

The Witch's Trinity : a Novel

by Erika Mailman

New York : Three Rivers Press, c2008

Erika Mailman's novel is set in the village of Tierkinddorf, Germany, in 1507, during the second year when there was no harvest. It is winter, and there are no animals in the woods. People are starving, and everyone is wondering why hard times have come to them. Because people want to know why tragedy occurs, and want some control in their lives, a person or group of people can become the targets of suspicion and blame. Enter a friar with a copy of the recently published *Malleus Maleficarum*, essentially a handbook of how to ferret out a witch, put her on trial (almost always an older woman), and put her to death. The friar also arrived with plenty of food, which was used to pay informants and accusers.

To rid herself of a mother-in-law who is no longer productive (i.e., just another mouth to feed), Irmeltrude betrays Güde to the friar's inquisition. Güde herself isn't completely certain she is innocent, though, because she has been having some fantastical experiences that she cannot explain. She considers it possible that she has been seduced by a witch who offers her food. Still, she doesn't want to burn to death, either.

A Witch's Trinity : a Novel is full of interesting and provoking lines of thought. A prominent one is the question of suffering that most people struggle with, and the desire to know why things happen to us. The role of society is also intriguing. The village was a cultural institution of protection and cooperation that was meant to insure survival of inhabitants. Division of labor provided for enhanced skill sets and investment on the part of some villagers (one miller with a mill, one butcher, etc., skills handed down from father to son) and benefit to all because each person/family did not have to do everything for themselves. Shared labor could also be bartered. But the village could become an agent of death when people entertained their fears and suspicions, or when someone had a grudge, or thought that any action could be justified to feed one's children.

If the village can represent aspects of safety and protection (in a functional sense, not a dysfunctional one), the forest can be seen as a place of danger. The forest was dark and foreboding, and not a place to be alone or at night. Bandits or other predators were real dangers. A person could become lost. Recall Stephen Sondheim's musical, "Into the Woods," in which Act 1 presents the interwoven fairy tales, with one or more people from each vignette going or being sent into the woods on some business or to make dreams come true. In Act 2, with everyone in the woods, reality sets in and expectations are turned upside down. Life is not a fairy tale.

As a librarian, I find it quite sad that Gutenberg's printing press (ca. 1455), which made possible the proliferation and spread of printed materials, knowledge, and literacy, played into the historical events that are at the center of this novel. Copies of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1485-86) were produced in large quantities and were in the hands of many friars and priests who tried to purify their congregations, or who traveled from village to village, town to town.

Erika Mailman's novel is well worth the time. She weaves a compelling story that is much more than entertainment. Her characters and story line provoke thought and reflection. A side note about Mailman is that she is an eleventh-generation descendant of Mary Bliss Parsons, who was twice tried for witchcraft in colonial Massachusetts (1656 and 1674).

Linda Ginn – Patron Review

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