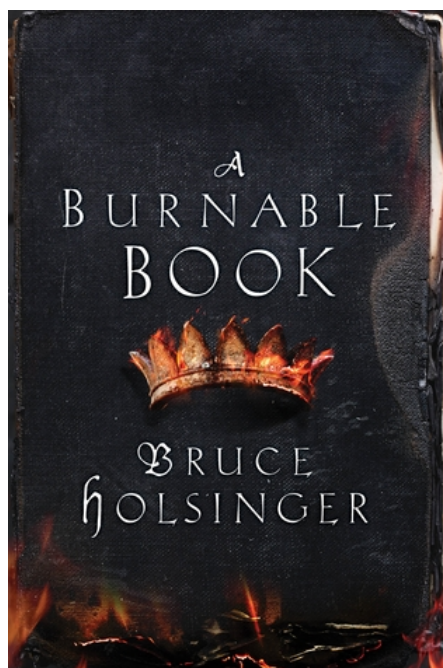




A Burnable Book

Bruce Holsinger

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In Chaucer's London, betrayal, murder, and intrigue swirl around the existence of a prophetic book that foretells the deaths of England's kings

London, 1385. Surrounded by ruthless courtiers—including his powerful uncle, John of Gaunt, and Gaunt's artful mistress, Katherine Swynford—England's young king, Richard II, is in mortal peril. Songs are heard across London—catchy verses said to originate from an ancient book that prophesies the ends of England's kings—and among the book's predictions is Richard's assassination. Only a few powerful men know that the cryptic lines derive from a "burnable book," a seditious work that threatens the stability of the realm. To find the manuscript, wily bureaucrat Geoffrey Chaucer turns to fellow poet John Gower, a professional trader in information with connections high and low.

Gower discovers that the book and incriminating evidence about its author have fallen into the unwitting hands of innocents, who will be drawn into a conspiracy that reaches from the king's court to London's slums and stews—and potentially implicates Gower's own son. As the intrigue deepens, it becomes clear that John Gower, a man with secrets of his own, may hold the key to saving the king, and England itself.

Medieval scholar Bruce Holsinger draws on his vast knowledge of the period to add colorful, authentic detail—on everything from poetry and bookbinding to court intrigues and brothels—to this highly entertaining and brilliantly constructed literary mystery that brings medieval England gloriously to life.

A Burnable Book Details

Date : Published February 18th 2014 by William Morrow & Company

ISBN :

Author : Bruce Holsinger

Format : Kindle Edition 560 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Mystery, Fiction, Medieval, European Literature, British Literature

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From Reader Review A Burnable Book for online ebook

Dawn says

Over the last few years I've really jumped into the historical fiction genre and have managed to read a whole lot them. From classics to living masters to those with mass appeal and those without and quite a few first attempts at fiction. The last applying to this book. And if I hadn't already known that fact, I would never have found out from the quality of the writing or the story. This is a well written book by a man who really loves his subject.

I absolutely appreciate that there are no info dumps, that everything you need to know is incorporated into the story in a believable way. I love the type of book that can really transport you to the time and era, that can make you understand the lives and feelings of the people, how they lived and survived, what it would have been like to live in that part of town or work in a certain trade. I think this story really did that.

I also liked the mystery of the second story, the one in italics. That I didn't quite know what it was about or who it was about but that it revealed itself at just the right moments.

For me it could get a little descriptive. Too many small aspects were explained in too much detail. And the end took too long in my mind, I just wanted to get on with it already.

Some wonderful characters and fascinating history make this a very good read. I am happy to know that at least one more book with John Gower is in the works.

Terri says

Don't burn it! It is pretty decent.

Once I got over my giggle fest at any mention of the road in London called Gropecunt Lane (immature I know, but I can't be a grown up about everything all of the time) I went on to delight in this charming and well written read. I can hardly even believe that it is a debut for that scholastic fellow, Bruce Holsinger, but it is. So believe it I must.

The absolute strength of this book is its characters. Sure, the writing is adept majority of the time and the manner in which the story laid itself out impressed me enough, but I liked the book for its memorable characters most of all.

Then there is the meat of this book. Its reason for existing. The mystery plot.

The mystery plot did its job. Enjoyable, educational and significant enough to keep me coming back for more. However, I would not say the outcomes sneaked up on me. I could see down the line what was coming.

