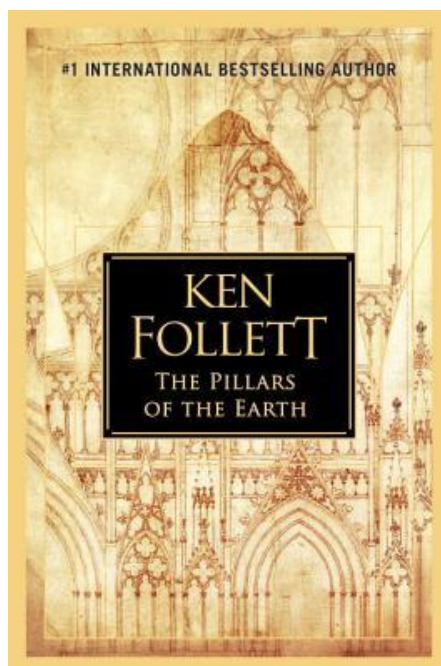




The Pillars of the Earth

Ken Follett

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The Pillars of the Earth

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The Pillars of the Earth Ken Follett

If you liked the Century Trilogy, you'll love the "extraordinary...monumental masterpiece" (*Booklist*) that changed the course of Ken Follett's already phenomenal career.

"Follett risks all and comes out a clear winner," extolled *Publishers Weekly* on the release of *The Pillars of the Earth*. A departure for the bestselling thriller writer, the historical epic stunned readers and critics alike with its ambitious scope and gripping humanity. Today, it stands as a testament to Follett's unassailable command of the written word and to his universal appeal.

The Pillars of the Earth tells the story of Philip, prior of Kingsbridge, a devout and resourceful monk driven to build the greatest Gothic cathedral the world has known...of Tom, the mason who becomes his architect—a man divided in his soul...of the beautiful, elusive Lady Aliena, haunted by a secret shame...and of a struggle between good and evil that will turn church against state, and brother against brother.

A spellbinding epic tale of ambition, anarchy, and absolute power set against the sprawling medieval canvas of twelfth-century England, this is Ken Follett's historical masterpiece.

The Pillars of the Earth Details

Date : Published May 3rd 2016 by Viking (first published October 1989)

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Author : Ken Follett

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From Reader Review The Pillars of the Earth for online ebook

James says

I read this out of order as once I read "World Without End," I was so captivated that I had to go back to read this one. It was good, but I much preferred "World Without End."

Follett creates such a remarkable world full of characters you love and you hate. And to think it takes place over 500 years ago... so many historical adventures, realities... I love the relationship people had with the church -- not so much from a religious perspective, but in how it defined every action and thought in their day. It was a powerful time period.

And when I think about what I would have done if I lived in that time period... not sure I would have survived very long.

The detail woven into these stories is exemplary. That's what makes his novels feel so magical and inviting.

About Me

For those new to me or my reviews... here's the scoop: I read A LOT. I write A LOT. And now I blog A LOT. First the book review goes on Goodreads, and then I send it on over to my WordPress blog at <https://thisismytruthnow.com>, where you'll also find TV & Film reviews, the revealing and introspective 365 Daily Challenge and lots of blogging about places I've visited all over the world. And you can find all my social media profiles to get the details on the who/what/when/where and my pictures. Leave a comment and let me know what you think. Vote in the poll and ratings. Thanks for stopping by. *Note:* All written content is my original creation and copyrighted to me, but the graphics and images were linked from other sites and belong to them. Many thanks to their original creators.

Francine says

I did not hate this book (hate would be too strong a word, and I can't hate it because I applaud the fact that Ken Follett *attempted* to write an epic novel). But I did not like it. I didn't like it from the start; his writing style hit me like a brick, but Jim thoroughly enjoyed the book that I kept trying to convince myself that I ought to give it a chance, hoping it would get better. When I was about 500 pages in, he saw how miserable I was and asked why I didn't just stop reading it, but at that point, I was invested in it; I had spent all that time getting that far, that I needed to finish it, and I couldn't wait to come to the end. I kept counting down: "Only 450 pages left; only 300 to go; last 200 pages...yay, I have 50 pages left!" Those fifty pages were the toughest to get through. By the time I was at the end, I thought it was a wasted effort - both on his part *and* mine.

It's so much easier to explicate on what I did not like because there were so many things:

- I loathed the writing style (he vacillated between pages and pages of highly complex architectural discourses to third-grade level simple sentences grouped into short paragraphs). Sometimes it was bearable. Other times, I wanted to pull my hair out. There were times when I felt the only time he came alive as an author was when he was discussing architecture, but these parts were so didactic in nature that it couldn't hold my interest for long periods of time.
- I did not like the author's narrative style. He *had* to tie everything together (causality was so prevalent throughout the text that I wondered how he didn't work in how the killing of a fly affected events 60 years later). Every single storyline was wrapped up - *too* neatly for my liking, in some cases. Everyone was tied to

someone else (it was like playing Six Degrees); every single character had to have a denouement; every little plot twist had to be explained; closure had to be achieved, no matter how preposterous the circumstances, over time and space.

