

A Tense and Surging Affair

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Judith Fox

Scraping through Stone

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ACCORDING TO Umberto Eco, in his essay 'Dreaming of the Middle Ages', there are two kinds of medieval historical fiction. The first seeks 'to gain a better understanding not only of that period but (through it) of our present time, seen as the end result of those remote historical events'. The second uses the Middle Ages merely as a 'pretext', where 'there is no real interest in the historical background; the Middle Ages are taken as a sort of mythological stage on which to place contemporary characters'. Typically, in such novels, 'the fictional characters must move among "real" historical figures who will support their credibility'.

Eco's own *Name of the Rose* exemplifies the first category; Brian Helgeland's recent film, *A Knight's Tale* (with its soundtrack featuring Thin Lizzy, Queen and David Bowie, and its cameo appearances by Chaucer and the Black Prince), exemplifies the second, where the medieval functions simply as colourful background to the exploration of a contemporary or 'timeless' story.

Judith Fox's *Scraping through Stone* fits pretty straightforwardly into this second category, though it does not flaunt its modernity in the manner of *A Knight's Tale*. Richard I's crusade to the Holy Land provides a dramatic backdrop for Fox's New Age 'fable about the mysteries of passion and faith', in which Sibylla and Dominic grow up separately in England and Scotland before their various adventures and desires lead them through Europe to Jerusalem. Fox works through a full suite of scenes recognisable from other 'medieval' novels: the spirited Sibylla, for example, is taught to read the classics by an enlightened cleric, and learns herb lore and moral wisdom from the solitary woman living in the woods (a familiar character in most medievalist fiction). She must escape a dynastically driven marriage to a homosexual aristocrat, however, and so cuts off her hair ('a harvest of sun-ripened barley') and runs away, dressed as a boy, to Paris. There she slips quietly into some classes at the university (improbably conceived as large tutorials in a modern public university), explores the world of prostitution, joins a travelling troupe of circus performers, and becomes a cook's hand

in Richard's entourage before deciding that she cannot 'escape [her] identity' and that it is time to resume her woman's clothes. She becomes lady-in-waiting to Richard's future wife, Berengaria, enabling her to observe both the king and the progress of the Siege of Acre at firsthand, before her narrative intersects with that of Dominic, whose adventures have been similarly action-packed.

The novel seems undecided about its primary genre. It starts as a chronicle, but is happier as a romance, either in the medieval sense of a series of interlaced adventures, or in the modern sense, in which heterosexual love provides the most satisfying closure. The novel certainly ends this way, forgetting its opening nod to the chronicle mode, and closing with a lover's whisper. The inescapably modern message is clear: in finding love, we find ourselves.

The novel's understanding of identity, similarly, is built on a modern model of ego-psychology. 'Only a calm spirit entices the future to reveal the unimagined. I know this but cannot calm the rush of blood that urges me to action. I want to be meditative but am drawn to movement. Did not understand for a very long time that this conflict is central to the design of my identity.' In this way, the novel tracks the personal struggles of its heroine. As a rebellious, resourceful and spirited heroine, Sibylla doesn't fit easily into the twelfth century, but she is remarkably at home in the modern genre of historical fiction.

The writing is resolutely modern, too. Fox is fond of sentences without subjects or principal verbs ('Did not understand for a very long time ...': 'The difficult task of being myself.'). resulting in a staccato style that sits oddly with her love of philosophical or moral aphorisms. 'A siege is a state of mind as much as a real event,' Sibylla tells the startled Berengaria. Worse — though this is less a sign of modernity than of writerly indecision or awkwardness — Fox seems uncertain in her use of narrative tense and perspective (and even grammatical number: 'Here lust and longing is concentrated in too small a space'). In a half-page on Sibylla's escape from her family home, the narrative shifts from dramatic present to pluperfect, to simple past and back again. Metaphors are often strained to breaking-point: 'Dominic's neck clamoured vulnerability ...'; and 'a stranger's desire can lance you each time you turn a corner'. Cumulatively, these effects don't inspire confidence, and the reader is less inclined to grant Fox the benefit of the doubt in the many, many sentences that read like this: 'Respect surged through him, followed immediately by affection, the true force of the wave felt only once it has broken.'

Scraping through Stone comes from a long tradition of historical romance fiction, but it is a mixed writerly inheritance to negotiate, full of contradictions and paradoxes. Fox is not the only writer to founder amongst its deceptively simple appearances.