

historical fiction.

*Phyllis T. Smith*

## 13<sup>th</sup> CENTURY

### THE FRUIT OF HER HANDS

Michelle Cameron, Pocket, 2009, \$25.00/  
C\$32.99, hb, 448pp, 9781439118221

Shira's upbringing is different than other Jewish girls' childhoods in 1224. Her widowed father, the esteemed Rabbi Shmuel ben Solomon and great Talmudic scholar of Falaise, allows his only child, Shira, to study the Talmud in the same manner he teaches his male students. Eventually, the rabbi is convinced to remarry so that Shira has a female influence to curtail her so-called wild behavior and teach her womanly skills. Shira manages to learn household duties while continuing her studies, becoming more learned than the average Jewish man. These skills serve her well when she marries one of her father's students, a man who will build his own reputation as a great scholar. This education and her *b'shert* (loving husband who is her soul mate) will help her cope with the hardships that are to come.

This novel follows Shira's life from childhood through old age, but her narration is more a conduit for the story of Cameron's famous relative, Rabbi Meir ben Baruch of Rothenberg, the Maharam, Shira's husband. Through the fictional character of Shira, Cameron personalizes events like the burning of the Talmud, mock trials intended to legitimize genocide, and the exploitation of the Jewish community's hard-earned wealth. Anti-Semitic thoughts and actions were encouraged by officials, who did everything they could to keep the Christians suspicious of the Jews. Arguments among Jewish scholars added further turmoil.

Finely written, *The Fruit of Her Hands* imparts an impressive amount of historical information in a pleasing fashion that contains romantic elements, demonstrating the author's expertise and passion. A glossary provides definitions for unfamiliar terminology. Readers desiring a realistic look at Jewish life during the Middle Ages will thoroughly enjoy this book.

*Suzanne J. Sprague*

### OUTLAW

Angus Donald, Sphere, 2009, £6.99, pb, 365 pp,  
9780751542080

Retellings of the Robin Hood legend are always interesting. This novel tells the tale from the point of view of the band's minstrel, Alan o' Dale. Here he is called Alan Dale. He is a thief, and in flight from the harsh Norman law of the period, he is forced to join the outlaw band. But Dale has a gift for and a love of music, hence the link with the Alan of legend. All the other familiar figures of the legend are there too: Little John, Will Scarlet and Friar Tuck. But they are demystified and captured upon the page as real people. This applies to Robin also, who is certainly not the Robin Hood of legend. He

is capable of great ruthlessness and violence and rules Sherwood by running some kind of protection racket. Yet the Robin Hood who robs the rich to give to the poor is not entirely absent.

Angus Donald has avoided the trap of going to the other extreme and presenting us with an out-and-out villain who merely robs the rich for his own profit, though he does that too, of course. The Robin Hood of this novel is a complex and believable person, a mixture of both good and bad. The main elements of the legend are still there, but transmuted into a more realistic form. All in all a satisfying read. I was glad to see, too, that this book is the first in a series continuing the story of Alan and his relationship with the legendary outlaw of Sherwood.

*Neville Firman*

### THE KINGDOM OF LIGHT

Giulio Leoni, Harvill Secker, 2009, £12.99, pb,  
324pp, 9781846551284

1240, Florence. In this, the second of the Dante mysteries, the poet finds a galley beached by the river Arno; all the crew are dead. The only clues are a damaged, mechanical device, possibly Arabic, and a note containing the words 'The Kingdom of Light', the name of a secret sect devoted to freedom from papal despotism – dangerous with a powerful inquisition around. Later, he's asked to investigate a murder at the Angel Inn. The victim was one of six people staying there. Who are they? Why are they in Florence? Do they have anything to do with the Kingdom of Light and the mysterious galley?

Leoni is good at getting inside the mindset of another age. Pre-Renaissance Florence is a dangerous and squalid city, riven by warring factions, whose superstitious inhabitants believe in miracles. Science, though still regarded with suspicion by the inquisition, is beginning to

open minds.

Unfortunately, the book is something of a chore to read. Too many names begin with B: Brunetto, Bigarelli, Bernardo, Bonatti, Brandano, not to mention Boniface. There are almost as many M's. I frequently had to check the cast list and the translator's notes to work out what was happening. I found the translation self-consciously literary which had a ponderous effect on the prose style. Personally, I agree with George Orwell that the best writing never uses a long word where a short one will do and avoids Latinate words if possible in favour of an everyday English equivalent. Whiteside has phrases like *the obscene exultation of the flesh* (what does *that* mean?) and uses words like *vulpine* instead of *fox-like* or *foxy*. However, I do understand that a book shot through with hidden quotations from Dante's *The Divine Comedy*, is never going to be an easy book to translate.

*Elizabeth Hawksley*

### CHAMBERS OF DEATH

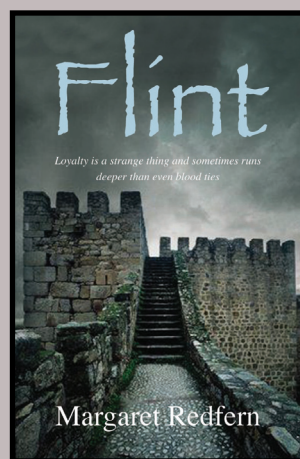
Priscilla Royal, Poisoned Pen Press, 2009,  
\$24.95, hb, 260 pp, 9781590586402

It is 1284, and no one at the Earl of Lincoln's castle is having a happy sex life. Those who aren't gay are having illicit affairs – or trying to – and those who are gay snuggle at night by the kitchen fire and exchange soulful gazes by day. That is, except for Tobye, the groom, who enjoys more "favors" than everyone else combined. But Tobye doesn't really count because he is killed off almost at the start. Ah, the wages of sin!

In this, the sixth of Priscilla Royal's Prioress Eleanor mysteries, personal torments seem to outweigh the elements of a good mystery story. The young prioress castigates herself for her decision to travel during the wintertime, for being a factor in a young novice's consequent illness which forces the party to impose on the

### FLINT

Margaret Redfern, Honno, 2009, £6.99, pb, 195pp, 9781906784041



miniature gem of a novel. The reader will need to concentrate as the novel does flick about in time, but once absorbed into the rhythm, it's a highly rewarding, skilled piece of writing. One for my keeper shelf.

*Susan Hicks*

### EDITORS' CHOICE

Young Will and his brother Ned are called away from their home in East Anglia to King Edward's Welsh wars to dig the foundations for his new castle at Flint, intended as part of his campaign to bring Prince Llewellyn to heel once and for all. Will is the younger of the brothers but takes responsibility for Ned, who is strange and otherworldly. Ned is a mute, a musician, an herbalist and healer, who has been taught his arts by an accomplished Welsh bard, Ieuan ap y Gof – but what is a Welsh bard doing in the heart of the East Anglian fens? As the boys travel into the heart of Wales, they find their answer, but there is danger on all sides and nothing is as it seems.

*Flint* is a book that sits well in both the young adult and adult markets. Its particular strength is the poetry of the language and the way it draws the reader into a stark, beautiful, dangerous mediaeval world, so rounded out and tactile that I believed I was there. It's a wonderful,