- The characterization was poor. In fact, it was appalling how two-dimensional these characters were. Good people were good. Bad people were loathsome. As time went on, the good were always suffering one thing or another; they were put upon; they were harassed; they were constantly challenged and put to the test like Job (something Follett actually used as a sermon!). The badfolk became more oppressive over time; they were not only detestable, but they had absolutely no redeeming qualities. And to go with a typical medieval stereotype, the good were always excessively beautiful, honorable, intelligent (geniuses or savants, even!) - and if they weren't rich, they would be at the end (I half expected Havelok the Dane and his refrigerator mouth to pop up somewhere, proving once and for all that in the medieval period, to be good was to have the purest light shining out of your mouth each time you opened it). Nevertheless, the bad became uglier, became more despotic, scheming throughout life to get the better of their enemies (the goodfolk). But in the end, good always triumphed over evil; those who could, repented and were forgiven. Those who couldn't, were killed off somehow, because apparently, death is the only way an evil person gets his (or her) dues. And then everyone had a happy ending. I hate happy endings when they're so obviously contrived. And this work was so elaborately, exhaustively, thoroughly contrived. (Maybe it's not too late for me to change my mind and say I *hated* it. *grin*)

- Historically speaking, there was so much left to be desired. Granted, this novel was written two decades ago, and there have been new discoveries about the medieval period since Follett started his research. But he got it all wrong anyhow. His idea of medieval life was so...off, that it hurt my head to continue reading sometimes. I had to pause periodically and rant to Jim about what I currently found off-putting (for example, there weren't many literate people at the time; at the time this novel was set, there was still a distinct divide between England and Wales; reading and writing were two separate skill sets, and people who knew how to read did not necessarily know how to write and vice versa; orality was a prevalent part of storytelling back then and books not so much and yet somehow, he conflated much of both; manuscript writing was either orally dictated or copied tediously by the monks - his concept of a scriptorium was incomplete, defective - and there has been so much written about this that it saddened me; he used modern translations of medieval poetical/verse works and couldn't explain even alliterative verse form effectively - I even wonder if he *knew* what it was; his understanding of the languages of the period - Old English, Middle English, Latin, Norman French, Old French, Middle French, etc. - and what was spoken by the aristocrats vs. the peasants vs. the growing middle classes disgusts me; he showed a lack of understanding of medieval law, medieval rights, the social classes, gender roles, even the tales and legends of the period, in both England and France; priests were quite low on the totem pole, in terms of the religious hierarchy, and were quite disparaged yet somehow, that didn't quite come across in this novel...I could go on and on, but I won't).

And the historical part of the novel I just found lacking. There are enough histories and chronicles, contemporaneously written, of the time, that he did not have to deviate much from history. There is so much written about the period between the death of Henry I through the civil wars between the Empress Matilda and King Stephen, to the time that Henry II ascended the throne (including the martyrdom of Thomas a Beckett), that I don't quite understand how he couldn't have mined the chronicles for better material. I understand that this is why it's called historical *fiction*, and that there will always be some element of fiction interspersed with historical fact. But the fictional aspects usually have to do with surrounding characters and situations that bolster the history. The fiction is not necessarily to the history itself. Many times, when writing historical fiction, the author has to beware the pitfalls of creating a revisionist retelling, interspersing his or her own ideals or beliefs of what should have been to what *was*. If this novel had been marketed as a revisionary narrative, it would have been okay. But it wasn't. I'm just glad that the historical aspect of the novel just served as the background and not the real story. Because then, I probably would've stopped reading.

The premise was a good one and held a lot of promise. It could've been a great historical epic had it been handled by a more assured writer. By someone who was more of a visionary, someone who had the patience

to do exhaustive research or who knew how to craft richly developed characters. It needed an author who understood the epic genre, who knew how to mold the epic, who knew how to keep the narrative going, seamlessly binding time with narration and the human condition, without resorting to stereotypes and grating drama. And most importantly, it needed someone who understood when the story had been told; that while there will always be other stories to tell, that each book has its own natural end, and that these stories may *not* belong in this book.

Ken Follett may be a bestselling author of suspense novels (and even historical fiction such as *Pillars of the Earth* and *World without End*), but he is no writer of epics. Compared to writers of historical fiction such as Edward Rutherford, James Michener, Bernard Cornwell or Margaret George, Ken Follett has a long way to go.

Troy says

Ahem.

"Pillars of the Earth" is a very long book. It's got a lot of soap-opera-like twists and turns - no amnesia, but just about everything else, including mistaken identities, illicit marriages, illicit lack of marriage, illegitimate children, questionable parentage, love triangles, revenge, greed, power, a few murders, rape, witches, politics, knights, swords and horsies. OK, that last bit is not so soap-opera-like. There's also lots and lots of architecture. And it's a very long book.

Main story follows a single family of stone masons for (roughly) three generations, and the extended families associated with re-marrying, etc. Around this family revolves an aspiring monk/prior, a powerful but morally questionable bishop, a ruthless Earl (title, not name), and several kings. The thing is, even with all the re-marrying and such, there are so many evolving inter-relationships between these main characters as the struggle for political power unfolds, and of course everybody grows up, has children, etc - that EVERYTHING seems to happen to this small group of people. And just when you think things have settled down for a while, something else happens, or attempts to happen. And these things keep happening for approximately 980 pages.

Along the way, you learn a lot about medieval culture - particularly the role of religion, the political power of a monastery, priory, or diocese - how life is funded, and just how much it sucks to be a serf. There's also quite a bit of focus on the reason for, and the means to, building cathedrals - Follett muses in his Foreword that one of the things he never could understand is why people in such destitute times would have put so much energy into buildings of such scale, and this book addresses that. You also learn a lot about architecture and the evolution of cathedral-building. I can also now tell you the difference between a nave, chancel, transept, cloister, and clerestory. Oh, and probably 7 different words for "horse".

