



The Relic Master

Christopher Buckley

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From *New York Times* bestselling author Christopher Buckley, “one of the funniest writers in the English language” (Tom Wolfe), a compelling and hilarious adventure featuring a sixteenth-century relic hunter and his best friend, Albrecht Dürer, who conspire to forge the Shroud of Turin.

The year is 1517. Dismas is a relic hunter: one who procures “authentic” religious relics for wealthy and influential clients. His two most important patrons are Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony and soon-to-be Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz. While Frederick is drawn to the recent writing of Martin Luther, Albrecht pursues the financial and political benefits of religion and seeks to buy a cardinalship through the selling of indulgences. When Albrecht’s ambitions increase his demands for grander and more marketable relics, Dismas and his artist friend Dürer conspire to manufacture a shroud to sell to the unsuspecting noble. Unfortunately Dürer’s reckless pride exposes Albrecht’s newly acquired shroud as a fake, so Albrecht puts Dismas and Dürer in the custody of four loutish mercenaries and sends them all to steal Christ’s burial cloth (the Shroud of Chambéry), Europe’s most celebrated relic.

On their journey to Savoy where the Shroud will be displayed, they battle a lustful count and are joined by a beautiful female apothecary. It is only when they reach their destination that they realize they are not alone in their intentions to acquire a relic of dubious legitimacy. Filled with fascinating details about art, religion, politics and science; Vatican intrigue; and Buckley’s signature wit, *The Relic Master* is a delightfully rich and intelligent comic adventure.

The Relic Master Details

Date : Published December 8th 2015 by Simon & Schuster

ISBN :

Author : Christopher Buckley

Format : Kindle Edition 400 pages

Genre : Historical, Historical Fiction, Fiction, Humor, Adventure

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From Reader Review The Relic Master for online ebook

Andrea: BookStoreFinds says

Thank you to Simon and Schuster for sending me The Relic Master for review. Unfortunately I just couldn't get in the book at all and I found it draining to read. It was written well but It's just not my cup of tea!

Melki says

Oh, believe me - I wanted to LOVE this book. I pre-ordered and paid a hefty price for it. And maybe it was the wrong time of year, what with all the holiday brouhaha, there was scant time to get really wrapped up in a book. BUT, anytime it takes me fourteen days to finish a novel, there's something wrong. I can't exactly say what was off about this one, but it never really grabbed me. The concept is fine - Dismas travels around, obtaining religious relics for two competing patrons. I quite enjoyed the part near the beginning where our hero was attending the Basel Relic Fair. Among the items up for sale are some thorns from the Crown of Thorns, Mary Magdelene's foot and the mummified camels who supposedly carried some wise men into Bethlehem. That was fine, as was the bromance between Dismas and German painter Albrecht Durer.

Pretty boy Durer

If selfies had been around in his day, he'd have never gotten any painting done.

They trade quips like the best of the comedy duos. But when he is caught in a scam, Dismas is sent on a quest to obtain one immensely desired relic, and the book evolves into a most unusual caper novel, albeit a pretty implausible one. Then a female character is introduced. I groaned, because, yes, there is the dreaded *instalove*. And though she does prove to be useful in other ways, in the end she is just a damsel in need of rescuing.

The book is well written and amazingly well researched. I imagine Buckley was able to write-off several trips to Europe while preparing to write this tale. I REALLY wish it had clicked for me.

It's probably a case of it's-not-you-it's me, as many others seemed to like this one more than I did.

Maybe it was the subject matter and the mania for collecting holy relics. Or the way the characters fretted so about what awaited them after death. The cynic inside me would not shut up, and kept insisting this whole mess could have been avoided if everyone had just been atheists.

Paul Pessolano says

“The Relic Master” by Christopher Buckley, published by Simon and Schuster.

Category – Fiction Literature/Comedy Publication Date – December 08, 2015.

Looking for something different to read? How about a story that dates back to the 1500's? How about a story based in some facts and characters of that time? How about a fun read? If you answer "yes" to any of the above pick up "The Relic Master" on December 08, 2015.

Dismas is a Relic Collector. He purchases relics of saints of the Roman Catholic Church, most of them of dubious provenance. These relics are used to help sell indulgences, which were to lessen one's time in Purgatory. These indulgences came under fire by Martin Luther and became part of his 95 theses that he nailed to a cathedral door.

Dismas is on a search for the "Holy Shroud", the supposed burial cloth of Jesus. In his search he comes across three mercenaries, Unks, Cunrat, and Nutker (remember the Three Stooges?), he also is joined by a beautiful young lady, Magda. Thus is the setting for a rollicking adventure that includes comedy, duplicity, revenge, and a little romance.

The story does go into some detail as to the authenticity of the "Shroud of Turin", which even today remains a mystery.

This is one of those books that is an easy read that keeps the reader captivated from beginning to end.

Jason Pettus says

(Reprinted from the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [cclapcenter.com]. I am the original author of this essay, as well as the owner of CCLaP; it is not being reprinted illegally.)

