

The Queen's Man Short Guide

The Queen's Man by Sharon Kay Penman

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.



Contents

The Queen's Man Short Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Overview.....	3
About the Author.....	4
Setting.....	5
Literary Qualities.....	7
Themes and Characters.....	8
Topics for Discussion.....	10
Ideas for Reports and Papers.....	11
For Further Reference.....	12
Related Titles.....	13
Copyright Information.....	14

Overview

The Queen's Man is a new venture for Penman, in that an invented mystery replaces historical events as the main "story engine." In an angry confrontation with the Bishop of Chester, Justin forces the churchman to admit he is Justin's real father. This harrowing rite of passage leaves the young man no better off. Justin loses his position as a squire in a noble household, and has to figure out what to do with his life now.

Chance provides the answer, In a bizarre string of events, Justin happens upon a fatal assault, and the victim gives him an important letter to take to the Queen. Upon reading it, Queen Eleanor asks Justin to investigate the murder. This search takes him through many levels of Winchester and London society. He ends up working with two undersheriffs, Luke and Jonas. Even after capturing the villains, he almost misses the motive for the attack. Justin loses some of his naivete during his adventures, but this is far from a typical coming-of-age novel.

About the Author

Sharon Kay Penman seems superbly equipped to write novels about the medieval era, but she took several detours before finding her calling. She attended three different colleges, graduating in 1969 with a history major. After teaching for a year at a Catholic school in Hawaii, she returned to the mainland and earned a J.D.

degree from Rutgers University in 1974.

She then worked for four years as a tax and corporate attorney. Penman says that she hated her legal work. She turned back to her original passion, history, and in her spare time began to write a novel about Richard III. After four years' work on it, the 500-page manuscript was stolen from her car.

She was devastated. It took her five years to begin writing again. But she continued to research the topic, and finally an insurance settlement gave her enough money to quit her job and rewrite the novel. It was a big risk, but her friends and family were encouraging, and in 1978 she was able to spend three months in England, visiting the castles and other sites where her story would take place. Upon returning to America, she finished *The Sunne in Splendour*. From that time on, her luck changed for the better.

The novel was accepted by Henry Holt, the first publishing house that saw it, and sold 32,000 copies right away. Penman's success with this book bucked a trend away from long historical novels, and established an audience for her later, also successful, novels.

Penman takes pride in the detail and historical accuracy of her books. She seems to enjoy the research process as much as the actual storytelling, and her novels are often praised as fine exemplars of both.

Setting

The Queen's Man takes place in medieval England, during the unsettled winter of 1192-93. The ship bringing Richard the Lionhearted home from the Third Crusade has been reported wrecked at sea, but news of the King's survival has not yet reached Britain. In his absence his mother, the famous Eleanor of Aquitaine, has been overseeing his kingdom. But his brother John is building his own army and plans to rule. Meanwhile, the Holy Roman Emperor and King Philip of France find it serves their purposes to keep the English wondering about Richard's fate.

These events undergird the novel's background, and also the mystery that Justin, its main character, must solve. Riding away from Winchester in the midst of a blizzard, he stumbles upon a robbery and murder in progress. The victim, a goldsmith named Gervase Fitz Randolph, gives Justin a sealed letter to deliver to Queen Eleanor, then dies.

Justin puts his other, half-formed plans on hold while he carries the letter to London. After he delivers it, the Queen asks the young man to investigate Gervase's death. This task takes up the rest of the book, and requires Justin to travel back and forth, several times, between Winchester and London.

The land and cities of medieval England are brought to life in brief but evocative word pictures. We see the ice-coated tree branches and the paw prints Justin notes along the road out of Winchester, just before the fatal attack. His later investigations take him into a wide cross section of medieval life: to a Benedictine abbey and leper house, the goldsmith's shop, and to a grain mill just outside the town, ominous in the dark of the moon.

In London he goes from Eleanor's court in the Tower to a smithy, and lodgings on crowded but respectable Gracechurch Street. During his detective work he also visits more low-life parts of the city: several gaols (the British spelling for jails); the Southwark stews where prostitutes ply their trade; and Moorfields, a marsh where another body is found.

