

'Harlequin,' 'Vagabond,' 'Heretic': The Grail Quest Series by Bernard Cornwell

Review by Jonathan Aird



Bernard Cornwell's Grail Quest series is made up of the titles *Harlequin* (a.k.a.: *The Archer's Tale* in the USA), *Vagabond* and *Heretic* and follows the adventures of an archer, Thomas of Hookton, in the Hundred Years War.

Harlequin starts conventionally enough with a surprise French attack on the coastal village of Hookton which sees most of the population slaughtered – including Thomas's father, the village priest. This acts as a spur to Thomas to choose his future path – he had been destined for the church but had a hankering for a soldiering life. Witnessing the killing of most of the men in the village, and the raping of most of the women, sends him out into the world with a taste for vengeance. He heads for France and joins King Edward I's army. There follows a fairly typical Bernard Cornwell tale of further violence and rapine undertaken alternatively by the French and English armies – thereby showing that there are no men of good motive on either side and that medieval warfare was a desperate, and desperately unpleasant, activity. These events do allow Thomas to show his mettle and with some examples of *dering-do* he quickly gains promotion and, naturally, gathers a few mortal enemies. So far, so as expected – a sort of medieval *Sharpe* starts to emerge – but don't forget this is *The Grail Quest* series, and sure enough a few chapters in the story does go all *Da Vinci Code* on the reader, albeit still within a medieval setting! Fortunately Bernard Cornwell is a far superior author to Dan Brown so this sudden change of direction into almost a medieval-fantasy is not too jarring. Thomas, it turns out, is related to a family that is believed to know the location of the true Grail (and not the one that everyone is aware to be currently on display in Genoa!). The quest to recover it and thereby heal the world of all its pains is laid upon him, a quest that he is somewhat reluctant to accept.

And really it would be very wrong to reveal more of the plot than that – but Thomas's quest is frequently interrupted by minor events such as the battles of Crecy and Neville's Cross (the latter forms the start of *Vagabond*, the second of the novels). And, similarly to *Sharpe*, Thomas of Hookton has an uncanny knack of picking up arch-enemies – no sooner is one

disposed of than another appears, and sometimes he has two or three on the go at once. No-one, it seems, likes an uppity archer!

The books can be grim in places ó ðHarlequinö deals several times with the brutality meted out to civilians after the fall of a town or city following a siege. This is dealt with a little clumsily (for want of a better word) as Thomas is amongst the keenest for ðspoilsö but loses some of the taste when someone he cares for is on the receiving end. This grimness is offset a little in ðVagabondö by some very curious, and somewhat humorous, characters ó Lord Outhwaite for example would not seem out of place at Blandings Castle! There is also a running joke at the expense of Mel Gibson, as a Scottish character is continually asked if it is true that his countrymen paint themselves blue before going into battle.

Across the three books, the story is skilfully unravelled ó although the attentive reader may notice a rather big hint as to where the Grail is to be found quite early on, which does tend to overshadow the rest of the books. However, being a closed trilogy, it is possible for the story to be wrapped up in a satisfactory manner without Thomas then having to participate in every notable event of his part of the Hundred Years War. There are a few loose threads though ó I imagine theyöll be picked up in the novel ð1356ö, which also features Thomas of Hookton, but ðHereticö does see the Grail Quest come to a proper end. It should go without saying that there are three or four battles of various sizes per novel that could be transferred to the tabletop ó as the English are frequently outnumbered they often find themselves in quite a defensive role, which is handy for the solo gamer. Overall ó a good read, and all the better for having a Start, a Middle and an END!