So first, a shameful confession, that I haven't read anything by the brilliant writer Christopher Buckley since his 1994 *Thank You For Smoking*; and that's almost a punishable crime, given the half-dozen smart and cynical books he's churned out since then, an author who is nominally a Republican (he's the son of famed conservative William F. Buckley, and early in his career he was a speechwriter for the elder George Bush), but whose political satires tend to skewer the stupid and corrupt no matter what their particular partisan leanings. So how great for all of us, then, that Buckley recently declared it impossible to write decent political satire in an age of the Tea Party and Trump, and instead has released his first-ever historical novel, the delightfully wicked and profane Medieval comedy *The Relic Master*; for this is Buckley being just as naughty as he is with contemporary tales, but in this one lampooning no less than the entire Catholic Church, delivering what is essentially a zany caper about a pair of con artists who fool the church into buying what we now in contemporary times know as the venerated Shroud of Turin.

For those who don't know, the Shroud is supposedly the actual cloth that Jesus's dead body was wrapped in after crucifixion, seared with the outline of his naked body from the electricity that came from his resurrection; and back in the years after the Roman Empire but before the Renaissance, it was a crown jewel in what was at the time a booming business in holy relics among Catholic churches, literally hundreds of thousands of objects from the tiny (pinkie toes of minor saints) to the immense (splinters from the cross that Jesus was nailed to), that were tied in closely to the Catholic practice in those days of "indulgences," in which one could literally buy their way into heaven by paying museum-type admission fees to churches to go pray in front of such relics. That's a big part of what makes Buckley's novel so enjoyable, is that it's an extremely well-researched and factual look at all of these subjects and more, including the Martin-Luther-led Protestant movement in those years that was expressly a rebellion against such indulgences; but then

Buckley wraps all these facts and figures into a *very* witty fictional story, one grounded in the real world where all the characters are quite aware of the semi-scams all these practices are, even the Catholic officials themselves, and where decisions over things like Luther's protection against popish prosecution are acknowledged as mostly political maneuvers that have little to do with actual religious piety. A fairly thick novel but one that I flew through in just a few days, this will be a hit both among existing Buckley fans and those who enjoy any good skewering of organized religion, and it comes strongly recommended to all but the most self-righteous Catholics.

Out of 10: **9.5**

Tony says

THE RELIC MASTER. (2015). Christopher Buckley. ****.

Meet Master Dismas, a dealer in relics. The time is the early 16th century. The trade in relics is brisk, since buying and collecting relics is one way of reducing the time needed to be spent in Purgatory. Dismas has two patrons, both avid collectors: Frederick the Wise, ruler of Saxony, and the Archbishop of Mainz. Both collectors keep Dismas in ready cash, but both would like to have the 'true' shroud of Christ. The story tells of the quest for this shroud, and the many ways it can be obtained – including out-and-out forgery. Along the way, we get to meet people of the times who interact with Dismas, including Albrecht Durer, Paracelsus, and major figures of the time including Martin Luther. In all, this is a caper novel set in interesting times that will hold the reader's interest to the end, and having him check his dictionary on a regular basis.

Don Gorman says

(1 1/2). I am going to be kind and in the holiday spirit by rounding this up to 2 stars. I have read many of Christopher Buckley's other books and most have been very entertaining, a few really good. This one does not cut the mustard. The first 100 pages or so are bordering on dreadful, the tongue in cheek and stupidity level reaching an all time high (or low). After that the story becomes more palatable but way down deep it is shallow. Not a strong effort.

Mal Warwick says

In an interview conducted by Deborah Solomon for the New York Times Magazine in 2008, Christopher Buckley engaged in this exchange:

[Your father] was a practicing Catholic. What are you? I am post-Catholic.

As opposed to a lapsed Catholic? I am probably more of a collapsed Catholic.

That's about the size of it, to judge from Buckley's latest satirical novel, *The Relic Master*. This diabolical tale is a send-up of the Catholic Church at what was probably the most unattractive period in its history. The dissolute scion of a notorious family, Lorenzo de' Medici held forth in the Holy See as Pope Leo X, pursuing carnal pleasures and bankrupting the Vatican as a patron of the arts. He was perhaps the most corrupt and

immoral in a long line of unspeakably awful Popes. In Wittenberg, in reaction to the excesses of Leo's Church, the Augustinian monk Martin Luther began his campaign for reform.

A tale of the Reformation

In *The Relic Master*, Christopher Buckley spins a tale built around the historical figures who played key roles in the early days of the Reformation: not just Leo and Luther themselves, but also Johann Tetzel, the Dominican friar commissioned by the Pope to raise money for the construction of St. Peter's Basilica; Tetzel's greedy bishop, Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz; and Elector Frederick "the Wise" of Saxony. The brilliant German painter, Albrecht Durer, plays a major part in the story, too.

The plot is built around two historical artifacts that helped to define the Catholic Church of the era: the veneration of "relics" of the crucifixion of Jesus and the martyrdom of the saints, and the notoriously corrupt practice of selling "indulgences" to credulous followers of the Church. By paying money to Tetzel (who split his take with Cardinal Albrecht), the ignorant believers of the era presumably were pardoned for a period of time in Purgatory, the more money they paid, the longer the period. Failing that, according to the Church, they would languish in Purgatory for hundreds of years.