These scenes are skillfully drawn so that a reader can easily picture them, yet without breaking the medieval point of view of the narrator. For example, upon first entering London, Justin notices that the streets are unpaved. This accounts for the dust and mud, and it also reminds readers that this era indeed has courtyards and other places that are paved—with cobblestones. Another realistic touch is the use of two languages. Justin, who has been educated by monks and in a noble house, and people of "gentle birth" including the sheriffs, speak French as well as English. Ordinary people speak only the latter. The meshing of two languages into what we now know as English, even Middle English, had not been completed at the time of the story.



Penman's immersion in things medieval shines through each scene of this novel. Although a relatively small part of it deals with actual historical events, *The Queen's Man* offers an absorbing vicarious adventure in late tenth-century Britain.



Literary Qualities

Penman first earned her literary reputation with big, intricate novels about British historical figures. Her *The Sunne in Splendour* (1982) is a sympathetic novel about Richard III of England. Other novels followed, centered on British historical figures such as Henry III and King John's daughter Joanna. All of these books were praised by critics for their historical accuracy and level of detail, while still telling a good, absorbing tale of human events and passions.

In this, her first venture into the mystery genre, the historical backdrop of Justin's assignment is used sparingly. Aside from a few early passages on Eleanor's unique life and position, historical details mostly appear in dialogue. The King's disappearance, and John's intentions, are speculated on in high quarters and low. Other events of the time, like the ambiguous end of the Third Crusade itself, are not mentioned. This may reflect a historical reality—these matters were so far from common people's concerns that they did not talk about them. Or perhaps the author omits them because they have no impact on her plot.

Most of the story is told from Justin's perspective, in a limited third-person narrative. Occasionally a passage shifts to another character's point of view. However, except for the two bishops' verbal sparring which opens the book, these are supporting, "friendly" characters. Readers may be shown what is going on in the undersheriff's mind, or the Queen's, but never in the villains'. Many readers would not want to "enter" the murderers' minds anyway; these men are both simplistic and nasty. But since the mystery centers on why the goldsmith was killed, rather than who actually did the deed, keeping the villains at this distance also serves the plot.

The aspect of *The Queen's Man* which seems most problematic is the mystery's solution. True, the author does give a subtle clue just before the attack on Gervase. And murder by mistake does happen, both in life and in mystery fiction. Yet the book builds its suspense upon a false premise—that Gervase was killed for political motives. To learn that it was all a case of mistaken identity—that the man marked to die was merely a haughty noble hated for using loaded dice—comes almost as an anticlimax. The reader may feel, along with Justin, that nothing here makes sense. Perhaps the author meant to convey this message, but it does not appear to be a larger theme of the book.

Historical mystery series have recently become very popular. Their settings range from ancient Egypt and Rome to the Victorian era. The sleuths range from amateurs who stumble onto murders, as in other "cozy" mysteries, to that era's equivalent of the police detective or private eye. One might also note that big historical novels, like Penman's earlier books, are now relatively rare. Mysteries set in other eras, along with historical romances, may well attract those who read for the exotic setting and atmosphere which are a hallmark of straight historical fiction. Such readers may not be as interested in the "whodunit?" aspect as critics assume they are. In any event, Penman's book joins Ellis Peters' *Brother Cadfael* series and Sharan Newman's *Catherine LeVendeur* books as colorful mysteries of medieval life.



Themes and Characters

The Queen's Man's most obvious theme, like that of most mystery fiction, is that murder requires an accounting. Violent death disrupts the social order. To set things right, such events must be investigated, and murderers made to pay for their crime. This almost universal moral law is shown by the involvement of the lawmen Luke and Jonas in the case. Even without the Queen's interest in the matter, it would be their duty to investigate. But because grave matters of state may be involved, London's sheriff gives the investigation extra manpower.

Behind this theme is another thread also common to mysteries: Things are not always what they seem. The importance of this theme is shown in the novel's very first scene, before the murder even occurs. Justin, who has been brought up to believe himself a foundling rescued by Aubrey de Quincy, Bishop of Chester, confronts the bishop. Hugh denies he is Justin's father until the young man asks him to swear it on a cross. Outraged that Aubrey never voluntarily told him, and always dismissed questions about his dead mother, Justin charges away. He loses his squire's position and goes off in search of new employment. The ambush he witnesses along the road leads to the murder investigation and to many more hidden identities and motives.