Really though, I very much enjoyed it, despite its very lengthy nature. Very full of words. Long. Not a day went by I didn't read at least 50 pages (note - at that rate, it will still take about 3 weeks to finish). The building is a constant, its a reason to keep the central family of masons from wandering off and having more illicit marriages, and its a reason for the ongoing political power struggles. It's essential, but it's not distracting, and the cathedral is not the focus. The people are. They're engaging, you feel for them, you assign labels (good, evil) you change labels several times (he's pretty self-serving and conniving for a "good" guy), and you constantly wonder just what more can possibly happen to these people. There's also an underlying mystery that keeps you wondering... right up until 100 pages too soon.

My only complaint is this - the big climax occurs, the mystery is revealed, it all comes together - and there are still 100 pages to go. The last part of the wrap-up, the rise and fall, takes a while, has an interesting but

probably unnecessary historically accurate reference to English church vs. king to give the whole novel an air of "this could have really happened in some obscure English medieval village somewhere, I wonder which cathedral this is supposed to be? Can I go see the real thing?" But it loses momentum right at the very end. Loose ends nicely tied up, but it wasn't the gripping page turner it had been in the first 900 pages. By that time, though, you've got so few pages in your right hand you just keep going because the end is in sight.

Jax says

A massive tome with a spine thicker than Arnold Schwarzenegger's forearm, *Pillars* looks intimidating enough to make even the most avid readers wary; its 973 pages are densely packed with unforgiving walls of 8-point text with nary a line break in sight. Before I was more than a hundred pages in, however, it became apparent that length was among the least of this behemoth of a book's problems.

Follett's concept—a medieval, generation-spanning epic built around the construction of a cathedral—is exciting and full of potential (as are the illustrations, which are far too beautiful to serve as bookends to such trash); but the snaillike pacing, nonexistent characterization, and stilted, robotic prose ruin whatever potential the book might have had. Things start off on a sour note as we must bear witness to a painful prologue in which Follett tries to establish some sort of basis for an intersection that we are led to believe is soon to come – only to abandon this plotline for so long that we've forgotten what the point of the book is by the time it comes around again.

Then we fast-forward a decade, ending up in a rolling green valley alongside a totally different cast of characters. Before even a single word of dialog has appeared, Follett has described in exhaustive detail the lives thus far of Tom Builder (guess what his profession is), his moderately pregnant wife, Agnes, and their children, Martha and Alfred. Here we run into one of the most irritating faults of the whole book—a descriptiveness that borders on—and then completely transcends—the excessive. One wonders what on earth Follett's editor was off doing when he should have been cutting *Pillars* down by several hundred pages' worth of unruly tresses and twinkling eyes.

A thorough editor, armed with a hacksaw, could have perhaps fashioned this mammoth mishap into a passable pulp page-turner; but left as is, *Pillars* proves infantile, taxing—and oftentimes just plain disgusting. Fight and torture scenes are pointlessly gratuitous; descriptions of the architecture are historically accurate but impossibly long and boring; attempts to make the solidly one-dimensional characters charming only render them crass, impulsive—and, frankly, kind of gross.

It's all downhill from there—with the exception of plucky prior Phillip, who could have been the novel's saving grace if not for Follett's iron resolution to curdle what little cream rises to the top of this mess. Phillip is smart, tenacious, and intensely likable, and his involvement in Tom's life (being the prior of Kingsbridge Priory, where the cathedral is being built) gives the impression that he'll be a key player for a long while. We are sadly mistaken; Phillip barely has time to settle in to his newly-acquired prior's quarters before he is cast aside like a ragdoll. Oh, sure, he's still *around*—but he does little more than pace hallways, issue stale anecdotes, and wring his hands over his inability to keep Kingsbridge safe after it is attacked again and again and again by the bad guys—who, in typical Follett style, would not have looked out of place twirling their moustaches and cackling maniacally. Waleran Bigod (I kid you not) and William Hamleigh fill their roles of 'cold-hearted evil mastermind' and 'sadist thug', respectively, with menacing glares, cold, unsmiling eyes, and appropriately villainous hubris all around. Follett abandons all pretenses with these two and instead goes for pure shock value, thereby rendering even his silliest characters uniformly unlovable.

This is all well and good (well, truly, not)—but what really had me sputtering with disbelief was the author's warped sense of justice. Does he honestly think that making William fat and gouty by the book's end will bring closure? If anything, I found it a little extreme; Willy and Wally (as I took to calling them) were the only ones who even tried to relieve the suffering for the reader brought on by Tom's (literally) witchy girlfriend (yes, girlfriend) Ellen, her funny-looking son Jack, and his improbable beau Aliena (I couldn't make this stuff up if I tried); the men deserve pats on the back!

For that matter, so does anyone who managed to overcome the temptation to throw this bloated Colossus out the nearest window halfway through. Congratulations. Now how about that sequel?

DeLaina says

I devour books. That is my euphemism for being so OCD that I can't put it down and live my life until I finish it. For shorter books, that's generally not a problem, but for the 974 page Pillars of the Earth...well, let's just say we ran out of food, my children clung to my legs asking for food, and the floors did not get vacuumed for a good five days while I whittled away at this book.

CLIFF HANGER: This book is not a cliff-hanger at the end of every chapter kind of book, which makes it easier to read it in multiple sittings. However, Follett does such a masterful job of character development, that I found myself wanting to know what was going to happen next whether the end of the chapter contained a cliffhanger ending or not.

