiciously missing, smallpox has come to the village frightening everyone and Catherine's skills are both called upon and called into question. In order to clear her name and that of several others, young Catherine, Ann, and two male companions must journey beyond their small village and embark on an adventure none of them could have ever imagined. Not only is their adventure full of intrigue and answers but it is also a time when Catherine must come to grips with the fact that her way of life, her only life really, is coming to an end and she must make a dreadful decision that may change the entire course of her life.

The Bottom Line: Sarah Kennedy's *The Altarpiece* is a title that I desperately wanted to like far, far more than I did and never once did I consider DNFing this book. However, I found both the characters and the plot problematic. As to the characters: with exception of Ann and Catherine, I found it difficult to care about the characters – it was incredibly difficult to connect to any of them. For example, Christina is stubborn and arrogant to the point that she literally gets herself and many of her sisters killed; the Overton twins are simply repulsive and most of the men with the exception of a few met a well-deserved end. As to the plot: I often found myself feeling as if I were running in circles as well as being lost in repetition - Christina and her complaints being the most repetitious. To be fair, there were a few moments that did surprise and please me but those moments were too few and far between for my liking. I never DNFed this title because I felt at any moment it was going to become the book I hoped and truly felt it could be.

Grady says

Well-researched historical novel that lacks motion

This review is from: *The Altarpiece* (The Cross and the Crown Series) (Hardcover)
There seems to be a growing trend toward serialization of stories: witness the Harry Potter series, the Twilight series, the Fifty Shades of Grey series - to name but a few. It now seems that Sarah Kennedy has set out to make her own serial extravaganza about the 16th century changes in England and while her initial presentation, *THE ALTARPIECE*, is a solidly constructed novel, it pleads tolerance for more of the same.

The premise is a good one: what did the Catholic Church in England do when Henry VIII took the knife to the life line with Rome, creating the Church of England at the expense of essentially devastating the

remnants of Catholicism in his realm? Kennedy creates the character of Catherine Havens, an abandoned child taken in by the prioress of the abbey in a local town in Yorkshire. With the schism of the broken church and Henry's infamous marriages and divorces and beheadings, life for the young bright mistress of healing changes from the desire for living at court to taking the veil. As the pillaging of the churches continues the altarpiece at Mount Grace goes missing the intrigue begins and Catherine and her friend Ann become the focus of investigation - a factor that leads to a blend of conflicts between love for church and longing for corporal love.

Sarah Kennedy is a poet and her eloquence of prose supports that. But poems are concise self-contained works that do not necessarily translate to prose. The story is fine but it is the pacing and the resistance toward forward momentum that a novel needs that is too frequently missing. For a first venture into novel writing it would seem that a single freestanding story would have served Kennedy's foray better than placing a 'Book One of the Cross and the Crimson Series' before her readers.

Grady Harp

Debra Martin says

This book explores the relationship when Henry VIII breaks from Rome to create the Church of England. He demands that all Catholic priests and nuns renounce their ties to the Pope and embrace his new religion. Catherine Havens, a young nun and healer, who lives in a small convent in Mount Grace faces the unimaginable when the King's soldiers come to Mount Grace to turn the nuns out of their abbey and to seize anything of value. The nuns try to hide as many valuables as they can and refuse to open the abbey doors to nobleman Lord Robert Overton and his soldiers when they come to claim their spoils.

Catherine is torn. She's been at the abbey since infancy when Cristina took her in and raised her, but her real passion is the healing arts. When she nurses Robert's brother with the pox back to health, her loyalties and faith are severely tested. The story explores her struggle between her growing feelings for William and her loyalty to the prioress and her vows. The book is well researched and a host of secondary characters immerses the reader in what life was like in 1535 England. I did find the story a little slow in parts, but the character of Catherine is compelling and will keep you turning the pages.

I received the book in exchange for a fair and honest review.

Stephanie Tracy says

Book one of The Cross & the Crown Series, this novel follows Sister Catherine Havens, a nun at Mount Grace Priory, during Reformation England. Her convent is in the process of destruction and overtaking by Robert Overton. Involving a mystery surrounding the missing altarpiece (a painting of the Madonna and Child), Catherine and some of her sisters are forced on a journey to discover the truth about the religious upheaval in the country, and her unlikely companion is Robert's brother, the kinder (and handsome) William Overton. The story was well laid out, and I liked the characters. At times, this somewhat dark story was even made a bit humorous, thanks to some witty dialogue. I enjoyed the fact that the novel stayed away from court, too. We never met Henry VIII or Anne Boleyn, though they were referred to several times, as is

expected. We did, however, get to see Katherine of Aragon in her prison of Kimbolton Castle - an angle of her story that I haven't read much about in novels, so I appreciated that. Overall, I found the story interesting. It came with a punch of surprise at the end, and a twist that I didn't see coming. Some romance, some danger, a lot of blood, and a bit of humor - I think this novel is a great addition to any Tudor Enthusiast's library.

