

To Live Again: Arelia's Story

Cam O'Keefe

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The shadowy historical novel To Live Again follows a young woman whose spirit survives dark times, enabling her to seek the light.

In Cam O'Keefe's historical novel *To Live Again*, an orphaned teenager struggles to find love and a place to call home in the wake of the Black Death.

Arelia is a young peasant woman who watched, helpless, as her family succumbed to the plague. Now orphaned and about to be married off to a cruel older man, Arelia flees into a nearby forest, carrying only her father's handwritten psalter and an amulet with her as she goes. When an encounter with wolves leaves her with severe injuries, Arelia is rescued by nobles. They recognize the amulet and whisk her off to court. There, Arelia's surprising discoveries plunge her into a strange new world of vicious intrigue and genuine love.

Even through its darkest developments, which include instances of abuse, the novel is absorbing. Through Arelia's story, it comes to seem that hope can thrive, even after tragedies. Arelia, though she is witness to the worst of humanity, continues to read her father's psalter, pray for a place to call home, and long to connect to others. In return, she finds gentle, compassionate people who help to bolster her faith in the future.

The often archetypal cast includes a kind friar, Ambrose, who meets Arelia in the woods and takes her to his monastery, and a narcissistic noblewoman, Marisa, who worries about how Arelia will affect her inheritance. In this medieval setting, people are seen struggling with loss and grief, as well as navigating life during the plague, whose tragedies shape them in different ways: some find purpose; some mature; all speak and think in ways that are natural and engaging.

Moving with speed, the book lines up plot points that Arelia must then meet at a complementary pace. There is little time devoted to developing her world in substantial ways, beyond the people whom she encounters; there are only enough details to expand the drama around her. This involving pace is interrupted midway through, when Arelia is held captive in Marisa's home and is subjected to drugging and exploitation at the hands of nobles; long descriptions of Arelia's haze take over the dramatic section. The story's natural pace resumes after this period, though, rebuilding tension. More involving than her haze are Arelia's conceptualizations of ways to escape her captors—and the fact that she finds solace with others once again, including with sympathetic servants and a gentle soldier.

Set during a medieval plague, the historical novel *To Live Again* follows a young woman whose spirit survives dark times, enabling her to seek the light.

KATERIE PRIOR (February 1, 2022)

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