

## The Turn of Midnight by Minette Walters

### 4 Stars

Will the promise of freedom for serfs hold against the power of the church and the greed of noblemen?

It is the year 1349 as we see the ravages of the Black Death in England. The cause of the pestilence, introduced in the *The Last Hours*, is yet to be discovered. It has swept the land with such severity that many have been left unburied with fields untilled and settlements deserted. Sheep and cattle wander over the fields untended. As a woman ahead of her time, Lady Anne has saved all in her demesne and continues her role as liege lord of Develish. With her strong belief in education for all men and women, she supports her serfs with care. Alongside her steward and most trusted friend, Thaddeus Thurkell, she develops their knowledge and health. However, notwithstanding their dwindling food supplies, they need to deal with the threats of those who do not believe in freedom for serfs and interpret Lady Anne's progressive thinking as heathen practices and black arts.

The novel unfolds with Lady Anne's midnight visit to Lady Eleanor, Sir Richard's illegitimate daughter. She needs to prompt Eleanor to perform an act that could inflame Eleanor's hatred for her even further. Lady Anne is riddled with guilt and keenly feels her failure as a mother to Eleanor. To hide her pregnancy, Lady Eleanor's vindictive lies and foolish games have driven five boys from the demesne. Thaddeus has taken them as his companions in his quest to find what is beyond Develish.

The party of six discover much devastation, and they are forced to burn down villages in the hope of containing the pestilence. Along with finding supplies for Develish, Thaddeus and the boys are tasked with finding Lady Eleanor's hidden dowry. When Thaddeus is run off by a pack of dogs the boys find his horse tangled in a rope without its rider, they are forced to follow the trail to Athelhelm. Here their newly acquired skills are put to the test. As the novel progresses they become unrecognisable as the five serf boys that left Develish and become known as Athelstan's men.

To her detriment, Lady Anne has no choice but to re-appoint the duplicitous and antagonistic Frenchman as her steward. His betrayal drives her from Develish in a quest to salvage her plan of freedom for serfs and bondsmen. She will stop at nothing to keep the promise she made to her people and can only hope that her allegiance with a noble will be to her advantage.

Walters writes fluidly, and her depiction of the characters accurately sketches the power wielded over bondsmen by the constrictions of religious beliefs and the rulership of the nobility. As her characters start believing that they can live as free men and women, they are enlightened by the knowledge that religion is not about penance and God's punishment, but about forgiveness and living in celebration of it.

The novel leaves us with several loose ends which suggest that we can expect and look forward to a third in the series.

Ange

Breakaway Reviewers received a copy of the book to review.