In saying that, I was not all that disappointed by knowing who was up to what and why they were up to it and what they would do with what they had when they wanted to get up to what they were up to... That is going to happen in every mystery. Some readers will guess, some won't. Just so happened that in this book, I guessed.

I must not forget to mention another strength of this book that I overlooked earlier in this review. The description of setting and context. I am a sucker for a well strung bow. And A Burnable Book carried a qualified arsenal. The streets, the politics, but of them all, I think the portrait of life in the slums of London came through sharply. Even now, having finished the book a few weeks gone, that world of the London moll

stays vivid in my mind.

Bruce Holsinger did a fair job in A Burnable Book, to bring this particular era of medieval England to life and I cannot wait for the follow up book to be released.

I get so jaded with sorting wheat from chaff in the genre of historical fiction. When a great debut comes along and I get the scent in my nostrils of even better reads to come, I celebrate them. And therefore I celebrate A Burnable Book. I hope to discover more of these quality debuts.

Alicja says

rating: 4/5

What a fun and thrilling mystery! When I think I know what's going on, the plot twists and conspiracies and motivations were all turned upside down. Over and over again. I still have a few questions which I hope the next one (yup, there is a sequel in the making) will tackle.

Its as exciting as 14th century can get outside a battlefield. We have Chaucer (yup, that writer we all studied in high school) mixed up in *something*, the murder of a French girl, curious maudlyns (prostitutes), lawyers, and even the King. In the middle of these is a mysterious book of prophecies that can bring down the kingdom.

And my favorite character is Elenor/Edgar. It is so great to have an awesome and fully drawn non-cisgender character in a book that isn't specifically centered around LGBT+ identities. She/he is a maudlyn whose accidental involvement in the case gives it a deeper dimension.

It took some time for me to warm up to Gower, his personality takes some time to develop but once we started to find out the personal about his life I just couldn't help but love him too. He is the primary mystery solver (Gower PI?), and its through him that the whole story gets put together (mostly).

This isn't what I typically read (historical mysteries or this historical era) but I am so glad I did. I loved the mystery and the characters and I'm definitely picking up the next one.

Jane says

Actually 2.5. This started out as a 3 or 3.5, but as it progressed I became impatient with it. The premise of a treasonous [or 'burnable'] book, analogous to the prophecies of a Nostradamus, was interesting; gnostic verses are open to multiple interpretations. Each of thirteen prophecies tells of the death of one of England's kings, from William the Conqueror until the present Richard II. Richard II's regicide is predicted in the thirteenth prophecy. The others have already occurred.

The novel is told partially from the perspective of John Gower, a poet, "trader in information", and friend of fellow poet and author Geoffrey Chaucer. Gower wishes to obtain the book, as do others, including a group of prostitutes. The women want to sell it to the man paying the most for it. Everyone wants to find out the identity of the assassin and prevent the king's death on St. Dunstan's Day. The book is wrapped in an embroidered cloth. To what extent is that connected with the book? The story spans England to Italy. After much deceit, political intrigue, treachery, more dead bodies, St. Dunstan's Day dawns, with the procession of

the king and his court to hear mass. Will the assassination be prevented?

For awhile, the first death, the search for the book, discovering the prophecies were written in a coded form, and the meanings were fascinating, but then explanations got tiresome and too arcane for my taste. I was irritated at the switching back and forth from Italian plot to that set in England. I absolutely did not like any of the business with the prostitutes; some of the descriptions were much too earthy for my taste. The characters were all very flat. I thought the story was poorly paced; good beginning, long, boring stretches, then a too rushed conclusion.

Anna says

"The best stories, it seems to me, are those that force us to ask the most difficult questions of ourselves. They want to be mined for these questions, even as they want our soul to be mined for its will, in the way a priest mines it at confession. The poet is asking us to become our own confessors."

Bruce Holsinger, A Burnable Book

Jana says

Simon Vance, will you read me a story?

UPDATE: And what a story!

This worked for me on so many levels: I remember first reading Chaucer in high school and being so surprised at how bawdy and interesting he was. Much like the surprise of finding out that Shakespeare is this way as well. To spend time immersed in Chaucer's medieval England is about as fun as it gets. In real life last October, and in a book last week. I'm sure I missed many of the references, but I knew that I was in very good hands and was ever so pleased when the dots connected.