CHARACTER DEV'T: Each character is so beautifully defined and fleshed out, that they become almost real. I felt that I knew them personally, that I could accurately predict how they would react in different situations. None of them were 100% good or bad, just like in real life. Some priests were holy, others evil; some were rich people with big hearts, others with small minds and evil intentions; some poor farmers were judgmental, w/narrow-minded attitudes, others opened their doors to strangers.

PLOT/PACE: Foreshadowing was a very powerful convention that Follett skillfully weaved in and out of every chapter. It gave subtle hints, but never so overt as to suggest that the reader may be an imbecile. Backstories meander and come to closure at such a nice pace, that it always feels like something is happening and things are being resolved, for better or for worse.

THEMES: My favorite theme was that natural consequences followed the actions of the characters. (I'm still a bit out of sorts after reading the deus ex machina riddled Breaking Dawn, where all the natural consequences of three books worth of actions were completely erased-ugh.) There was a natural ebb and flow of triumph and misfortunes in Pillars of the Earth. Good things happened to bad people and bad things happened to good people, just like in real life. Follett does not try to save his characters from themselves, or from each other, and I enjoyed that very much.

STRONG WOMEN: I absolutely adored the strong women in this book! What a joy to read about Aliena, carving out her own future after her world had been turned upside down! Life knocked her down plenty, but each time, she got up, made a plan, and triumphed eventually. Ellen, and Agnes in her own way, were also strong women.

OVERALL IMPRESSION: As strange as it sounds, with all of the despair and misery that took place, the overarching take home for me, was HOPE. In the face of overwhelming adversity, these characters triumphed. The road was hard and the journey was long, but they CHOSE hope. They CHOSE faith. And in the end, that was all that mattered.

Pillars of the Earth will be on my favorite books list for a very long time.

amelia says

This is seriously one of the worst books I've ever read. The only reason I finished the book is because I cannot put a book down once I start.

The writing is terrible. The plotting may be dramatic, but I had almost zero interest in any of the characters; they seem to exist merely for events to happen to them, like actors in a disaster movie. Beyond that there seemed to be three characters in the book: Bad guy, good guy, and good victimized-yet-able-to -overcome girl.

What got me most was: Ken Follett seemed so proud of his historical research that he mentions every 40 pages, "_____ took out his/her eating knife" Really, they didn't have forks, how is constantly reminding the audience of this fact important to the story? There were other oft repeated throughout the novel as well. This seemed like an attempt to fool the audience into thinking they're immersed in the middle ages, when the rest of the book could have taken place anywhere in time. One fact does not a novel make (unless it's a really clever fact.) The bad characters keeping the amazing building from completion felt like a fountainhead rip-off, but that might just be me.

On the positive (?) side the book is an extremely easy read, I might have enjoyed it more were I laying in the sun half drunk on something sweet and rum-filled. Violent sex too if that sort of thing titillates you.

Thank you "Wait Wait" for warning me of Oprah's evil plan, if I can save one person from reading this book my work will done.

Emily May says

"The most expensive part of building is the mistakes."

Look, it's difficult to explain exactly why I liked this book. Seriously, if you take a look at the blurb, note the **973 pages**, and the fact it's a very long story about building a cathedral in Medieval England, you might think I've been smoking something. But for me - and I'm assuming for a large number of other readers - it was **so damn compelling**.

I'm going to get the crap out of the way first - if you are sensitive to scenes of rape, **DO NOT READ THIS BOOK**. Medieval England is a shitfest of misogyny, violence, accusations of witchcraft and, yes, rape. One of the scenes is especially disturbing and graphic; I actually had to take a break from the book after reading it.

I should say that it is not portrayed as a positive, or even a normal, thing. Scenes of rape and brutal violence in the book largely serve to make us despise William Hamleigh with a ferocious passion. It turns out that a deep, seething hatred can really keep you turning pages, waiting for that bastard to get what he rightly deserves.

Anyway, yes, the main plot is about the building of the fictional Kingsbridge cathedral. But, really, it is

about all the characters that come into contact with Kingsbridge, its cathedral, and Prior Philip - their loves, desires, ambitions, conflicts and heartbreaks. I was pulled in from the very dramatic prologue when a young woman arrives at a hanging and curses the three men who guaranteed her beloved's execution.

There are love stories in here, as well as tales of ruthless ambition, and betrayal. Follett has created some incredible and unforgettable characters: Tom Builder, Philip, Ellen, Jack, Aliena, and Waleran Bigod. And, of course, that snivelling stain on humanity that is William Hamleigh.

I haven't read any of Follett's other work, but it is not surprising to hear he was a thriller writer before beginning *The Pillars of the Earth*. He has carried that with him into this story. Just when everything seems to be going right, some catastrophe happens to throw a spanner in the works. Just when it looks like Philip is going to succeed, some more shit happens. But it was an effective way to keep me looking over my shoulder.

It's a strange book because it's a bloody, heart-pounding page-turner wrapped up in a 900-page, serious-looking, cathedral-building package. Strange, and yet I find myself wanting more. I guess I'll have to read *World Without End*.

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Matthew says

7.2 MILLION STARS!

Did I just read one of the most amazing books I have ever read? Yes, yes I did!

I cannot say enough about this book, the story, the writing, the characters, etc. etc. etc. Everything is perfect!

If someone had said to me, "Here is a 1000 page book about the building of a cathedral 1000 years ago in England" I probably would have fallen asleep before the end of their sentence. But, do not judge a book by its description – it is a 1000 page book about the building of a cathedral, but Follett does an amazing job of crafting a historical fiction story around it that will keep you engaged from page one until the very end.