Diane Fanning says

I am a Tudor nut. I've read gobs of books set in that period. But, honestly, they all tend to cover the same historical figures. Not, this one. I was intrigued by the idea of a book that explored what happened to the nuns after Henry VIII confiscated the church's property, shutting down the convents, monasteries, etc. That is the subject of this work of historical fiction and I found it fascinating. Sarah Kennedy is an excellent writer and I loved reading this book. I am looking forward to the second book in the series, *City of Ladies* and certainly hope the series will continue after that.

Great Job, Sarah!

Melinda says

Originally posted on The Book Musings

The Altarpiece is the first book in The Cross and the Crown series and plays off in 1535, during the time when King Henry VIII declared war against all religious houses. Mount Grace is a priory in Yorkshire village where Catherine Havens, a young nun, grew up after being abandoned. The priory is under new ownership of a man called Robert Overton, and the nuns are required to abandon their faith and take a vow on the new ways. Catherine, along with her mother Christina (the prioress of Mount Grace), her friend Ann and an elderly nun, Veronica, swears to protect their belongings and faith, no matter what happens.

One evening, Catherine and Ann, finds that their altarpiece has been stolen. A beautiful art work of the virgin mother Mary and her son. They suspect that one of the soldiers have stolen it, however Robert Overton takes the nuns under suspicion. Catherine has a gift... she is a healer and she uses her knowledge to cure Robert's brother, William, when he falls ill with small pox that has fallen upon the village. Her "gift" is also a curse, because she might run the risk of being accused of being a witch. Meanwhile, a strange death occurs in the village and a friend of the man gets accused of the murder, and subsequently also accused of having stolen the altarpiece. Catherine, being a friend of this man's wife, tries to find him to seek for answers and maybe even to find the altarpiece which she believes he has stolen. She does this so that the nuns can be cleared from suspicion.

Although I enjoy reading historical fiction, I have mostly read books that play off during the civil war, so reading about the Tudor period was a first for me. Reading about the destruction and brutality during the abandonment of the Roman church to create the new Church of England under King Henry VIII's reign was interesting. I think the author described the era well, as well as the hopelessness that the nuns felt. I enjoyed Catherine's character the most, because I felt her character showed the most growth. She fell for William Overton and soon questions her believe, ending in her having to decide: her faith or William. I hated the despicable Overton twins and Ann, I find to be quite a feisty young woman; however I had qualms with Christina. She is so set in her ways and so unnecessarily stubborn that I feared something would happen to

her if she does not stop it, and I was right....

I find this novel to be a short, enjoyable tale about faith, struggle and forbidden love during the Tudor period. I would recommend this to anyone who enjoy reading about that time period, or anyone who enjoys historical fiction. It's not a lengthy novel, so it's a quick read!

Kendal says

The Altarpiece is a powerful depiction of a horrible time in England's history. So many men and women were killed or displaced so Henry VIII could produce an heir. His selfishness touched so many people. This story tells the tale of Catherine has to make some very difficult choices in order to live in this new land. Ms. Kennedy captured in a wonderful way on how brutal the soldiers were to the religious houses in England. The soldiers had no respect for any member of the cloth. It was such a sad time and Ms. Kennedy's words really depicted that sadness.

Catherine is a very unique character. She is well-read and highly skilled in medicine of her time. While she lived in her convent, she was safe and protected. Without that protection, she may be considered a witch by people she had helped. I admired Catherine courage and her sense of right and wrong. Her loyalty, however, almost cost her in the end. She truly faces life altering revelations and choices. She is a character that you want to survive and succeed on her own terms.

At the heart of this book is the missing altarpiece and the attempts to find it. It is quite the mystery, but I figured it out pretty quick. There is intrigue and murder throughout. You have villains and heroes. But which is which? I really enjoyed the mystery of the altarpiece.

Ms. Kennedy, also, captured the plight of women during the 16th century. They had so few choices and with Henry VIII taking away the sanctuary of the Church, so many women were left destitute and homeless. It is so sad watching once proud and devout women having to repent against their beliefs and leave their homes. I just can't image a world where there are so few choices.

Overall, The Altarpiece a very good piece of historical fiction. It depicts that time with great honesty and brutality.