I quickly became very attached to one particular character. Here's a hint: I won't tell you his/her name. But all of them were fascinating: the narrator John Gower, Chaucer himself, and a cast of characters from highborn to low.

5* for setting/atmosphere, characters & plot. Simon Vance is the perfect voice for the narration and I am sure it added to my enjoyment. Hooray for a sequel in the future! I look forward to meeting the author in Vermont next month.

Kimber says

This is one of those books. The ones that when you flip the last page and contemplate what you just read make you wonder, "How in the name of all that is creative did he come up with that?"

I wasn't sure of my feelings during the first few chapters of A Burnable Book. I was confused. There were so many characters and places and I was still trying to get my mind wrapped around Medieval vernacular and practices. However, I soon found myself unable to put the book down.

I was fascinated by the changing points of view. I don't very often find books that switch from third person

to first person depending on the subject matter of the chapter. Usually multiple view points stick all to one POV. In **A Burnable Book** it was a brilliant way to connect the reader to the main character and yet still allow the reader knowledge of events going on away from the person of John Gower. Maybe the overload of information - places, people, events - at the beginning of the novel are to make the reader really feel the confusion and sense of unknown that Gower felt when set upon his quest by his best friend Chaucer? If so, it worked. The more that Gower discovered about the mysterious missing book at the centre of the plot, the more I, as the reader, wanted to know the rest. As soon as I thought I had figured out such things as Princes of Plums, long castles, thistles, swords, fawns and hawks, I would turn another page and be proven wrong. This narrative weaves among kings and commoners, mercenaries and maudlyns, bishops, bawds, and butchers, . It twists in one direction while hinting to you, the reader, to look in a completely different way. Right when you think it is the end and all is solved...it isn't...and off you go again. I am definitely looking forward to more from Bruce Holsinger.

Margaret says

I did not warm to the main character of John Gower at all. This could have been extremely detrimental to the book.

However, the book was redeemed from the depths of medieval mediocrity by the transvestite and the whores. Wonderful, well rounded, extremely human characters who made the book a delight to read.

The Prioress was also an excellent character whom I would like to have seen more of.

The plot was a trifle dull and was the much over used device of a missing book that could be greatly damaging to those in power. But the aforementioned whores wove through the plot so well that it was easy to overlook how cliched the plot actually was.

Not so sure, however, that I would want to read another John Gower novel - unless the transvestite, the whores, and the Prioress were also major characters again.

Jeffrey Keeten says

“There is no deception on the part of the woman, where a man bewilders himself: if he deludes his own wits, I can certainly acquit the woman. Whatever man allows his mind to dwell upon the imprint his imagination has foolishly taken of women, is fanning the flames within himself -- and, since the woman knows nothing about it, she is not to blame. For if a man incites himself to drown, and will not restrain himself, it is not the water's fault.”

? John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*

John “Dour” Gower. The great bard himself, William Shakespeare, used Gower as a character in three plays. Pericles, Prince of Tyre, Henry V, and Henry IV Part II .

Geoffrey Chaucer in a moment of romantic lust wrote a series of poems for a young lady. Poets use their best gifts, words, when seducing pretty, nubile women. This book of poems came up missing and though in themselves they are not dangerous, he was writing couplets about the deaths of English kings, when another

couplet about a living king is added the book goes from being an amusing fancy of seduction to treason.

<“At Prince of Plums shall prelate oppose
A faun of three feathers with flaunting of fur,
Long castle will collar and cast out the core,
His reign to fall rain, mors regis to roar.
By bank of a bishop shall butchers abide,
To nest, by God’s name, with knives in hand,
Then springen in service at spiritus sung.
In palace of prelate with pearls all appointed,
By kingmaker’s cunning a king to unking,
A magnate whose majesty mingles with mort.
By Half-ten of Hawks might slender be shown.
On day of Saint Dunstan shall Death have his doom.”

The Prince of Plums of course is Richard II, the young King, untested, vulnerable. The year is 1385.

Chaucer, soon becomes aware of the danger his wooing has placed him in. He has some of the most recognizable handwriting of the realm. He goes to his friend John Gower and asks him to retrieve the book, which has now surfaced in England, but he leaves out a few details regarding the potential inflammatory nature of the material in the book.

