Mistress of the Art of Death

A chilling, mesmerizing novel that combines the best of modern forensic thrillers with the detail and drama of historical fiction. In medieval Cambridge, England, four children have been murdered. The crimes are immediately blamed on the town's Jewish community, taken as evidence that Jews sacrifice Christian children in blasphemous ceremonies. To save them from the rioting mob, the king places the Cambridge Jews under his protection and hides them in a castle fortress. King Henry I is no friend of the Jews—or anyone, really—but he is invested in their fate. Without the taxes received from Jewish merchants, his treasuries would go bankrupt. Hoping scientific investigation will exonerate the Jews, Henry calls on his cousin, the King of Sicily—whose subjects include the best medical experts in Europe—and asks for his finest master of the art of death, an early version of the medical examiner. The Italian doctor chosen for the task is a young prodigy from the University of Salerno. But her name is Adelia—the king has been sent a mistress of the art of death. Adelia and her companions—Simon, a Jew, and Mansur, a Moor—travel to England to unravel the mystery of the Cambridge murders, which turn out to be the work of a serial killer, most likely one who has been on Crusade with the king. In a backward and superstitious country like England, Adelia must conceal her true identity as a doctor in order to avoid accusations of witchcraft. Along the way, she is assisted by Sir Rowley Picot, one of the king's tax collectors, a man with a personal stake in the investigation. Rowley may be a needed friend, or the fiend for whom they are searching. As Adelia's investigation takes her into Cambridge's shadowy river paths and behind the closed doors of its churches and nunneries, the hunt intensifies and the killer prepares to strike again...

My Personal Review:
In every other book about Henry II that I've read, he's the bad guy. In this book, he's the good guy. And the case that's made for him is convincing. I was not aware that he invented the jury system, yet he did. I was not aware that our concept of Common Law originated with him, but it did. I certainly had no inkling that Jews in twelfth century England, with a single
exception, were not allowed to have their own cemeteries, nor that Henry II was the one who reversed that piece of oppression. Both things are true, as it turns out.

What does all this have to do with a murder mystery whose protagonist is Italys 12th century answer to todays Kay Scarpetta? Its the setting and the premise, thats what!

Adelia, a medical doctor from Salerno, is sent by the King of Sicily to investigate the murders of four children in Cambridge, at King Henrys request. She succeeds in revealing the identities of both of the culprits, one of whom is not much of a surprise and the other one of whom is a devastating shock. [The reviewers who found the plot predictable evidently didnt bother to note that there were two villains, not one. But then they admit to not having read the whole book, dont they!]

King Henry himself, who has been waiting in the wings for most of the story, makes an impactful appearance near the end, and reveals himself to be far more than the rather soft-willed fop portrayed memorably by Peter OToole in the movie Becket. In fact, hes both hard and unambiguous in this incarnation. [And the author reveals on her website that she believes Saint Thomas a Becket to have deserved what he got.]

As I read this fascinating period piece, I was reminded more and more as I went along of my all-time favorite author-- Edith Pargeter, AKA Ellis Peters. The differences are many: Ms. Pargeter is by far the better writer, both in terms of plot and in terms of language and style; the late mistress of historical matter about the 12th century did a lot more, and a lot deeper, research, and the superiority of her knowledge is apparent in her own work, and, by contrast, in this one. BUT, and its a big one, Ariana Franklin comes close to claiming the mantle, as a female Elisha to the greater Elijah of Shrewsbury. She the first author Ive met who can be even mentioned in the same paragraph. And thats saying a lot.

Is Mistress of the Art of Death great literature? No, it is not. But it is highly competent yarn-spinning. And it does one thing that Edith Pargeter never did: it creates a female protagonist worthy of the name.

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:

Mistress of the Art of Death - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!