

## Balian d'Ibelin: Knight of Jerusalem

**Helena P. Schrader**

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*Set during the Crusades, Balian d'Ibelin follows a heroic knight's efforts to save the kingdom of Jerusalem.*

Helena P. Schrader's riveting historical novel *Balian d'Ibelin* is set during the Crusades and is filled by battles, blood, and faith.

Balian hopes to make his own fortune; his older brother inherited the land and title that what was meant to be his. Rather than living in safety as his brother's constable, he heads to Jerusalem in search of new opportunities. In Jerusalem, in King Amalric's household, he serves as Prince Baldwin's riding master. The prince is a leper; nobody expects him to survive to make it to the throne.

Beginning in 1171, the novel charts Balian's fascinating rise through medieval society. From a landless knight to a king's powerful counselor, he finally becomes the hero of the realm, rallying troops in a battle to save the king. But the world that Balian inhabits is rife with conflict: people are always looking to take advantage of the prince, and Saladin's forces threaten to invade. With conflicts to spare, the exciting story also integrates history well, particularly via its introductory essay and through characters' conversations, as when an archbishop receives pushback for letting an Arab doctor treat the king, and a cleric reveals that the doctor is a Coptic Christian, highlighting the religious complexities of the landscape.

Balian is compelling. His knightly code sets him at odds with the more scheming members of the court. Prince Baldwin also holds interest as he struggles with grief over his illness and because of his hope that he can use his role to create a better world. Balian's love interest complicates, but also adds romance, to the story, while the vast and interesting supporting cast helps to flesh out the time period and setting; they express period prejudices, but are also drawn with nuance. Tracking them is made easier because of the book's index listing key personalities and their relationships, alongside maps and family charts.

Evocative descriptions of the landscape arise, helping to capture castle settings, desert sands, and coastal cities well. Nods to "pomegranate and lemon orchards" that become "vineyards and fields of wheat" stand out. The Crusades themselves are treated with care, with the novel focusing on how powerful European forces connect to the kingdom in Jerusalem, including through fascinating and complicated marital and family alliances that link the two regions. The result is a compelling drama that works its way toward an exciting battle scene that features knights clashing and arrows flying.

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