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Beatrice's Last Smile: A New History of the Middle Ages

By: Mark Gregory Pegg

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Mark Gregory Pegg's history of the Middle Ages opens and closes with martyrdom, the first that of a young Roman mother in a North African amphitheater in 203 and the second a French girl burned to death beside the Seine in 1431. Both Vibia Perpetua and Jeanne la Pucelle died for their Christian beliefs, yet that for which they willingly sacrificed their lives connects and separates them. Both were divinely inspired, but one believed her deity shared the universe with other gods, and the other knew that her Creator ruled heaven and earth. Between them, across the centuries, lives were shaped by the ebb and flow of the divine and the human. Here is the story of people struggling in life and in death to understand themselves and their relationship to God. Beatrice's Last Smile interweaves vivid portraits of such individuals to offer a sweeping and immersive story. Some are of enduring renown Augustine, Muhammad, Charlemagne, Heloise and others are obscure. An Egyptian youth fighting demons in the desert as the first monk; a Briton becomes a holy man after enslavement in Ireland; an emperor in Constantinople watches as rioters torch the city; a old Syrian monk advises the English on sex; the soul of a Merovingian noble flies through the night sky to heaven; an Irish warrior surfs the waves like a dolphin as he flees the Vikings; a crusader's boots squelch with blood on the streets of Jerusalem; a troubadour sings of love; a Muslim lord expresses admiration of the Templars; a pope proclaims that Christendom encompasses all time and space; a barefoot Franciscan friar visits the Great Khan of the Mongols; a Parisian rabbi argues for the holiness of the Talmud; and a poet laments being alive amid the horror of the Black Death. Together, they take readers from the vastness of the Roman Empire to small communities between the Mediterranean and the North Sea, from the nomads of the Asian steppes to the triumphant Church of Latin Christendom. Beatrice's Last Smile offers a pulsating history of the West the passionate belief in the old gods that yields to a cosmos shaped by one; the transition from a penitential culture to a confessional one; the universal obsession with imitating Christ. The book is named for the moment in Dante Alighieri's Divine Comedy when his long-dead love, Beatrice, smiles one final time at Dante in paradise before turning away to look eternally upon the face of God. Mark Gregory Pegg's epic narrative captures a millennium within that fleeting smile, in ways that modern readers will find illuminating and haunting.

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