With 1000 pages, there has to be filler, right? There is not! Every sentence, every word – all of it adds to the story. And, events on page 25 may have ramifications on the events of page 825. How the author kept the storyline together, intertwined, and fully applicable throughout is amazing. I picture him referencing a very complicated flowchart covering his entire wall while writing this book. Sounds confusing – it is not! Despite the intricacies, it was very easy to follow.

Do you love to hate evil characters and feel passionate emotions for the ones you love? READ THIS! I don't think I have ever wanted to reach into a book more and strangle a character than I did with this book. Then, I found myself audibly cheering and groaning as the relationships of my favorite characters developed, succeeded, and sometimes failed. I was emotionally spent loving and hating these characters – and it might be the most I have ever been emotionally invested in characters in a long time (if ever).

I cannot say that this book will be for everyone, but it is worth giving it a try. Especially if you like any of the following:

- Historical Fiction
- British Fiction

- Stories about church vs government
- Knights, monks, kings, and other medieval dramatis personae
- Character studies

This comes with a warning, though: I know I have some book friends who do not like violent depictions of sex. If that is a problem for you, either go into this story being aware that you will be uncomfortable, or steer away from it completely.

StoryTellerShannon says

A tapestry of medieval cathedrals centered around an epic drama and some would term it melodrama but that's open to debate.

Ken Follet actually wanted to write this book years before it was published. But his agent told him to build up his base of fans by writing several more thrillers. His EYE OF THE NEEDLE pushed him up to the best seller list.

At a later point, after writing those novels and studying medieval cathedral architecture, Follet got to write his 900 page novel centering around the British dispute of the crown between Queen Maude and King Stephen; these were the contestants who preceded Henry II, who is best known for his colorful History with Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard the Lion Hearted and the gray King John.

Story centers around several commoner types, with a few exceptions, whose lives intertwine in the eventual struggle to build a glorious cathedral. Without revealing too much and generalizing this story has: lurid scenes of lust, violence, intrigue, political disputes, wars, loves gained, loves lost, main characters dying, a child abandoned at birth and much more. And, to enthusiasts of History, it even teaches readers of the period.

Highly advised reading, even if the dialogue is a bit informal and the structure sometimes isn't as focused as it could be. If those two points don't bother you, this is a great book.

And, for those too lazy to read the novel, there's now a miniseries.

STORY/PLOTTING: A minus; CHARACTERS/DIALOGUE: A minus to A; SETTING/EPIC SCOPE: A minus; HISTORICAL FLAVOR/ACCURACIES: B plus to A minus; OVERALL GRADE: A minus; WHEN READ: 2006 (second reading)

Misfit says

I know I'm going to be in the minority here, but this is truly one of the worst books I have ever read. I came so close to throwing the book across the room on several occasions, and ended up skipping through many pages just to get to the final and not too surprising finish.

The characters were flat and lifeless and seemed to have been transplanted from the 20th century into medieval England. The book was rife with unnecessary profanity that in no way enhanced the storyline and obscene gratuitous sex (I mean how many times did William have to rape someone to prove that he was a really really bad guy?). I noticed that at least one other reviewer commented that this book was required reading in his child's school, which if you are a parent I would recommend you take a good look at this book and perhaps take issue with your school district. As an adult I was shocked at the language and violence in this book, and find it totally inappropriate for a child and/or young adult.

I also noticed comments about the historical accuracy and research that must have been involved in writing this book. If that is so, it must only be in regards to the building of the cathedral and the civil war between Stephen and Maud. As for the rest, I must disagree, I have read many well written and researched books of medieval times (thank you Sharon Kay Penman and Elizabeth Chadwick for such awesome reads), and I was infuriated on numerous discrepancies in this book. Examples and anyone may correct me if I'm mistaken as I am not a history major:

- * Aliena is frequently described as having long, curling loose flowing hair. Women in those days wore their hair braided and covered, it being quite scandalous for any man other than her husband or lover to see it loose.
- * After the attack on the castle, and the imprisonment of their father Aliena and Richard are allowed to live alone in the castle with only the steward? I doubt that the king would punish the children so for the sins of their fathers, and most likely would have been made wards of the king until they reached their majority. This was most desirable as the king could then skim the proceeds off the estates and funnel them to the crown's use. Sometimes a king would give ward ship to another party as a reward for service, etc.
- * Young boys of the noble class were typically sent to another noble household to be raised and educated, first as squires and then trained in that household as a knight. What on earth was a teenaged Richard doing living at home?
- * Much was made of William's warhorse. These were formidable beasts that were not easily handled by strangers. Yet Aliena and Richard were able to not only saddle the warhorse, but to get right on and ride it? I don't think so.
- * The English nobility of that period were Norman French and did not speak the language of the peasant class. So how did Aliena manage to not only communicate with them, but could set up a successful business in that atmosphere?

I could go on with more examples if I had remembered to take notes, but there were many similar instances to this throughout the book. All I can say is that if you want to read a very well written and researched book on this period, please see Sharon Kay Penman's *When Christ and His Saints Slept* and *Time and Chance* (Ballantine Reader's Circle). JMO.

Bookdragon Sean says

This book was so completely fantastic that I almost forgot the outside world existed when I was reading it. I've never been so emotionally invested in a story, as I was with this. It's a rare book that does this to me. I think it's because it follows the characters through such a large proportion of their lives, resulting in a large amount of intimacy and investment with them. Indeed, this novel spans a massive period of forty years and

has 1000+ pages; this is no light reading; it is deep, emotive and completely brilliant.

