



The Pillars of the Earth: Ken Follett (English edition)

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Ken Follett's historical novel *The Pillars of the Earth* provides a personalized view of family life, civil wars, and the power struggle between the monarchy and the church in twelfth-century England. With storytelling skills that focus on suspense, Follett unwinds a captivating tale that follows the failures and successes of several generations of prominent families in the fictional village of Kingsbridge. The leader of Kingsbridge is Philip, abbot of a small monastery that stands at the center of the village. The plot of the novel revolves around Philip's dream of having a large cathedral built for his town, an ambitious vision for an otherwise seemingly humble man. Through prayer and fortunate happenstance, a master builder appears at Philip's doorstep one day. The builder's name is Tom, and he has a vision that mysteriously matches Philip's own. Follett's novel exposes the author's obvious fascination with twelfth-century architecture, especially in reference to the building of cathedrals. The author provides interesting details of the technological aspects of masonry as it evolved from the Romanesque to the Gothic structures of that period. Complications of how to build tall structures with large boulders are fully explored as the builders work out their problems through primitive sketches scratched in chalk. But the architectural discourse in this novel is minimal. It provides a thin skeleton upon which the rest of the story is drawn. The gist of the narrative is more personal, with historical events, such as the battle for the English throne between Empress Maude (1102-1167) and King Stephen (1096-1154) and the murder of Thomas Becket (1118-1170), added to provide a vital background. The page-turning quality of this long novel is fully rooted in the lives of the main characters as they are challenged by nature, poverty, famine, and torture, and then rewarded with love, prosperity, and answered prayers. The story opens with the hanging of a redheaded stranger, whose crime is unnamed. His unwed, pregnant lover looks on and curses those who have accused him. The woman's name is Ellen. She is often called a witch because of her ability to survive in the woods and her uncanny ability to predict those who will fall from grace in the future. The child in Ellen's womb will be named Jack, after his father. Jack will become one of the central figures of the story. Later, Jack's love for Aliena will prevail despite Aliena's marriage to Tom the builder's oldest son, Alfred, an impotent and cruel young man. The story concludes as Jack and Aliena's children mature, taking on roles as leaders in Kingsbridge as the small village is transformed into a thriving community that lies in the shadow (and grace) of the magnificent and finally fully constructed cathedral.

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