

Book Review: The King's Witches by Kate Foster

The chilling last words, spoken by Anna, Princess of Denmark, open Kate Foster's electrifying novel *The King's Witches*.

'The witch Doritte Olsen is being burned at the stake today and they're making us watch.'

Princess Anna of Denmark

Edinburgh author Foster gives voice to three very different women, all of whom are caught up in the paranoia gripping Scotland, and indeed much of mainland Europe, in the late 1500s. Anna, Anna's Lady of the Bedchamber Kirsten Sorenson, and Jura Craig, a poor servant girl trying to escape an alcoholic father, will soon find their lives perilously intertwined.

Think you know everything there is to know about the 16th century North Berwick Witch Trials? Think again – this is history from a feminist perspective. These women are all victims of patriarchal, misogynistic and oppressive times – but times which may seem increasingly familiar to today's readers.

'There was once a Great Pestilence that spread from country to country, killing millions of people...those days are long gone, they say. But a new Plague is upon us. A plague of fear; a disease of ideologies. Doritte Olsen knew it. The women and men of Trier knew it.'

Kirsten Sorenson , March 1590

Anna is travelling to Scotland to marry King James. She is 17 years-old (in real life she was just 14). The marriage has been negotiated to consolidate diplomatic relations between Scotland and Denmark, but will not take place until the couple have lived together for one year. During that year (called 'handfasting') Anna is required to prove her worth as a fit wife for the king of Scotland, and most importantly, to conceive James's heir.

Witch hunts are ravaging Denmark.

James is a superstitious man and it is essential that he knows as little as possible about the sorcery in his bride's country. If the betrothal fails, Anna knows she will most likely be sent to live in the Danish convent of Hellebaek Abbey,

'...where the lame and hunchbacked daughters of the nobility are stored out of sight, alongside the ones who are caught being whoreish.'

Kirsten is a strict and careful woman. She knows how important this marriage is, and while always solicitous for Anna's welfare, she is also strict about her behaviour. When Anna forms a friendship with Henry, Lord Roxburgh, who has been sent with the Scottish fleet to improve Anna's English as they sail back to Leith, Kirsten is horrified. For Kirsten has her own reasons for wanting to return to Scotland, a country she first visited as a young woman. She sees the witch hunts gaining momentum in Trier and Copenhagen; she knows the persecution will spread across Europe and soon reach Scottish shores. She needs to take action.

Meanwhile Jura is mourning her late mother, a 'wise woman', a 'cunning wife',

'A belligerent old bird, but she'll aye help those who come to our door in need. Usually love inchantments or potions to get unpregnant.'

Determined to get away, she finds a post in the house of North Berwick Baillie Stuart Kincaid. The last maid left in disgrace. No other girls want the job. It won't take long for Jura to find out why.

Kate Foster's characters are compelling, nuanced and real. She skilfully conveys Anna's innocence, Kirsten's reserved, watchful, anxiety, and Jura's determination to make her way in the world, but it's not only the main players who come vividly to life in the excellent novel.