The intense story

So much happens within this novel. It's impossible to lay it down in a brief summary; these characters, quite literally, go through hell. Such is the life of commoners in the period. They are good folk, and are just trying to erect a church for the betterment of their town. However, the corruptness of the local nobility, and the church hierarchy itself, almost prevents them from achieving their aim. Prior Phillip and Jack the Builder are forced to seek out the aid from their monarch, but because of the turmoil of the civil war, this monarch keeps changing. They have a choice of two royal courts to appeal to. Both are convinced they have the legitimate claim to England's throne. Picking the wrong side would lead to the ultimate ruination of a folk that simply want to live in peace, and celebrate God's glory on earth.

Well, this is the mere surface level of the plot. This book is so much beyond it. It is a story of betrayal and seduction; it is a story of love and hardship; it is a story of human nature and the all-encompassing morals that imposes. It is just fantastic in every sense. The characters are real, and their hardships are even realer. These are truly some of the most human characters I've ever read about; these people could have existed.

This is no less true for the villains of the book, William Hamleigh in particular is characterised superbly. For all his ruthless aggression, and sense of entitlement, he's still a coward at heart. He'd never admit it to anyone, but the reader knows of what he is; the reader can see his blackening yellow heart. He is a product of society, and his parent's ruthless ambition. He doesn't deserve sympathy because of this, but the reason why he is the man he is can be seen by looking at his origins. His parents ruined him; he has no restraint; he has nobody to tell him no. So, to his mind, he can get away with anything. He even has a Bishop who will gladly absolve all his sins. He's actions have no consequences; he can murder and rape without feeling the consequences. This is an incredibly dangerous mind-set, and one that almost destroys the protagonists of the book. He's a nasty man.

The strength of the church

Follet also weighs the potential power of the church. I love the way he contrasts godly Prior Phillip with the twisted Bishop Waleran. It shows us two routes the church could take; it shows us two possibilities for God's monument on Earth. Prior Phillip is everything the church should be; he is kind and forgiving; he is benevolent and just: he is a true believer of Christ's teachings. He is in the church for the simple reason that he is a man of faith. Contrastingly, Bishop Waleran is a tyrannical despot. He represents everything the church shouldn't be; he is the personification of its potential evil. The Bishop is vain, greedy and ambitious. In this his will is his own; he is completely self-serving. He abuses his power to meet his own ends and self-aggrandisement. So, he is slightly corrupt. He's only in the church for its political power and rewards. In this, he is not a true believer of his own faith.

By contrasting these two characters Follet demonstrates how the church has the power to do great good and also great evil. This, for me, is quite a strong message to take from the book because it shows us the dividing nature of man, of life, of good and evil; it shows us that all things can be benevolent or terrible. It also hints at redemption. If something is this bad, it can be made into something good once more; it has the potential to be as it should be in the right hands. I do love this story. It shows that if people can come together, to achieve something greater than themselves then humanity is not lost despite the backdrop of war, corruptness and general chaos.

Jack begins the novel as a mute boy with little human socialisation. At the end of the novel he is a respected builder and farther of the town. He is the anchor of Follett's story telling. Everything centres on Jack, and his family history. His narrative questions the restraints the common man lived under in the period; it highlights the injustice the legal system exerted in the time. He cannot marry his love without a written divorce from his horrible step-brother who'd sooner see him live in misery than have the happiness he couldn't achieve. The church doctrine almost prevents him from being a farther to his child. But, he perseveres and overcomes the restrictions of the church, his awful step-brother and the corruptness of society itself. Jack's story is one of human perseverance and fortitude; it is a story of a man who somehow managed to survive a system that was completely against him.

"Nevertheless, the book gave Jack a feeling he had never had before, that the past was like a story, in which one thing led to another, and the world was not a boundless mystery, but a finite thing that could be comprehended. "

This is a phenomenal story, and though that I've got hundreds of books I want to read in my lifetime, and little enough time to read them in, this is a book I will definitely be reading again in the future; it's a story that I simply have to revisit regardless of its vast length. This is a book I just have to read again.

Dan Schwent says

Confession time: This is not a book I would have picked out for myself. First of all, look at the size of this kitten squisher! Second of all, Amanda's hate-filled review of it is one of my favorite reviews on Goodreads. However, it's one of my girlfriend's favorite books and when she suggested I give it a read, I knew what was good for me. Lucky for me, I enjoyed it.

Pillars of the Earth is a multigenerational tale about the construction of a cathedral in a fictitious English town in the 1100s. Many threads are followed for it's nigh-1000 page girth. Tom Builder goes from being an expectant father to a widow to a master builder. Philip becomes a prior and the ruler of Kingsbridge. And lets not forget Jack, Aliena, Richard, Waleran, that bastard William Hamleigh, or any of the many other characters.

Ken Follett was primarily known as a thriller writer before Pillars and it shows. Every time things appear to be going right for the good guys and it looks like the cathedral is back on track, another monkey wrench is thrown into the works. For a book with very little in the way of action, I was enthralled. You can squeeze a lot of plot complications in nearly 1000 pages and Follett jammed in as many as he could. I have to admire the kind of planning it took to write something like this.

As I said before, I always found the size of this thing daunting but I probably shouldn't have. It's a best seller, and best sellers aren't known for being difficult reads. Since Follett is a thriller writer, he tended to keep things to the point for the most part, though I thought he was ignoring Elmore Leonard's rule about not writing the parts people skip a few times.

I don't really want to say much about the plot for fear of spoiling anything. It's a long read but the ending is worth the time it takes to get there.

