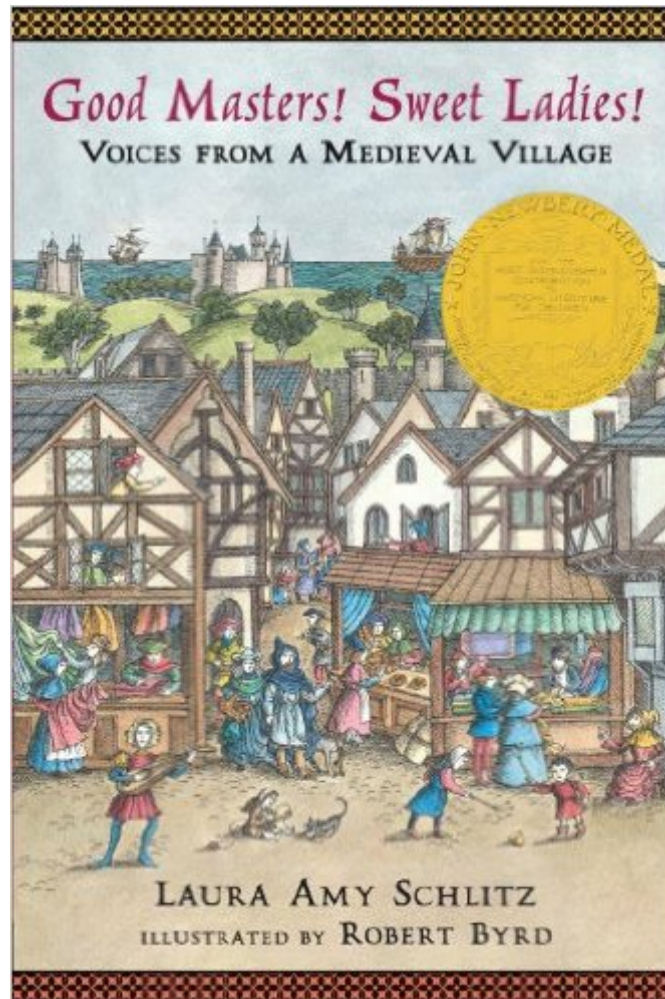


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Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!: Voices From A Medieval Village



Synopsis

Step back to an English village in 1255, where life plays out in dramatic vignettes illuminating twenty-two unforgettable characters. Maidens, monks, and millers' sons are in these pages, readers will meet them all. There's Hugo, the lord's nephew, forced to prove his manhood by hunting a wild boar; sharp-tongued Nelly, who supports her family by selling live eels; and the peasant's daughter, Mogg, who gets a clever lesson in how to save a cow from a greedy landlord. There's also mud-slinging Barbary (and her noble victim); Jack, the compassionate half-wit; Alice, the singing shepherdess; and many more. With a deep appreciation for the period and a grand affection for both characters and audience, Laura Amy Schlitz creates twenty-two riveting portraits and linguistic gems equally suited to silent reading or performance. Illustrated with pen-and-ink drawings by Robert Byrd inspired by the Munich-Nuremberg manuscript, an illuminated poem from thirteenth-century Germany is this witty, historically accurate, and utterly human collection forms an exquisite bridge to the people and places of medieval England. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 14 years

Grade Level: 5 - 9

Customer Reviews

Allow me to make something perfectly clear. There are, living amongst you, one or two sad souls for whom the name "Laura Amy Schlitz" does not mean anything. This is a state of affairs that does

none of us any good. You see, Ms. Schlitz is an author whose time has come. In 2006 she managed to simultaneously produce an epic gothic/realistic/historical/faux-ghost story in the tradition of *The Secret Garden* and *The Wolves of Willoughby Chase*, while also churning out a truly amusing and interesting bit of non-fiction on the side. You have an assignment. If you have not read *A Drowned Maiden's Hair: A Melodrama* or *The Hero Schliemann: The Dreamer Who Dug For Troy*, do so. You'll be better for it. That done, you may turn your sights onto a book that combines the two things Schlitz does so very well: Research and historical fiction. Maybe once a month a parent will walk up to my reference desk and ask me where they can find a nice selection of plays for children. Usually I'll direct them to *Plays* the periodical or wave them towards the 800s, but by and large there's not a lot of quality drama material for kids out there. Nothing that would give them all some great parts, that is. Schlitz acknowledges this fact right from the start in her book. Says the Foreward, "It really isn't possible to write a play with seventeen equally important characters in it. If you read Shakespeare, you'll notice that he never managed it - there are always a few characters that have little to say or do." So what was Schlitz to do when a group of students at the school (where she tends the library) all let her know in no uncertain terms that they wanted big starring roles? She just had to write them a book. In "Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!," Schlitz gives us a whopping twenty-three parts, each one the monologue of a kid who would have lived in a Medieval village. There's Edgar the falconer's son plotting to keep his bird out of the grasp of its real owner, Simon the knight's son. There's Taggot who moons over the lord's nephew, Constance the pilgrim, and Nelly the sniggler. Any book with a sniggler is bound to be good. Each part tells its story in the first person so that by the end you have seen twenty-three lives perfectly realized for the child audience and actor. I expected to learn something from this book. What I didn't expect was to be touched. What you need to remember here, even as your eye falls on footnotes giving the definition of "Prime" or the importance of dying "unshriven", is that Schlitz is a masterful writer. These monologues aren't rote lists of facts for kids to memorize. They're powerful stories, and none of them have easy answers. Maybe the characters' lives will end well. Many times they will not. What is important is that Schlitz is at least giving these people a chance to be heard. And as a child takes on a character, they'll start to think about what happened to them in the future. What'll happen to Jack, the boy everyone assumes is a half-wit? Or Barbary the mudslinger's mom? What are we to make of that brief moment of grace between a Jew and a Christian merchant's daughter? It's like parsing the words of twenty-three narrators, some of whom you could easily categorize as "unreliable". Aside from the innate drama here, Schlitz also gets in some lovely writing. For example, Mogg, the villain's daughter, talks of how her mother fools the lord and finds a way for the family to