Geoffrey Chaucer was still working for the crown at this point as a customs inspector and had just started writing the work that would immortalize him *The Canterbury Tales*.

Gower is more conservative than Chaucer and though they are good friends he can’t help shaking his head over the continued problems his friends poetic libido lands him in.

”You’re remarkably careless with your poetry, Chaucer. And always have been.”

In the 15th century John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer were considered the fathers of English poetry on an equal platform. As the centuries passed Gower’s poetry was looked on as dull and didactic and his reputation suffered leaving Chaucer’s bawdier work reigning supreme over their period. Gower would not be amused.

The book falls into the hands of a maudlyn, and is passed from hand to hand among them because none of them can read. They sense it is worth something. You might be asking yourself what does a maudlyn do?

”Eleanor Rykener grunted, spat, wiped her lips. The friar covered his shriveled knob. Wouldn’t meet her eyes, of course. Franciscans, they never liked to look. He dropped his groats on the straw.” “why thank you, Brother Michael,” She said, her voice a sullen nip. The friar stared coldly at some spot on her neck, then shrugged on his cowl, edged around the old mare, and left the stall.”

Bruce Holsinger mixes in pieces of language that has been long left behind. Swyving is what maudlyn’s do. Skincoin is the pay they receive. They work for the most part in Southwark which resides on the other side of the Thames. One of the whorehouses is called the Bishop’s Prick which is aptly named since the Bishop owns the property. The English language was growing by leaps and bounds in this period and Holsinger took full advantage of some of the juicer words available which adds some much appreciated spice to a

convoluted plot.

Gower starts his investigation with Katherine of Swynford who is the mistress of John of Gaunt Duke of Lancaster. Just a quick note on John of Gaunt. He was worth an estimated \$110 billion dollars making him the richest man of this era and the 16th richest man to ever live. He was a very ambitious man and had designs on the throne of England(just not this time). There is very little that Katherine couldn't find out in the process of servicing his desires. She didn't have to be the richest man in the kingdom. She just had to control the richest man in the kingdom.

Katherine of Swynford, the power was in the palm of her hand nearly every night.

The problem of course is she is a notorious gossip. One must exchange if one is to keep receiving. News spreads quickly and soon more people are searching for this book.

John Gower has to wade his way through assassins, French agents, butchers, prostitutes, figures at court, and ends up risking more than he could ever imagine when Chaucer first approached him about finding a little book. Kings of this era were quick to swing the axe. Even just knowing about such an incendiary book could land a person on the chopping block smelling the stank sweat of the executioner as he prepares to lop off their head.

And how pray tell does Sir John Hawkwood fit into this dastardly plot?

Sir John Hawkwood was an English mercenary who worked for the Pope and for many other factions in Italy. He amassed a fortune in wealth and information.

Bruce Holsinger is a medieval scholar at the University of Virginia and has written an entertaining book of the 14th century using the colorful, historical people of the period.

Ron Charles says

Forget Tom Cruise scaling the Burj Khalifa tower; the hot new super-agent is 14th-century writer Geoffrey Chaucer. Thrill to his daring Middle English rimes! Gasp at his mighty scansion! Here in the pages of Bruce Holsinger's medieval adventure, that randy old poet finally gets the "Mission Impossible" cameo he deserves.

"The Burnable Book" joins a heavy shelf of novels about intrepid literary folk. The popularity of this subgenre — "An Instance of the Fingerpost," "The Shadow of the Wind," "Ex Libris" and many elegant others — isn't surprising. After all, there comes a time in the life of every poorly dressed bookworm — the Post-Walter-Mitty Phase — when it's tiring for us even to fantasize about commanding a Navy hydroplane or saving lives in the ER. "Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages" of a different sort. We reach — carefully, so as not to wake the cat — for a lush bibliomaniac thriller. The cerebral heroes of these novels let us imagine that we might someday save the realm not by flying a helicopter through the English Chunnel, but merely by explicating a particularly knotty metaphor.

