

# Breakthrough Books

WE ASKED NINE SCHOLARS TO TELL US ABOUT THEIR FAVORITE NEW BOOKS IN MEDIEVAL STUDIES

David Nirenberg, professor of history at Rice University and author of *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1996).

"In my Father's house are many mansions," medieval defenders of religious tolerance were fond of saying. Modern devotees of medieval studies might say the same. Nevertheless, the field is held together by some shared concerns. Consider two recent books about ritual in two very different corners of the medieval world: Ivan Marcus's *Rituals of Childhood: Jewish Culture and Acculturation in the Middle Ages* (Yale, 1996) and Paula Sanders's *Ritual, Politics, and the City in Fatimid Cairo* (SUNY, 1994). The first describes an obscure initiation rite for Ashkenazi schoolboys as a complex dialectic of imitation and opposition between Judaism and Christianity. The second reconstructs the processes through which the breakaway Ismaili Muslim caliphate simultaneously appropriated the idioms of its Sunni predecessors and marked its differences from them. Both are wonderfully true to the local logics of the cultures they study while drawing on an interdisciplinary treasure house of approaches to problems of cultural differentiation and reproduction."

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William Chester Jordan, professor of history at

Princeton University and author of five books, including *The Great Famine: Northern Europe in the Early Fourteenth Century* (Princeton, 1996).

"Steven Justice's book *Writing and Rebellion: England in 1381* (California, 1994) sets a new standard for interdisciplinary scholarship. Focusing on a group of 'letters' attributed to rebel leaders in the Great Peasant Rebellion of 1381, it is a brilliant discussion of attitudes toward writing, the nature of literacy, and the power of documentation to terrorize (by recording who owes what, how much, and to whom) in fourteenth-century rural England. Justice rescues the thought world of medieval rustics from both the denigrating stereotypes of their hostile upper-class contemporaries and the persistent oversimplifications of modern scholars. The author comes closer than anyone has to capturing something like the authentic voice of medieval rural discontents."

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Patrick Geary, director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at UCLA and author of *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994).

"If I could send people to two recent medieval-history books that are fascinating, important, and demanding,

they would be David Nirenberg's *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1996) and Amy Remensnyder's *Remembering Kings Past: Monastic Foundation Legends in Medieval Southern France* (Cornell, 1996). Nirenberg examines the persecution of lepers, Jews, and Muslims in southern France and Spain, not as part of an age-old history of prejudice, but in terms of how people negotiate their lives and create meaning within the broad inherited traditions in which they live. Remensnyder looks at how legendary foundation stories, created when royal power was still a fiction, became part of the means by which later monarchs were able to consolidate real power. Both expose us to a world at once very alien from our own and yet frighteningly familiar."

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Ruth Mazo Karras, professor of history at Temple University and author of *Slavery and Society in Medieval Scandinavia* (Yale, 1988) and *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval England* (Oxford, 1996).

"No single book in the last five years has had the impact of Caroline Walker Bynum's *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (California, 1987)," says Karras,

"but several stand out. John W. Baldwin's *The Language of Sex: Five Voices From Medieval France Around 1200* (Chicago, 1994) eruditely refutes Foucault's dictum that 'the Middle Ages had organized around the theme of the flesh...a discourse that was markedly unitary.' Of greater interest to non-medievalists, however, is Robert Bartlett's *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change, 950-1350* (Allen Lane, 1993). Bartlett reinterprets the broad sweep of medieval history, arguing that the experience of colonization on the periphery of Latin Christendom shaped western Europe's internal political and cultural development. Without directly addressing theoretical discussions about colonialism, this work has nevertheless much to offer those interested in these issues in a more contemporary context."

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Barbara Newman, professor of English and religion at Northwestern University and author of *From Virile Woman to Woman Christ: Studies in Medieval Religion and Literature* (Pennsylvania, 1995).