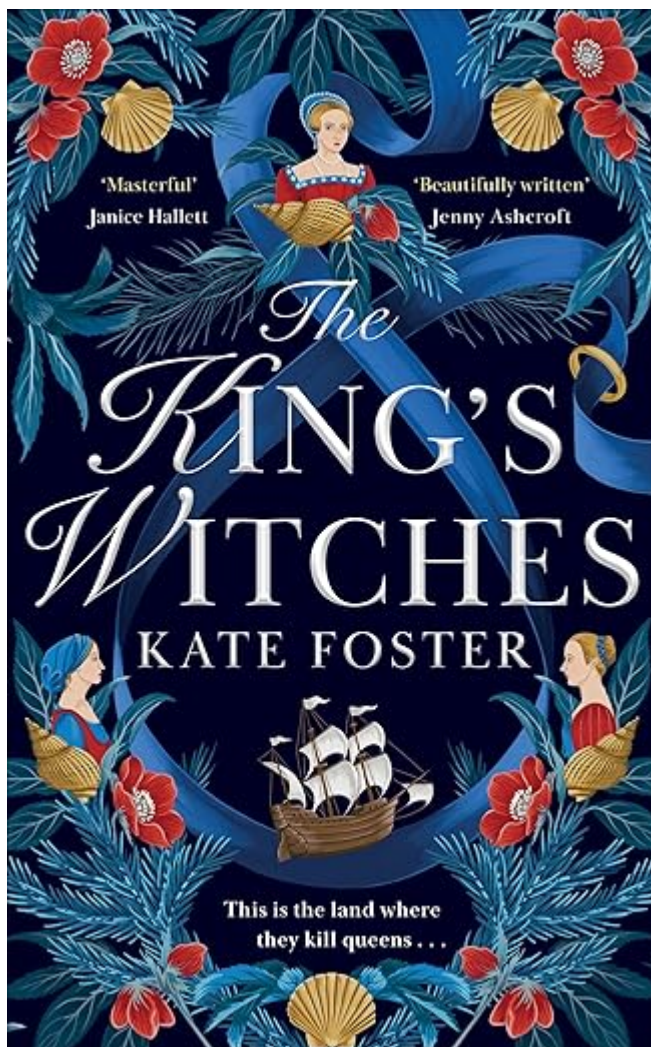
Kirsten's friend Mary, part of a network of women helping other women, eking out a living in the Canongate, ready to risk her own safety to save others; Stuart Kincaid, secure in his self-righteousness, revolting in his habits, cruel in his behaviour. We can easily recognise people like these; in Foster's hands they are not historical artefacts but real people, people we see in our own lives today.



James VI, attributed to John de Critz

Foster's skill is in getting under the skin of every character, and this is especially interesting in her treatment of King James. The king is only 25 himself, but painfully aware of the expectations his status brings. It is well known that James had many close male friends, and here we see him struggling with his sense of duty – he must have an heir, and a respectable marriage – and his personal feelings. Although Anna is repulsed by him, he does his best to be kind to her and she eventually comes to understand this,

“You have taken on this challenge – this betrothal – with huge dignity,” he tells me...“Our betrothal is not about falling in love, it’s not about romance. It’s about uniting two countries. It’s about giving Scotland a queen, and I think you have the qualities of a queen.”



Anna, meanwhile, is torn between her duty to the Danish Crown and her romantic feelings for Henry. Both she and James are victims of the system, but Anna in particular is seen by James's advisers (and those of her own family) as a chattel, an asset vital to their political requirements. Foster, however, shows us the coming of age of a young girl, one who has the best of intentions but is also increasingly aware of her own needs; a brave girl who, like Mary, risks everything to help a less fortunate woman.

All the while, Foster ratchets up an atmosphere of tension, threat and fear. As blame for everything from crop failures to shipwrecks is directed at any woman (and a few men) who can't or won't conform to society's expectations, nobody is safe.

'If one person says something against another, and the accuser is more powerful than the accused, what hope is there?'

Jura Craig

Once more, the parallels with our current world are all too evident.

In *The King's Witches* Kate Foster tells a thrilling, disturbing story. I wanted to race to the end of the book to find out what would happen, but I also didn't want to leave these brilliantly written characters behind.

The King's Witches by Kate Foster was first published by Mantle. The paperback edition is published by Pan Books, an imprint of Pan Macmillan.

Kate Foster is also the author of *The Mourning Necklace* and *The Maiden*, both published by [Pan Macmillan](#).

Surely they can't
hang me twice?

The MOURNING NECKLACE

KATE FOSTER

'Her best yet'
Janice Hallen

'Extraordinary'
Claire Evans



'A masterpiece . . .
a thrilling historical murder
tale but so much more'
Janice Hallett

The
MAIDEN
KATE FOSTER