Holsinger, a native of Fairfax, Va., takes on the novelist's mantle draped in academic robes. A Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Humanities fellow, he teaches medieval literature at the University of

Virginia. You do not want to challenge the good doctor to a “Canterbury Tales” trivia contest. After a decade of writing monographs such as “Lollard Ekphrasis: Situated Aesthetics and Literary History,” Holsinger seems the last author we’d turn to for exciting skulduggery. But perhaps all those years trying to engage sleepy college students with the details of Ye Olde England have taught Holsinger what the Summoner figured out 600 years ago: Don’t underestimate the value of a good fart joke.

“The Burnable Book” takes place in 1385, when the walled city of London is still finding its footing after the Peasants’ Revolt four years earlier. As the Hundred Years’ War drags on, young Richard II faces myriad threats inside and outside his country. Who knows when fresh blood may flow between the Earl of Oxford and the king’s uncle, John of Gaunt?

But this story scurries along the grimy underbelly of London and its surrounding towns. The complicated gearwork of the city turns through these pages in rich detail, as thousands of men, women and children struggle to scrape together enough coins to avoid starvation. (This was back in the good old days before unemployment insurance ruined everybody’s work ethic.) Butchers and spicerers, gravediggers and smiths, lawyers and friars: Holsinger choreographs the whole teeming economy — slicing, digging, pounding and scribbling away — along with many, many prostitutes servicing everybody from earls to bishops.

The intrigue opens during a dark night on the Moorfields. A cloaked man is beating a young woman for information. Whatever he wants to know, she won’t tell him. She screams out two lines of an allegorical poem just before he finishes her off with a hammer. This doesn’t say much for the efficacy of poetry as a defense against blunt-force trauma, but it gets the novel off to a rousing start.

That grisly death is witnessed by a prostitute who’s hiding nearby, clutching a manuscript wrapped in an embroidered cloth. Over the next several hundred pages, she and her fellow sex workers — maudlyns — struggle to figure out what to do with this book “worth dying for.” They’re an irresistible cast that includes a lucky whore whose “Pretty Woman” fantasy is about to collapse, an outrageous bawd who alternately weeps over her daughters and beats them into service, and an ingenious transvestite who switches identities according to each client’s preference. Slowly, they come to realize they’re holding an ancient book that has correctly prophesied the demise of England’s previous 12 kings. What’s worse, the 13th stanza offers a ghastly description of how Richard II himself will be butchered in just six weeks. Dangerous verse, indeed, at a time when “by statute of Parliament it’s treasonous to compass or even imagine the death of the king.” Soon everybody knows about the existence of this book and wants it, but the trouble with selling such a manuscript is that anyone suspected of having it keeps ending up dead. As the bishop of London has declared, “This is a burnable book.”

Alternate chapters are narrated in the first person by Chaucer’s friend and fellow poet John Gower. Don’t worry if you can’t remember much of his 10,000-line Latin elegy, “Vox Clamantis”; Holsinger is a graceful guide to the 14th century, lacing his thriller with just the right seasoning of antique words and all the necessary historical detail without any of the fusty smell of a documentary. Building on the known record but confidently coloring in the lacuna, he depicts Gower in the shadow of grief. His wife has died, and his son has been forced to flee to Italy. While composing moralistic poems, he supports himself in a peculiar occupation: “I have become a trader in information,” he tells us, “a seller of suspicion, a purveyor of foibles and the hidden things of private life.”

Gower’s entanglement with this dangerous tale begins when Chaucer asks him to find the missing book. “This job needs a subterranean man,” Chaucer says, “a man who knows this city like the lines of his knuckles, its secrets and surprises. All those shadowed corners and blind alleyways where you do your nasty work.” Gower knows better than to trust his old friend completely; something about this odd assignment smells worse than the Summoner’s breath. Surely, in his day job as comptroller of the customs for the port of London, Chaucer could track down the manuscript himself. Something else must be going on. “This book could hurt me,” Chaucer acknowledges. “It could cost me my life.”

Oh, for the days when men died for poetry! But Gower can't afford to be romantic about this assignment. Powerful forces — inside and outside the government — are already grasping for these 400 lines of inflammatory doggerel. Whether it's authentic or forged hardly matters; it could be a rallying cry for political or religious revolt, a clue to a double-agent's treachery or a way to falsely implicate a powerful friend of the king. In a perfectly plausible, 14th-century reimagining of our chaotic Web culture, Holsinger demonstrates how this ancient verse slips out of anyone's control, gets replicated like some damning tweet all across England and takes on constantly shifting meanings among different readers — even while more bodies pile up.