keep their cow, Paradise. The lord comes and Schlitz writes, "So. He took the best of the pigs - I'd have chosen the same, in his place. We curtsied. Mother kissed his hand, and we watched him ride off, and waited till dark, to take back Paradise." Well played, that. Parts of this book are touching one moment and funny the next. As always, the application of humor to any title, when done successfully, ups the value of the book. Here Schlitz brings a wry, almost gallows humor to a time that was harsh and cruel with the rare snatches of great beauty here and there. Even the footnotes, bane of the easily bored, are of interest. For example, there's a moment when we learn of the peculiar fact that the patron saint of tanners was Saint Bartholomew, because he was flayed. "The logic of this is macabre, but not unique," says the author. She gives a couple examples of similar cases closing with, "We won't even talk about what happened to Saint Erasmus - it's too disgusting." Saint literature is about to go way up in circulation, I suspect. I don't pretend to know why illustrator Robert Byrd chose the style that he did. It's possible, and really I'm just spitballing here, that he was drawing inspiration from the illustrated Bibles created by monks during this time period. No stranger to illustrating Schlitz's words (as he did for the aforementioned Schliemann), each section Byrd creates is accompanied by an image of the speaker of the monologue in the uppermost part of the page. Using delicate pen-and-inks, Byrd works in details in minutia, coming across as a kind of cohesive dot-free Peter Sis. Most amusing is the map he has drawn at the beginning of the book. It displays "A Medieval Manor" in 1255 England. Every character appears here, according to where they would have lived on a typical manor during that time. The map really clarifies beautifully how people lived during that era and, in addition to its accuracy, is fun in terms of figuring out where all the characters are located ala "Where's Waldo?" "Where's Waldo?". Getting people excited about this book is going to be difficult. The hard part is going to consist of promoting it properly to the right people. "Good Masters! Sweet Ladies!" doesn't fall neatly into a single category. It's historical, but it's also a drama. There are facts galore but they are couched between a series of fictional monologues. Footnotes explain the odd phrases and out-of-date terms. Non-fiction two page spreads break up the monologues and offer a little factual background on things like "The Crusades" or the status of Jews during Medieval England. A lot of hand-selling is going to have to go down here, so it's best to start now. Read it. Love it. Talk it up like mad. As one librarian I briefly allowed to see this book (I'm very protective) said to me, "It really sucks you in!" It does at that. When you hit Pask's section and the first line is "I don't know when I ran away," it's hard not to read on. With the dual practical purpose of serving as an accompaniment to those children learning about Medieval life AND providing those hungry for the limelight for a chance to shine in the sun, this title stands unique. But wait! How fare the facts? Well the Bibliography is not one, not two, not even

three, but FOUR pages long. Put that in your pipe and smoke it. I'm no Medieval scholar but nothing I read struck me as false here. The writing is good, the facts even better, and the whole kerschmozzle a necessary purchase (to say the least). I may not know how to catalog this puppy in my library, but I do know that if breaking new ground in non-fiction ever deserved attention, it was now. A title to buy from an author to watch.

Set in England in 1255, various people from the village speak in monologues about their lives. Pask, for example, has run away from his harsh ruler, the local lord. If he lives in the village for a year and a day, he will become free. Surviving the fierce winter is questionable until he hides in a kennel and is fed dog food by the daughter of the man who cares for the dogs. She, in turn, loves the dogs but is plagued by fleas everywhere in her house - even in the bread. Twenty-three different young villagers introduce themselves to readers through monologues and dialogues. With well-researched details of life in a medieval village, each young person relates to one or more of the other characters until an intriguing whole, highly original book emerges. Ready to be performed, these voices themselves unite into a masterful performance.

From the cover illustration on, the tweens and teens who inhabit this fictional village have taken up residence in my imagination, where they continue to flirt and jostle, scrounge out a living, sin and repent and hunger and triumph. I imagine their beatings, their wasted frames and matted hair and share their hard-scrabble existence through 81 brief pages, with smatterings of discreetly placed background notes. Schlitz wrote this for students at a private school in Baltimore, where she's a librarian and historian. When she offered to write a play that truly depicted life in the Middle Ages, nobody wanted a minor part. She created 21 scenes, all but two of them for a single actor, and most of them in verse. As the characters speak, they offer an unflinching view of their poverty, their superstitions and prejudices and the limited scope of their ambitions. And, like any kids, they're brightly optimistic, cheerful in their adversity, and full of imagination and daring. We meet the Lord of the Manor's nephew, who risks his life in a boar hunt; a glassblower's apprentice determined to get it right; a shepherdess struggling to save her "sister" sheep, and many other charming, disarming and (mostly) guileless kids struggling to figure out their place in the local pecking order and how to bridge those awkward years until adulthood. Even with so many disparate voices, there are no discordant notes. Village life emerges with its rhythms, its simplicity, and narrative threads that weave all the characters into a cohesive whole. Byrd helpfully illustrates with scenes that could've come from a Book of Hours; his approximation of Medieval illuminations are so close that I forgot I'd

already seen his name on the cover and searched the extensive bibliography for the pictures' source. Although the scenes are meant to be performed or at least read aloud by 10-15 year olds, this can also be read silently by one very absorbed kid -- or, ahem, grown-up.

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