Parting thoughts (may contain spoilers):

- Tom Builder sure jumped into bed with Ellen pretty quickly. Agnes' body wasn't even cold yet.
- Lots of rape in the 1100's

- Since Kingsbridge is fictitious, does that make Pillars of the Earth historical fantasy?
 - I really hate William Hamleigh.
-

Amanda says

This book was popular? As in a mini-phenomenon? Seriously? Am I being punked? Tell the truth--no one else read the book. It was all an elaborate media/pop culture scheme to trick me into reading this book. Please lie to me about this. I'm not sure I can go on living if I have to believe that this is what my fellow man is reading these days.

My utter disdain for the book comes from many a source:

A) It's 900 pages. Mind you, I'll read 900 pages, even 1,500 pages, if it's amazing. But it has to be a crackerjack of a book. This was not.

B) Here's where this book and I really parted ways: Tom Builder's beloved wife, Agnes, dies in childbirth on the side of the road. Only hours later, Tom's rolling in the leaves with an attractive forest wench in a sex scene so ridiculous I could practically hear the "bow-chicka-wow-wow" music in the background. Poor Agnes' body isn't even cold yet and Tom's getting it on with a woman he had a 15 minute conversation with earlier in the book.

C) It's hard to believe this is medieval England, what with all the modern sensibilities and modern vernacular.

C) It could have been whittled down by about 500 pages if the scenes of people eating had been omitted.

E) The women, oh, the women. Witches or whores or victims of tag team rape.

Here's the basic rundown of the plot:

--Building a church, building a church, building a church . . .
--Oh, crap, a plot complication! We might not be able to build the church.
--Crafty Phillip overcomes the complication.
--Insert licentious sex scene.
--Building a church, building a church, building a church . . .
--Oh, crap, a plot complication! We might not be able to build the church.
--Crafty Phillip overcomes the complication.
--Now insert gratuitous sex scene.

Lather. Rinse. Repeat. For 900 pages.

Cross posted at This Insignificant Cinder

Kay says

How does one review a book that one cannot even describe?

So many times after gushing about how good Pillars was, people ask me, *What's it about?*

And I, swirling in the happy aftermath of a mind so blown away that it's still traveling near the speed of light, struggle to gather what's left of analytical thinking and dumbly blurt, "Um, it's about building this cathedral..."

Way to *not* to sell a book.

I still have trouble really describing Pillars in a way that satisfies. Because while it is about building a cathedral, it's about so much more. It's about love, hate, sacrifice, duty, honor, sorrow, ambition, dreams... It's about cold, hard *life* in the Middle Ages during decades of civil unrest where both good and bad people, downtrodden and as hungry as they are, still dream and compete and seek a sense of accomplishment in their lives.

People like you and me, just some centuries and a culture apart.

And like life, not everything is pleasant.

There are many ups and downs in the novel, so many that you learn to brace yourself for the worst when someone emerges victorious because you know that there will be payback. The characters go through a lot of hardships, and it's pretty darn painful to read. The devastation that Prior Phillip felt when some part of his cathedral project was foiled is just as heartbreaking as the physical violation of Aliena's body.

On the flip side, when the characters felt joy, it was extremely acute. When Tom finally landed a job, I breathed a sigh of relief. When Aliena got revenge on the priest who was supposed to "take care" of her father's money, I felt a ruthless surge of satisfaction. It's like I'm with these characters, that they are real and I am next to them. Their life is not a bucket full of cotton candy. It's bitter, vile, and hard; but it's also sweet, gentle, and satisfying in turn.

Pillars does dramatize the lives of these characters by placing them in a zero sum system; when one gains, the other has to lose. What resulted was an intricate web between the characters, some more attached to one than the other. Each move that one character made had a profound effect on the other. While this may have been contrived for some, I found it fascinating to follow these lives and see how much they crisscross and tangle. The concept that every action has *consequences* is something that is definitely fleshed out in Pillars, which I think is a life lesson that not many people dwell on.

Despite their differences, what every character had in common was that the thread of their lives all intersect at the focal point of this one cathedral. Every significant action in the novel is somehow directly or indirectly connected to the construction of this cathedral.

And my, what a construction project it is to build a cathedral! Ken Follett really studied up on this subject and did a fantastic job depicting the grandeur and openness of cathedrals. Cathedrals really are complicated works of architecture. Even the darker, more foreboding ones of the early middle ages were incredibly expensive and a huge pain to build. The type of "open air" cathedral with flying buttresses and colored glass that so amazed Jack is really a sight to behold, even in modern standards, with their intricacy and careful architectural balancing. Some of Follett's best writing emerges when he describes the smooth arches, the interior of the nave, the structure of the transepts, and the light streaming in through elongated windows that brightened darkened corners, an innovation thought to be structurally impossible in a stone building.

The book does have its faults. Follett's writing was not all that consistent. It was jarring to read Follett's grandiose descriptions of cathedrals and then, on the next page, read about William Hamleigh fantasizing about violating women. The violence was graphic, almost to the point of being gratuitous, but then again everything about Follett's writing was graphic. I personally take no issue with graphic violence, but people who do should take note that the prose of this novel is in-your-face blunt.

My overall impression of the novel is that it is a tour de force of storytelling; a story that weaves together the lives of enemies and friends who are not all completely evil or good, who have their own dreams and ambitions, and who are willing to do dirty yet necessary things to achieve their ends. Some are more good than others, some are almost saintly, and others are steaming piles of doo. But somehow, amazingly, they are all parties in the construction of this one cathedral, and the cathedral connects them in both death and life.

