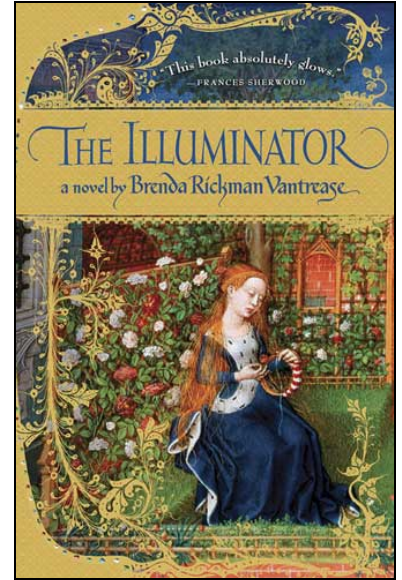


READING GROUP GUIDE

The Illuminator by Brenda Rickman Vantrease



St. Martin's Press
ISBN: 0-312-33191-6 (hardcover)

Introduction to *The Illuminator*

It is England, in the late fourteenth century, a time when the whim of a lord or the pleasure of a bishop can seal nearly anyone's fate. The printing press has yet to be invented. Books, written only in Latin or Norman French, are rare and costly, painstakingly lettered and illuminated with exquisite paintings--- far beyond the reach of ordinary people.

But there are cracks in the old feudal order---and in the absolute power of the Church. Finn is a master illuminator who works not only for the Church but also, in secret, for the heretical Oxford cleric John Wycliffe. Under the nose of the powerful Abbot of Broomholm, Finn illuminates pages for Wycliffe--- an English translation of the Bible, meant to bring the word of God to the masses. And Finn has another secret, one that will lead both himself and his beloved daughter into ever-increasing peril.

Lady Kathryn, the mistress of Blackingham Manor, is a widow who finds herself caught between the King's taxes and the Church's tithes. To protect her sons' inheritance, she strikes a bargain with the abbot---Kathryn will take in the illuminator and his daughter, and gain the monastery's protection. What begins as a hesitant friendship between Finn and Lady Kathryn grows into a passionate alliance that touches off a chain of betrayals, tragedies, and unexpected acts of heroism.

Richly detailed and irresistibly compelling, *The Illuminator* is a glorious novel of love, art, religion, and treachery at an extraordinary turning point in history.

Praise for *The Illuminator*

"A wonderful novel---a tumultuous panorama of Wycliffe's and Chaucer's England, with an absolutely compelling and irresistible heroine. This is historical fiction in the grand epic manner, beautifully felt

and written."

- Max Byrd, author of *Shooting the Sun*

"In her elegant novel, *The Illuminator*, Brenda Rickman Vantrease breathes light into the dark corners of feudal England, laying bare the consequences of political and spiritual oppression, and illuminating the power of both love and the written word to save."

- Charmaine Craig, author of *The Good Men: A Novel of Heresy*

"A very absorbing and masterfully written novel that twines two stories together---a personal one of life on a manor in 1379 and a political one about the undercurrents that led, eventually, to the Reformation. Impressive new talent Brenda Rickman Vantrease has created a cast of characters that stand out as individuals you want to follow."

- Margaret George, author of *The Autobiography of Henry VIII*

"Brenda Rickman Vantrease's *The Illuminator* is one of the most engaging books I've had the pleasure to read in many years. Extraordinary characters of an extraordinary period in history are portrayed with a passion that only an accomplished writer can deliver. . . . This is simply a wonderful book."

- Terry Kay, author of *The Valley of Light*

"A rich and original debut novel. Brenda Rickman Vantrease writes with a strong voice, imaginative scope, and an audacious reach about complex characters during a fascinating historical period."

- Valerie Miner, author of *The Low Road*

"*The Illuminator* is a novel with something for every reader. It has young love, older love, political plot and intrigue, and religious and philosophical conflict presented as grand adventure. . . . Each detail is telling, pitch perfect, important. The relationships are complex, engrossing. Vantrease's feel for time and place is natural. This book absolutely glows."

- Frances Sherwood, author of *The Book of Splendor*

Reading Group Guide Questions

1. Do you think *The Illuminator* is Kathryn's story or Finn's story?
2. How do you regard Kathryn's actions toward Finn? Are they inevitable given her nature and circumstances? On Finn's part, was his choice to marry Rebekka selfless or selfish? Noble or ignoble?
3. Why does Agnes choose to stay with Kathryn?
4. The strict feudal class system exerted great pressure on the lives of the people of the middle ages. To what extent does class consciousness still exert social pressure on the choices we make in the 21st century?
5. Why do you think Julian of Norwich has found a new readership six hundred years after her death? Some have called her *Divine Revelations* feminist in her concept of Jesus as "mother God." Do you agree or disagree with this interpretation?
6. Which of the relationships between the characters is the most nearly perfect model of the *agape* love Julian describes in her concept of Christ as "mother God"?
7. In light of the troubled times in which she lived, what do you think Julian means when she says/writes "all will be well"?
8. How are the characters of Magda and Julian similar? What role does mysticism play in spirituality? Is that role greater during tumultuous periods in history?

9. Do the two necklaces described in the novel figure symbolically in the same way or in different ways?
10. How do you interpret the novel's portrait of organized religion? What do you think accounts for corruption not only in religion but also in other established institutions such as government, capitalist corporations, large philanthropic organizations, etc? Is that corruption inevitable?
11. To what degree is faith a cultural heritage? To what degree intrinsic? Are prejudice and hatred products of cultural heritage or results of human nature? Elaborate with respect to the novel.
12. John Wycliffe has been called the "morning star" of the reformation? What part did his radical notions of theological reform play in the Peasants' Revolt and resulting carnage of 1389? Must the clash of powerful philosophies always lead to bloodshed?
13. What is ironic about Half-Tom's fascination with the epic heroes of history and legend?
14. The novel ends where it begins: Half-Tom meets Finn on the road outside Norwich and hands off another vulnerable child to him. What is the significance of this circular structure? Did you find the ending satisfying?

About the Author

Brenda Rickman Vantrease is a former English teacher and librarian who has traveled extensively in the British Isles. She holds a doctorate in English from Middle Tennessee State University and lives in Nashville, Tennessee. *The Illuminator* is her first novel.