This was an age and a culture enamored of complex allegories and hidden meanings, but unfortunately the nested intrigue of Holsinger's plot eventually grows ludicrously byzantine, which begins to sap the novel's action even as the crisis nears. Political rivalry in London shatters into a dozen arcane conflicts involving the intricate interpretation of playing cards and embroidery. Couplets from the errant manuscript are repeated and explicated to soporific effect, as the story sprawls out to include the theological conflict with Wycliffe's followers in Oxford, an elaborate side plot in Italy and several other story lines I struggled to track. Late in this hall of mirrors, Holsinger has Gower say, "I wondered who had come up with the ingenious contrivance," but there can be diminishing returns to even the most ingenious contrivance.

Puzzlemeisters, though, will love this. As will anyone who wants to sink into the sights and sounds of medieval England, a world that rises up here in all its strangeness — and its surprising similarities to our own era. We know Richard II will survive many more years regardless of what some clever couplet means, but as Chaucer's pilgrims proved, the journey can be a lot more fun than the destination.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/enterta...>

Linda Robinson says

The front of this amazing book has a list of characters, a map of London and surrounds, and begob!, a lineage flowchart. I was dismayed that I wouldn't be able to keep up with who's who and where's what. Before I was a third of the way into the book, I was flipping back to the first pages, eager to follow the trail Holsinger was blazing. I've claimed often not to like historical fiction, although Colleen McCullough's Rome series remains a favorite. A Burnable Book is the same sort of delightful experience. Holsinger brings the world of 14th century England to vivid life. He's a Middle Ages historian, so in a real sense, he lives in the world he shares with us. We can hear the barkers at the gates of city buildings (with one particularly rich exchange between hawkers, including Our Lady of Stale Buns.) We live with the clawing greed of political climbers, the cloying odor of the stews, the clamor of Rose Alley, the calamity scheduled for St. Dunstan's Day if our main characters can't successfully sleuth. Holsinger loves the richness of this time in English history, and we can feel that emotion on every page. The players are written alive, grasping to keep breathing from The Court to The Ward of Cheap. An excellent read.

Elizabeth A says

I'd been saving this one, sure that I would love it. And you know what? If it were not for the fact that I listened to the audiobook, superbly narrated by Simon Vance, this would have ended up in my DNF pile.

This is a historical mystery of sorts, set in London, circa 1385. I really liked the gritty atmosphere the author captures, but I was bored with the overall story. I'm not sure I've read Chaucer, or if I did in school, it's lost

to the mists of time. Maybe if I was a Chaucer aficionado this would have worked better for me, but alas I am not. The story starts with a bang - a murder, a book, a mystery - but then seems to plod about trying to find its way home. I absolutely loved the maudlyns and their part in this story, but could have cared less about much of the rest of it. It does pick up a bit towards the last several chapters, but I have little doubt that if I had read this in print form, I would have bailed about 50 pages in. So I'd give it 2.5 stars, and will round up to 3 because I so loved having Simon Vance read me a story again.

Aly Abell says

I just got back from a trip to the fourteenth century, courtesy of *A Burnable Book* by Bruce Holsinger. Set primarily in London at the time of Chaucer (before he wrote *Canterbury Tales*), the book is a historical thriller that will keep you turning the pages.

The main plot centers around a search for the “burnable book” of the title. Said to be written during the reign of William the Conqueror, the seditious book foretells the death of the English monarchs. Only the thirteenth prophecy has not yet been fulfilled – and it is about the current king! At the beginning of the novel, the book in question falls into the hands of Agnes, a maudlyn (prostitute), and Agnes enlists her sister Millicent and a friend (Eleanor Rykener, also known as Edgar) into helping figure out what to do with it. Meanwhile, Geoffrey Chaucer himself has recruited his friend and fellow poet John Gower into helping him find the book. It quickly becomes apparent that Chaucer is not the only one looking for the book, and bit by bit it seems like all the omens leading to King Richard II's death are being fulfilled.

The primary plot is supplemented by a complex web of numerous subplots, including the story of a girl from Spain, the ambitions of the mercenary John Hawkwood, and Rykener's quest to rescue younger brother Gerald from a dangerous guardianship. The characters are well-developed, with believable interactions with each other.