Faults aside, the sheer force of the story compelled me to give this five stars. It's not a perfect novel, and the novel doesn't showcase perfect writing. But it's a *really* good story, something so grand and epic that it can't be adequately captured in just a few sentences.

FIVE SHINY GOLD STARS AND HIGHLY RECOMMENDED!

Jeffrey Keeten says

"He was mesmerized by the challenge of making soft, round shapes out of hard rock. The stone had a will of its own, and if he tried to make it do something it did not want to do, it would fight him, and his chisel would slip, or dig in too deeply, spoiling the shapes. But once he had got to know the lump of rock in front of him he could transform it."

There are so many memorable characters populating this epic novel that I would be hard pressed to even say who is the main character of this novel, but my favorite character is undisputed. His name is Jack, and later as he discovers the name of his father, he begins calling himself Jack Jackson. His mother, Ellen, falls in love with a man named Tom Builder. Jack finds himself nearly starving to death along with Tom's kids, Alfred and Martha, as they trudge across England in search of someone who needs something built. Tom can build anything, but his dream, his most fervent desire, is to build a cathedral.

Jack is bright, unnaturally intelligent in fact, and it isn't Alfred who turns out to be best suited to achieve Tom's dreams (although Alfred is really good at beating the crap out of Jack on a daily basis). It is Jack who travels the world and discovers that cathedrals can soar high into the clouds beyond anything that Tom would have ever believed possible.

The backdrop for all these trials and tribulations that you will experience while reading this novel is the turbulent 12th century England. Henry 1st dies and leaves his daughter Empress Maude on the throne. This is extremely controversial because the nobles do not want a queen. If truth be known, they want a king, but a weak king they can control. Since Maude was born without a penis, this leaves the castle door open for her cousin Stephen, whom fortune has favored with a penis, to snatch the crown from her head and place it on his own. The nobles certainly do not want to work for a woman, but I think the issue that is even bigger is that Maude is very sure of herself, even one might say imperial. As her husband, Geoffrey of Anjou, would quickly find out, she is a handful.

Civil war breaks out, and the people who suffer the most, of course, are the peasants, who just happen to be

in the wrong place at the wrong time. The destabilization of the civil structure of law also allows men like William of Hamleigh to do whatever they want to do and take whatever they want to take. He is an opportunist who switches sides several times in the dispute between Maude and Stephen, depending upon which of the cousins has the wind behind them at the time. William is but a brutish thug, a tool of his demented, greedy mother and then later a weapon of evil for an archbishop named Waleran Bigod (great name, eh?), who wishes to obtain more and more power at the cost of everyone else.

William and Jack become mortal enemies as Jack tries to build a cathedral at Kingsbridge and William tries to destroy the economy of Kingsbridge to bring more wealth to his neighboring town of Shiring. William also has an unnatural lust for Aliena that is one part desire and one part pain. See, unless a woman is crying, bleeding, and feeling anguish, William's wee willie won't work. Here is a typical list of topics with which William and his henchmen like to entertain themselves:

"In the evening they would drink beer and sharpen their blades and tell one another grisly stories about previous triumphs, young men mutilated, old men trampled beneath the hooves of warhorses, girls raped and women sodomized, children beheaded and babies spitted on the points of swords while their mothers screamed in anguish. Then they would attack tomorrow morning, Jack shuddered with fear. But this time we're going to stop them, he thought."

Jack is Aliena, and Aliena is Jack. They are soulmates, and though many disastrous things happen to them to try and keep them apart, I kept hoping that love will conquer all. I may like Jack the best, but I admire Aliena the most. She recovers from a horrendous attack at the hands of William of Hamleigh to become the largest wool merchant in the area. This is remarkable for anyone, but for a woman, a woman who has never had to work a day in her life, and a penniless one at that, to raise herself up to such heights is remarkable. She survives every disaster, even the ones she makes for herself, and finds a way to achieve some semblance of security for herself despite the overwhelming odds.

There is one more character I want to discuss, and that is Prior Philip of Gwynedd. The man who shared the same dream as Tom Builder to have a cathedral rise up from the ashes of the old church at Kingsbridge. *"Jack did not like Philip but he liked working with him. Jack did not warm to professional men of God any more than his mother did. He was embarrassed by Philip's piety; he disliked his single-minded sinlessness; and he mistrusted his tendency to believe that God would take care of anything that he, Philip, could not cope with."*

There are times when I want to give Philip a good shake, but at no time do I question the sincerity of his beliefs. Even when those intent on evil ends are conspiring, even cheating, to obtain an advantage over Philip, he always stays on the high road. He makes enemies in lofty places, including the aforementioned Archbishop Waleran Bigod, who at every turn tries his level best to destroy Philip and his dreams of a cathedral. The church politics are so fascinating and create an extra level of intrigue in the novel that at times overshadow the quest for the throne.

There are a 1000 pages of juicy historical fiction awaiting you if you choose to accept this quest. This is not *War and Peace*, so do not be as afraid of that page count as reason would dictate, as the pages will fly by. I really needed some escapism into a different time and place, and this book served that purpose perfectly. As I was reading it, I kept thinking that this would have been a great choice for that long plane flight to Scotland last year. There are some graphic rape scenes, but they are purposeful to the plot and certainly are a part of a destabilized England at that time. Unfortunately, the very topics that William Hamleigh and his thugs find so amusing are a part of human history going back to the days when we were battering each other with sticks and stones. I would have to use another 1000 words to discuss all the other worthwhile aspects of this book, but I will leave the rest to you to discover on your own.

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