

A Canon's Tale

Marilyn A. Schneider

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(416pp)

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A Canon's Tale is a compelling historical novel about a man's attempts to balance his faith with his duty to the church.

In Marilyn A. Schneider's historical novel *A Canon's Tale*, a young man battles his inner demons and urges his church to follow God's message.

In the twelfth century, a time of great upheaval, territorial wars, and false prophets, Arles becomes a political and economic hot spot. Pons is a canon who's serving at the austere Cathedral of Saint-Trophime at the time; he faces constant temptation, but is steadfast in his dedication and faith. He feels as though God has instructed him to renounce all comforts and pursue a monastic's lifestyle on church grounds.

But with the example of other canons around him, who are married, have mistresses, and own personal property, Pons's tasks are challenging to uphold. Meanwhile, traveling prophets preach that the church is too much about greed and material worth, leading to violent outbursts. One prophet is burned alive in front of Pons. He's also beset by temptations of the flesh as he encounters women travelers and others who hope that he can take them to safety.

The narrative is embellished with supporting materials, including footnotes, photographs, paintings, and maps. These are leaned on to contextualize Pons's story within the historical record. The text also takes the time to unwind the slang and language of Pons's contemporaries, while architectural diagrams and recreations of the buildings that Pons worked on are weighty additions that take the story beyond its period. Aged terminology comes in as the story addresses the locations, groups of people, and society Pons knew, sometimes through the stilted interjections of its characters. Indeed, Pons's conversations with others sometimes include distracting, mid-dialogue translations.

At times, the book seems more concerned with history than with its narrative, as when Pons becomes obsessed with a new numbering system; he details the conception and use of the system in a distracting way. But elsewhere, Pons details instances of violence and temptation in an engaging manner, using his personal faith as a lens to understand them. In such moments, he comes across as flawed but captivating. And as the novel follows him through the years, from his service as a canon until his death, it incorporates some intriguing views of the real historical events that may have impacted him.

With a historical epilogue devoted to an all but forgotten canon's legacy, *A Canon's Tale* is an often compelling historical novel about a man's attempts to balance his faith with his duty to the church.

JOHN M. MURRAY (July 5, 2021)

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