



Beat the heat with escape into history

Sometimes the best way to take one's mind off of an intolerably hot summer's day is to sit in front of an oscillating fan and seek mental refuge in a book of historical fiction.

This week's book

'The Oath' by A.M. Linden
She Writes Press — 316 pages — \$17.95

By happy chance, Bellingham, Washington, writer A.M. Linden just published her first book in a projected five-part series called "The Druid Chronicles."

"The Oath" is set in 8th century Britain. Readers may need to brush up on their medieval history as they navigate the complex world Linden has reconstructed. It's helpful to know that Druids, Celts and Britons are one and the same. Likewise, Linden uses "Saxon" interchangeably with "Christian." These two different belief systems have little tolerance for one another.

At the opening of this tale, the once venerated Druids are struggling to survive as Saxon rulers seek to impose Christian hegemony on the land.

Fifteen years earlier, the sister of a Druid high priestess, Princess Annwr, was violently kidnapped, sold into servitude and taken to a distant Saxon stronghold to serve as nursemaid to the local king's daughter, Princess Aleswina.

But the king dies when Aleswina is still a young girl. Her older cousin, as the closest male relative, ascends the throne. He finds Aleswina's presence to be inconvenient, so he bundles her and her nursemaid off to a convent.

Back in the Druid shrine, it takes 15 long years, but the chief oracle finally has a vision of Annwr in captivity. He shares the ambiguous details with the high priestess who, in

turn, tells her young consort, Caelym.

He valiantly pledges to rescue his lover's sister, although it will mean a dangerous journey not just into Saxon territory, but directly to the convent, where Druids are completely reviled as "the devil's minions" and the only remedy is to burn them at the stake.

Courage, determination, and dumb luck all come into play as Caelym heads out on his quest. When he finally locates Annwr, he has an arrow in his back. The tart-tongued nursemaid is dubious about Caelym's professed mission and his ability to rescue her, but she has healing skills and attends to his wound.

By the time Caelym has recovered enough to travel again, suspicions have begun roiling through the convent and the surrounding community. Annwr realizes she really will have to flee with him.

But another complication arises when her young charge, Aleswina, insists on leaving with them.

Speaking of complications, the author might have done more to help readers who are not well versed in the Early Middle Ages to navigate the confusing alternative terms for the Druids. Also, while Linden did anticipate that readers would need to refer to the list of characters she provides at the beginning of the book, the list doesn't always

deliver the wished-for clarity.

That said, "The Oath" offers a refreshing escape. The scene-setting is marvelously detailed, the presentation of different world views is interesting and the protagonists are engaging.

The Druid Chronicles series holds promise.

The Bookmonger is Barbara Lloyd McMichael, who writes this weekly column focusing on the books, authors and publishers of the Pacific Northwest. Contact her at barbalmcm@gmail.com.

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