Sandie says

The year is 1535, and King Henry's martial issues and his defiance of the Pope and Catholic Church is having far-reaching consequences for his people. As he sets himself up to be the religious power, he decides to break the settings of the Catholic Church and orders the nunneries and monasteries to be closed; their inhabitants required to renounce the vows they made before God to now shift their allegiance to the King.

The Altarpiece tells the story of one such convent. The nuns are faced with soldiers in their holy house. All the treasures that were used to honor God in their ceremonies are now forfeit, either going to the Court or to the local landowner who will receive the land. Most of the nuns are frightened enough to take the renunciation oath and be turned out to find work as servants or even to marry if a man will have them. Others

take to the roads, begging for their food. Four nuns refuse the oath and attempt to salvage part of the treasures given to them to watch over.

Tensions grow higher as the soldiers demand the nuns comply. The village folk, who revered the nuns, now curse them and accuse them of witchcraft, blaming them for bringing the soldiers to their village. An epidemic of smallpox erupts, killing some and laying others low. The nuns are the ones with medical knowledge, especially the young nun Catherine. While asking for her services, the locals and the law also accuse her of using witchcraft to heal. Then several individuals die of what looks like poison. How will this all be resolved?

Sarah Kennedy has written a well-researched history of this turbulent time when vows were broken and allies became enemies overnight. The reader is taken to a time when nothing is sure and anyone or anything could mean death and destruction. This book is recommended for historical fiction readers.

Sheila says

Mysteries lie at the heart of this novel and blend and weave throughout the tale of a missing altarpiece. Mysteries of faith are set against the longings of a woman's heart. Mysteries of religion and politics take sides in a war against witchcraft with wisdom trapped in the middle. In classic style, this "wisdom" is a woman, Catherine, of unknown parentage, trained in healing, betrayed by the world's rapid changing, and finding herself as she journeys to find the stolen treasure.

Henry VIII has broken with Rome and married a new wife. Lutherans and Papists are equally scorned, and reform is the cry of soldiers who steal and destroy. But the lord of this convent had his eyes on one valuable wooden altarpiece, and when murder follows on from theft, almost everyone could fall under suspicion. Catherine's skills in medicine may heal the lord's sick brother, but will her skills in reading people be enough to find the treasure and keep her safe?

Uncovering past present and future, the Catherine-who-follows becomes a Catherine ready to set out and lead. Meanwhile the reader enters a world of convincing people, authentic relationships, fascinating medical practices, and genuine history. The dissolution of the monasteries is the background for a deeply involving and beautifully revealing historical novel, where the characters genuinely belong to their time, and their natures belong to us all.

Disclaimer: I received a free ecopy of this novel from the publishers.

Kathleen Kelly says

The Altarpiece Henry VIII has broken with Rome to establish the Church of England. He wants(demands) that all priests and nuns forsake the Catholic religion and embrace the new church. Over a period of time, there were a lot of complaints about monastic impropriety and supposedly this new act by Henry VIII will stop that, but it is only to line the pockets of the royalty and new church. Catherine Havens was abandoned on the church doorsteps as a baby and taken in by the nuns at Priory of Mount Grace, becoming the adopted daughter of the prioress. Catherine was one of these nuns forced out of the only home she had ever known. Most of the nuns refused to leave when the men came ordered by the priory's owner, Robert Overton, to take what wasn't nailed down and destroy the monastery itself.

A very valuable Altarpiece goes missing and the nuns are accused of hiding it or they know who stole it.

Catherine is not really committed to being a nun, she would rather heal people and live a quiet life. Robert's brother William becomes ill, along with other people in the region with the pox. Catherine nurses him back to health and at the same time tries to figure out who and why the Alterpiece was stolen or hidden away. Robert is adamant that it is the nuns who are to blame so Catherine along with William and her fellow nun and friend Anne race against time, before the men who were ordered by Robert come back to either get it back. At the same time there are a few mysterious deaths occurring at the monastery and Catherine finds the deaths suspicious.

This is a story that is not often told, what happened to the nuns or priests and where did they go and how did they live after a mostly sequestered life in the monasteries and nunneries. This book gives the reader a glimpse into the decisions that these people had to make. Do they accept the new religion and start new lives outside the church or do they risk danger of imprisonment or death for not complying.

I loved Catherine's character, a young woman who is passionate about what she does and clearly wants to do nothing but help people, even at the risk of her own health. The story also gives us a further look into Henry VII and his more often than not cruel machinations against his own people. This novel is filled with suspense, illicit love and human emotions all put into a historical fiction novel that is a worthy read. I really loved it and am eager to read the next in the series, *City of Ladies*. After that there is the third in the series called *the King's Sisters*. Excited to read both of those. If you love a great historical fiction series that is impeccably researched, this one is for you!