Some of these are typical "red herrings." For example, conflicts simmer beneath the facade of the murder victim's family, conflicts which might give several relatives motives for murder. The goldsmith's daughter Jonet and his journeyman Miles are secret lovers, but Gervase was determined for Jonet to make a "good match" with an old baron. Gervase's son Thomas had quarreled with him over the younger man's determination to join the Benedictine order. His brother Guy just acts nervous, rather than grieving over Gervase's death. And the goldsmith himself is revealed to have had a mistress, Ardith, who is planning to marry the sheriff's sergeant Luke.

In the royal household Justin finds alliances and secrets that are even harder to unravel. He distrusts Prince John from the beginning; Eleanor's lady in waiting Claudine describes him as "the prince of darkness." But Queen Eleanor and her retinue, who are helpful and gracious to Justin, still operate on levels of political intrigue that he does not understand. Near the end of the book, he discovers that Claudine is a spy for John, or perhaps a double agent. Durand, the knight whom Justin thought was tracking him under John's orders, is revealed to be guarding him for the Queen.

Justin, who never had a real family, soon loses his idyllic image of normal family life. The Fitz Randolphins turn out to have bonds of love as well as guilty secrets, and even the Plantagenets have some of both. But Justin is so shocked by having his fantasies punctured that he does not see any of this until very late in the story. Finally, the murder's solution again reflects that "things are not what they seem." Gervase was not killed by a relative, nor because he carried a politically sensitive letter. He died a victim of mistaken identity.



Justin is an intelligent and likeable young man. His early years as an orphan seem to have left few scars beyond a certain naivete about family relationships. However, *The Queen's Man* is first of all a mystery—a plotcentered story—and secondarily a novel of milieu. Justin and the other characters reveal theme through their function in the story, rather than with any unique epiphanies or character development.

The author has a gift for quick character summaries. When Justin meets Ella, Gervase's widow, he squirms: "Hers was a fading, brittle beauty... She seemed both vulnerable and aloof, and he did not know which signal to heed." Through such sketches the characters come to life. But there are many secondary characters rather than a few leading ones; it is occasionally hard for a reader to know which of them needs to be remembered for their later importance.

The two historical figures in the book are very much as tradition and popular history portray them. Eleanor at seventy-one is still every inch a queen. Protective of her son Richard's interests in his absence, gracious to most with whom she deals, she yet shows the wariness about motives and men that has helped her survive. Prince John appears and disappears on his own suspect business. Disadvantaged by being the younger, unglamorous brother, John is capable of generous or charismatic gestures, but even those who follow him do not trust him. At the end of the novel his involvement in outright treachery remains "unproven," but no one around him doubts that he is capable of it.



Topics for Discussion

1. The sheriff of Winchester is preoccupied with other matters. Luke, the undersheriff, could himself be a suspect in Gervase's murder, because of his relationship with the goldsmith's mistress. Would the murder ever have been investigated, let alone solved, if Justin had not been given the letter to deliver to the Queen? 2. Do you think most families are like the Fitz Randolphs, where many members have guilty secrets not visible to the outside world? Or is this an exaggeration to "thicken the plot?" 3. Justin immediately tumbles for Claudine, one of the Queen's ladies. Meanwhile Nell, the innkeeper, nurses him when he is injured, and hides the secret crush she has on him. Is Justin taking advantage of Nell's good nature, and dazzled by Claudine's position close to royalty? Or is he genuinely in love with Claudine? 4. Why is the use of a foreign language a mark of high class or education, even 125 years after the Norman Conquest?

Could a parallel situation exist today, in a country with television and universal schooling? If so, what are some examples?

