

Envoy of Jerusalem: Balian d'Ibelin and the Third Crusade

Helena P. Schrader

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Helena P. Schrader's *Envoy of Jerusalem: Balian d'Ibelin and the Third Crusade* is a detailed work of historical fiction that offers insight into the religious politics of the Middle Ages.

The book opens *in media res*, just after Muslims have taken over previously Christian-dominated Jerusalem following a fierce battle. Balian d'Ibelin has been taken captive, along with all of the other Christians living in the city, by Salah ad-Din, Sultan of Egypt and Damascus. The prisoners are given forty days to raise their ransoms. The majority are able to go free, but Balian is full of guilt that he could not help everyone taken prisoner at Jerusalem, knowing most will become slaves. Plans are launched for reclaiming the Holy Land in the name of Christianity.

Faith is the main motivator in the story, but characters are also involved in issues of politics and love. While war is raging, a battle is also being fought to secure Jerusalem's political future through an heir. Notes about the origins of the characters help in fleshing out backstories previous to this novel, but enough information is given in the extensive character descriptions to decipher who's who without further research. Even the most minor character is fully described and the attention to the smallest details is evident in every aspect of the novel.

Though Balian is the main character, his wife commands just as much attention and is a compelling force in the story. A Greek princess, Maria Comnena is everything a queen should be, and her husband's knights follow her command as faithfully as they would Balian's. Balian recognizes her strengths and asks her advice on his political endeavors.

Balian and Maria are a well-rendered power couple, intent on restoring peace to their lands. Maria is both a leader for her people and a mentor for her daughter, Isabella. Isabella is equally well drawn: passionate and a bit naïve, she is shown to have the potential to become as strong as her mother. The many relationships between characters can become confusing, but genealogical charts provided at the beginning are helpful and easy to reference.

Passionate prose brings the fascinating backdrop of the Middle Ages to life, and interest holds throughout. Battle scenes become somewhat tedious, but the political situations behind them are a source of constant fascination. Maps of the region showing what the area looked like in the Middle Ages, the baronies that were involved in the crusade, and what the area looks like now, help in establishing the story's period credibility and display the changes that occurred during the Crusades.

Envoy of Jerusalem is a captivating work of historical fiction that will certainly spark interest in companion volumes.

SARAH KOHOUT (September 6, 2016)

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