

History Access Reading Group

Meet with Professor BOB STACEY
to discuss
Ken Follett, *The Pillars of the Earth*

Monday, December 5th
1:30–3:30 in Smith 306

This book is widely available at most bookstores in inexpensive editions.

Set in twelfth-century England, the narrative concerns the building of a cathedral in the fictional town of Kingsbridge. The book chronicles the vicissitudes of a prior, his master builder, and their community as they struggle to build the cathedral and protect themselves during this tumultuous century, during the fight for the crown of England after the death of Henry I. The ambitions of the three men merge, conflict, and collide through forty years of social and political upheaval as internal church politics affect the progress of the cathedral and the fortunes of the protagonists.

Study Questions on Reverse

Please sign up for this group by visiting our website and clicking on the RSVP button
or contacting History Undergraduate Advising:

543-5691, histadv@u.washington.edu

<http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/access/reading.html>

Study Questions:

1) Ken Follett is known principally as an author of modern political "thrillers." *Pillars of the Earth* is, so far as I know, his only foray into the Middle Ages. He went to a good deal of trouble to get the historical details "right", even having the book checked by two eminent historians of medieval England (C. Warren Hollister and Margaret Wade Labarge). Follett's descriptions of plows, helmets, castle design, costume, etc. are thus quite reliable. Can the same be said about his characters, however? Do his characters strike you as plausible in the context of mid-12th century England? Or are they essentially modern people, plunked down into an alien world?

2) Does this book have a "theme" or "lesson" that is of any relevance to a modern audience? If so, what is that theme or lesson?

3) What do you make of the final two pages of the novel? Does the entire novel really celebrate the triumph of the "Church" over the "State"?

4) How would you account for the popularity of this very, very long historical novel?