"As the millennium approaches," says Newman, "Last Things surge to the forefront with the return of ambitious histories that trace the development of thought about heaven and hell, Christ and Antichrist, judg-

ment and resurrection. In *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200-1336* (Columbia, 1995), Caroline Walker Bynum brilliantly melds intellectual history with the history of the body, juxtaposing practices like the dismemberment of saints with theologians' debates about cannibalism and the power of God. Less apocalyptic but long overdue is Jo Ann McNamara's *Sisters in Arms: Catholic Nuns Through Two Millennia* (Harvard, 1996), the first comprehensive history of nuns since Lina Eckenstein's *Woman Under Monasticism* a century ago. The titles tell a story all their own: In a hundred years, we've moved from 'woman' to 'women,' subordinates to sisters—and that in itself is no small apocalyptic sign."

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David Wallace, professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Chaucer and the Early Writings of Boccaccio* (D.S. Brewer, 1985) and *Boccaccio: Decameron* (Cambridge, 1991).

Wallace recommends *Women's Writing in Middle English*, edited by Alexandra Barratt (Longman, 1992). "It examines differences between men and women—beginning with proclivities to baldness and ending with the womb. We learn how women may conceive girls or boys during intercourse, how hermaphrodites are made, and how a woman who has lost her virginity might find it again. The volume includes some extraordinary original texts. In 1422, for example, a woman dreams of her friend

Margaret, once a nun, being ripped apart in purgatory by a dog and cat. 'And as touchynge the lytill hounde and the cate,' we later learn, 'they were hir mawemetts [idols] the whils scho was one lyfe [alive], and scho sett hir herte to mekill one swylke [too much on such] foulle wormes.' Pet lovers beware."

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Lee Patterson, professor of English at Yale University and author of *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Wisconsin, 1987) and *Chaucer and the Subject of History* (Wisconsin, 1991).

Patterson likes Ralph Hanna's *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, 1996). "Hanna unlocks with intelligence and subtlety the social and literary meanings that manuscripts hold by returning to the medievalist's traditional tools: textual criticism, paleography, and codicology." Patterson also cites the enduring importance of Howard Bloch's *Etymologies and Genealogies: A Literary Anthropology of the French Middle Ages* (Chicago, 1983). "Not a new book, but it is still the foremost example of how contemporary theory can help us understand medieval culture. Plenty more recent books try to do this, but Bloch remains the best model, not least because he is not in thrall to any single theory."

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Stephen G. Nichols, professor of French and humanities at Johns Hopkins University, director of the



School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University, and author of *Medievalism and the Modernist Temper* (Johns Hopkins, 1990).

Medieval studies is "a hot topic on both sides of the Atlantic," says Nichols. "Postmodernism suits the Middle Ages and vice versa. From hypertext and feminism to queer theory, history, and material philology, terrific books are being published—and they're selling. One of the breakthroughs is Maria Rosa Menocal's *Shards of Love* (Duke, 1993). This gutsy book gives a philosophy of history and lyric poetry that blasts the boundaries between high and low culture to argue that in 1492 Spain expelled, along with the Jews and Arabs, the cultural pluralism that made poetry. Newborn in America, the traditional medieval lyric forms made songs out of the pain of exile: songs in many and mixed languages, from chants, to spirituals, to rock. Eric Clapton's 'Layla,'

based on a medieval Persian romance, is one of her most intriguing examples."

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Stephen Jaeger, professor of German at the University of Washington in Seattle and author of *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals, 939-1210* (Pennsylvania, 1985) and *The Envy of Angels: Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe, 950-1200* (Pennsylvania, 1994).

Jaeger recommends Horst Wenzel's *Hören und Sehen, Schrift und Bild: Kultur und Gedächtnis im Mittelalter* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1995). The book, whose title translates as "Hearing and Seeing, Writing and Image: Culture and Memory in the Middle Ages," is "a fascinating book about how communication was represented in the Middle Ages. Everyone knew that the angel announced to Mary her pregnancy; medieval artists were charged with the task of making that act of communication visible. In tracing the iconography of the annunciation from the early to late Middle Ages, Wenzel depicts a change from body language to written language. His 'poetics of visibility' uncovers codes governing communication for a variety of visual artifacts from medieval court culture. The framework suggests interesting parallels with other cultures in the midst of media transition—our own, for instance." Jaeger appends a plea to interested publishers: "We need an English translation!"

**RICK PERLSTEIN**