Holsinger gives us some glimpses of the life of royalty and other members of the upper class, but for the most part, the reader is immersed into the earthy lives of the maudlyns and others who struggle to survive in a harsh world. The fourteenth century really comes to life with the rich details of everyday living. Holsinger's masterful use of language provides a definite medieval ambience, with selected Middle English words incorporated into the dialogue, but not so many as to make it difficult for a modern reader to decipher.

Authors of historical fiction have artistic license to alter or embellish some details in the interest of creating a more compelling story, but there is the unwritten “rule” that the threads of history must remain intact if the work is to be called historical fiction rather than, say, historical fantasy or alternate history. When real historical figures are used as characters, they must remain true to the nature of the actual historical person. When not much is known about a historical figure, details may be made up, but the goal should be to try to recreate the person as he or she really may have been. I think Holsinger did a wonderful job in developing the Rykener character, who was a real historical person, but one about whom very little is known. My biggest qualm with the book is some discomfort with the character of John Gower. We know relatively little about Gower's real life, but we do have a reasonably large corpus of surviving work that may provide insight into his nature, as well as some known key details of his life. The characterization of Gower as a combination of a blackmailer and a detective is not entirely convincing relative to what we do know of Gower's actual life. Also, for someone who is supposed to be a devious and skilled snoop, Gower seems to make a lot of blunders and miscalculations.

A Burnable Book is highly recommended to those who enjoy fast-paced thrillers as well to fans of historical fiction.

This review is also available at <http://wyrwizard.blogspot.com/2014/0...>

Sharon says

Two pieces of disclosure to get out at the very beginning: Prof. Holsinger was my instructor for an excellent class entitled "Plagues, Witches and War: The Worlds of Historical Fiction." I also received an advance reader's copy of the book through his publisher.

So, with all of that said: wow, what a ride!

The story starts with the murder of a young woman and the theft of a ancient book that contains accurate prophecies of the deaths of England's kings -- and one about the current monarch, Richard II. Poets John Gower and Geoffrey Chaucer are working on finding the book ... as is half of England's gentry, because the Duke of Lancaster is implicated in the plot.

And who happens to find the book? A whore named Agnes, who witnesses the murder of the young woman. She tells her friend, a transvestite prostitute called Eleanor, about it.

Holsinger uses the devices of the prostitutes (called maudlyns during the period, based on the contemporary pronunciation of Magdalene) to introduce us to the underworld of London and Southwark, then two different towns. Thus, we have something of an "Upstairs, Downstairs" look at the culture of the time through the eyes of characters both high and low.

The mystery unfolds through the missing poetry, and I must admit that I was constantly surprised as facts and red herrings alike were introduced to keep the reader guessing until the very end.

The book is well-researched, with Holsinger providing information on books and primary sources he consulted to create the novel. I highly recommend it for fans of historical mysteries; this is one of the finest I've read.

Samantha says

This is a finely written novel that will pull you in and keep you guessing until the very end. I listened to this on audiobook, so there were a few times that I thought I must be getting close to the end only to be surprised by another plot twist. I am not a great reader of mysteries, so I will not say more than that I was shocked several times.

The cast of characters in this book is large with intricately woven backgrounds. Each time a little connection was made, I was impressed by the author's cleverness. The main character is John Gower, close friend of Geoffrey Chaucer, who also makes several appearances. From transvestite London prostitutes to Italian papal legates, Holsinger ties them together expertly. The reader also gets glimpses of Richard II, John of Gaunt, and Katherine Swynford.

Rich in historical detail and beautifully written, the mystery seems almost second to just dwelling in 14th century daily life. Everything centers around a book of prophecies, "The Book of the Deaths of English

Kings" which John Gower is on a quest to locate. People are dying to get it...or because they have it. But does it really prophesy the death of Richard II?

I would like to read this book again (rather than listen to it) because there was a lot to keep track of with the numerous characters, locations, and plot twists and connections. I feel like I just might have missed a few things. However, listening to it was also enjoyable because the Audible narrator was excellent. Different voices & accents made this book truly come to life, and his voice is so lovely I could listen to him read a dishwasher repair manual. Then there's that gorgeous cover! This is a great book for anyone who enjoys medieval history or mysteries.