5. Justin, the sheriffs, and Nell plan their ambush of Gil very carefully. Yet at the last moment Gil gets spooked. He kicks Luke and knifes another man, and he almost escapes. Does someone who lives a life like Gil's develop a sixth sense for danger? Does this near-misfire illustrate how unexpected events can deflect the best of plans? 6. The Church was a powerful institution in medieval life. It does not seem so important to this novel's characters, however. They are preoccupied with daily problems and events in their families or neighborhoods. Do you think this is an accurate picture of ordinary medieval people's lives? 7. Why does Justin at first fail to realize why Queen Eleanor wants Gervase's murder solved? 8. Did the real reason for the murder come as a surprise to you? A disappointment? Could you have foreseen it? 9. Was Justin's era a more cruel and lawless time than our own? Give reasons for your answer. 10. What does Justin learn from Luke and Jonas about solving crimes?



Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How might Justin support himself if he were not working for the Queen? Give several possibilities, and discuss the drawbacks of each. 2. King Richard's absence from his realm forms the background of many stories, including the adventures of Robin Hood, and Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820). Read another book with this setting. Compare and contrast its picture of English society, the monarchy, and law enforcement with that in *The Queen's Man*.

3. Draw a map of Gracechurch Street, showing the smithy, Nell's inn, Gunter's cottage where Justin stays, and other features. How would you describe the neighborhood to a traveler? 4. Some of this era's methods of questioning and punishing criminals were very harsh. Others seem irrational to us. Yet suspects also had some rights and choices which no longer exist. (Hint: two of these are shown in the book's sequel *Cruel as the Grave*.) Write a report about the punishments and defenses that were used. 5. Queen Eleanor says, of Claudine's spying for John, that it does not do much harm, and that she only does it for the adventure. Do you agree? Is Claudine attracted to John as well as to Justin? Try showing your answers through one of the characters' eyes: a scene that is not in the novel; a letter from Queen Eleanor; an entry in Claudine's diary. 6. Can you imagine an adventure similar to Justin's happening to a young person in today's world? If not, why not? If so, explain how this could happen and what matters of state the mystery might involve. 7. There were many orphans and other children without families in the Middle Ages. Those who survived were fostered by village women, or raised in monasteries and convents. How do these practices compare with our systems of adoption and paid foster parents?

8. Before the novel's opening, Justin had served as a squire in Lord Fitz Alan's household. The normal "promotion" from such a position was to become a knight. Do you think Justin will ever get that chance? Why or why not? 9. Even in the medieval era, cities like London had crime, traffic jams, and pollution. Do you think city life has become better or worse? Or, on balance, does it have about the same number of aggravations and rewards? Write an essay, using examples from the novel to support your position. 10. Nell is a single parent who makes her living as an innkeeper. Justin at first thinks this is hazardous work for a petite, friendly young woman. What are some ways that Nell protects herself, her daughter, and her business?

For Further Reference

Connally, Molly. *School Library Journal* 43 (March 1997): 216. A brief review and plot summary of *The Queen's Man*, with emphasis on its appeal to young adult readers.

Melton, Emily. *Booklist* 93 (November 1, 1996): 483. Short, positive review describing the novel as masterfully told, with authentic period details, fine characters, and a fast-paced plot.

Rhodes, Judith. "Penman, Sharon (Kay)." In *Twentieth Century Romance and Historical Writers*. Third edition. Detroit: St. James Press/Gale Research, 1994. Although this reference book entry is primarily about Penman's first three novels, it also explains how she handles conflicts between historical facts and the needs of fiction.

Steinberg, Sybil S. "PW Interviews Sharon Kay Penman." *Publishers Weekly* 228 (August 16, 1985): 72-73. This interview-based article is the most accessible source of information about the author's life and career.

Related Titles

Cruel as the Grave (1998) is a second mystery novel by Penman, set a few weeks after the end of *The Queen's Man*. In it, Justin seeks to solve the murder of a young woman, again aided by Luke and Jonas.

Copyright Information

Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor
Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design
Amanda Mott

Cover Art is "Pierrot," 1947, by William Baziotès Oil on Canvas, 42 1/8 x 36 Donated by the Alisa Mellon Bruce Fund, ©, 1996 Reproduced with Permission from the Board of Trustees, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)
ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)
ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

Copyright ©, 1996, by Walton Beacham. All rights to this book are reserved. No part of this work may be used or reproduced in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or in any information or storage and retrieval system, without written permission from the copyright owner, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. For information, write the publisher, Beacham Publishing Corp., P.O. Box 830, Osprey, FL 34229-0830

Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996