

GRACE NOTE: In Hildegard's Shadow

ISBN 978-1-4620-3123-8

A novel by P. J. Parsons

Book Club Reading Guide

(Spoiler Alert)

Synopsis

To most people it would have seemed like an obscure article in an obscure academic journal. To author P.J. Parsons, it was a challenge. The article called into question the authorship of music attributed to twelfth century mystic Hildegard of Bingen.

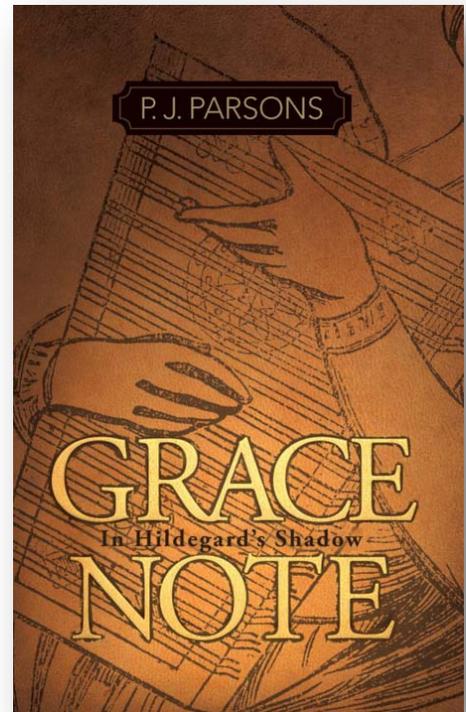
This is the story of two women, Hildegard and her childhood friend Lysanor of Rupertsberg, both ahead of their time in many ways. Hildegard becomes a twenty-first century saint and icon. The other is but a grace note – an embellishment of secondary importance. But their lives intertwine in ways that challenge both of them, taking them into experiences they could never have imagined. And both, in their own ways, have left a legacy to the generations that followed.

This is Lysanor's own story about her life – and the life of her friend, the mystic.

Q & A with Author P.J. Parsons

Is it true that this book was inspired by an article in an academic journal?

Yes. I can't now remember how I came across the article, although I was fascinated by Hildegard of Bingen and her story. There was a resurgence in interest about her in the late 1990's and when I did some digging, I came up with Richard Witts's article that questioned the authorship of the music compositions attributed to her.





You're not always flattering when you portray the historical figure Hildegard of Bingen. Was this intentional?

Hildegard of Bingen, saint, mystic, healer, composer – was a woman who lived in a time where women did not have the opportunity to make decisions for themselves and take leadership roles. As a Benedictine nun, she had many more such opportunities. But as I researched Hildegard, despite the slant taken by many of her biographers, I found that she was not necessarily as they portrayed her. For example, 21st century feminists have claimed her as an early feminist. My research suggested to me that she believed very strongly in the subservience of women to men. The fact that she herself did what we interpret to be extraordinary things doesn't change that.

Do you think that Hildegard fans will like this book?

Yes, in the sense that it is based on significant research from credible historians. Its fictitious nature allows people to consider the possibilities beyond what is known and interpreted by the historical writers.

How much of the book is historical fact and how much is a figment of your imagination?

Many characters in the book were real people – Hildegard herself, Jutta, Richardis, Bishop Otto, Hildegard's assistant in her later years, even Hildegard's brother Drutwin for example – all of whom I've researched and tried to imbue with a certain amount of historical reality. However, if we take Drutwin as an example, there is no historical evidence of what kind of relationship he and his sister ever had. That is fictitious. Lysanor and her family are fictional characters although the plot follows a parallel timeline with real historical events in Hildegard's life and in her time. Other historical details like the issue of female cross-dressing and aspects of the Benedictine rule are based in known fact.

Does this book reflect your own personal views of Hildegard and/or the Catholic Church?

My personal view of Hildegard is certainly reflected in the pages of *Grace Note*. Considering that Hildegard lived a millennium ago, I think it's fair to say that anyone's view of Hildegard is affected by what he or she chooses to read – and I say that deliberately. We often look for material that corroborates what we want to believe. For example, if you see Hildegard as an early feminist, you'll certainly find those who will put her in that category in spite of the fact that there is every reason to believe that she was not a feminist in the true sense of the word as I mentioned earlier. As I said, my reading of her life suggests that she truly believed that women were subordinate to men. Just because she saw herself as 'different' doesn't make her a crusader for women's rights.

As for my own views of the Catholic Church – I was, in fact, raised Roman Catholic. Some of my early education was even in Catholic schools, where I did have nuns as teachers. My views of “dogma-based” religions has changed over the years ; I do think that my evolved and somewhat more skeptical view does have an impact, but I believe that I’ve treated the church with respect in this book.

Lysanor’s story is a bit of a feminist manifesto in a way, don’t you think?

Manifesto might be too strong a word in my view. However, I think that there have been many strong women in history who have gone unnoticed by historians. And I’m talking about historical figures, not fictitious characters like Lysanor. These are women who have defied the conventions of the societies and cultures in which they lived and found creative ways to pursue their gifts and passions. As a fictitious character, Lysanor represents those women of her time. They are the ones who are still in the shadows.

You’re not an historian. Why have you written this book?

I’m not an historian by academic background – neither are many (perhaps most) writers of historical fiction. I’m a writer and a story-teller. I’ve been in love with historical fiction since I first read Anya Seton’s classic book *Green Darkness* many years ago. I’m luckier than many aspiring historical fiction writers, I think, since I do have a facility for documentary research which is a skill that is essential to writing historically-based fiction. I think that today’s readers of historical fiction expect that the story is at least reflecting places and times in real history. I believe that I give that to my readers. In the end, I’ve written this book that follows closely Hildegard of Bingen’s life because I found in her a fascinating historical character and a story with an unanswered question. That’s the way I begin my stories – with the unanswered question. Then I answer it – in my own Way.

Discussion Questions

1. In your view, what is the underlying theme of this book?
2. How did you feel about Lysanor as a person? Did you feel you could be friends with her? Who do you think could play her in a movie version of *GRACE NOTE*?
3. How did you feel about Hildegard?
4. How would you characterize their relationship?
5. How did you feel when Lysanor & Hildegard were experiencing their “death to the world” ceremony?
6. How did you feel about the choices Lysanor made in her life? Did she deal well with the circumstances faced by women in the middle ages?
7. How did you feel about the moral/ethical choices Hildegard made as part of her career?

8. Do you think that Hildegard was a true mystic?
9. Do you think the book reveals any of the author's particular perspective on history? Women in history?
10. There have been many other books involving Hildegard of Bingen's life: this one is not quite a flattering as most portraits. Do you think that it's possible that fiction can reflect the reality of a time in history and its characters?

For further Reading

Flanagan, Sabina. *Hildegard of Bingen: a visionary life*. Routledge, New York, 1989.

Maddocks, Fiona. *Hildegard of Bingen: The woman of her age*. Headline Publishing, London, 2001.

Witts, Richard. How to make a saint: On interpreting Hildegard of Bingen. *Early Music*, August, 1998.