The Relic Master in person

The protagonist, identified in the book's title as the Relic Master, is Dismas, a former soldier of fortune turned relic-hunter. He pursues the choicest relics for his two principal clients, Cardinal Albrecht of Mainz and Frederick of Saxony. Frederick was nominally the more powerful of the two, because he held the powerful title of Elector of the Holy Roman Empire, one of a handful of officials who would choose the next Emperor. To help his clients continue to build their unparalleled collections of relics — each of them containing more than 10,000 items — Dismas scours Europe and the Middle East, stopping by "relic fairs" that are scenes of hilarity. All goes well until Dismas loses the fortune he has accumulated in a 16th-century version of a Ponzi scheme. His friend, the artist Albrecht Durer, persuades him to engage in an elaborate fraud against the Cardinal that will make them both rich. And that is the beginning of the end of the tale.

Where does satire come from?

By giving reality a few twists in one direction or another, satire makes us think. *The Relic Master* is a great case in point.

At this remove of five centuries, it's difficult to understand how the people of the time could have been so colossally ignorant as to believe such nonsense. Yet, as I look around myself in the early 21st century, I can't avoid thinking about today's religious absurdities: the unfathomable violence of Muslim extremists, the irredentist absurdity that motivates ultra-Orthodox Jews, and the dogged insistence of fundamentalist Protestants in the literal truth of the Bible in the face of centuries of evidence to the contrary. Is there something in the nature of the human race that impels some of us to grasp so tightly onto such ridiculous fantasies? Sadly, it would appear so.

About the author

Christopher Buckley has long since managed to transcend his identity as the son of William F. Buckley, Jr., one of the founders of modern conservatism in America. Early in life, he became editor of *Esquire* magazine and shortly afterward a speechwriter for President George H. W. Bush. In addition to a number of nonfiction books and numerous contributions to magazines, he has written ten satirical novels, of which three have been

produced as films.

Clif Hostetler says

Christopher Buckley is a master at writing novels that poke fun at absurdities in modern life. In this novel he has gone back to the sixteenth century and set this novel in a world where selling indulgences and trade in religious relics were major components of the European economy. It's a world so bazaar to twenty-first century sensibilities that almost no effort is required on Buckley's part to make the point that there's no limit to human stupidity.

Here's a link to a short NPR interview with Christopher Buckley that serves as a good introduction to this book. <http://www.npr.org/2015/12/12/4593727...>

Most people today would agree that the relic craze got out of hand in the 15th and early 16th centuries. All cities with cathedrals wanted all the relics they could get their hands on in order to draw pilgrims (sort of like modern day tourist attractions). To give you an idea of the extent of these collections it's interesting to consider the warehouse size required to store over 19,000 relics which was the size of the collection owned by Frederick of Saxony.

Ironically, Martin Luther, who was the main cause for reducing the relic craze, lived within Frederick's jurisdiction. The question expressed many times by characters in this book is, "Why is Frederic of Saxony protecting Martin Luther?" The question is never answered other than to note that Martin is a Saxon and Frederic protects his own.

Readers of this book will learn about the theological concept of "relic translation". The main character in this novel is caught selling a fake shroud to Archbishop of Mainz. For penance he is given the assignment of stealing the Shroud of Chambéry (a.k.a Shroud of Turin) from its location in Savoy and bringing it to Mainz.

It's not stealing because when a relic is successfully "translated" from one place to another, it's assumed that the saint associated with the relic (in this case Jesus) has given permission for it to be moved. That is, if the heist works, God has sanctioned it.

I found the plot to be hilarious though improbable. However, there were some violent incidents near the end of the story that resulted in numerous deaths which I didn't think was very funny. So there are limits to how much comedy can be made of this bloody era. Frequent witch burnings and various torture techniques are referenced in this book. So sensitive souls should probably avoid this book.

If I remember correctly, this story takes place in 1517. Almost all characters mentioned in this book are actual historical people except for the main character, his girl friend and his landsknecht cohort. But of course many of the activities assigned to these characters by this book are fictional.

I learned from a New York Times review that some of the distortions of history contained in this book include adding 20 years to the age of Paracelsus and giving Machiavelli a status he had yet to achieve. In another probable deviation from historical fact, Paracelsus is credited with having pharmaceutical recipes that out perform modern medicines (including Viagra). There is frequent reference to the financial influence of Jacob Fugger which I know is historically correct from my recent reading of *The Richest Man Who Ever Lived* by Greg Steinmetz

This is a book to enjoy, not scruple over historical accuracy. Thus if the reader accepts the narrative as ironic satire it can be very enjoyable.

Laura Jean says

This book is by far the best I've read all year. Granted, this is at the end of one of my favorite eras of history and I was already familiar with the political and religious scene that served as the backdrop of this book, but was also woven deftly into the plot. The plot was intricate and enjoyable. The characters stole the show. I loved how their thoughts and actions were so accurate for that period of time. I gobbled it down in almost one sitting. It was also hilarious! It had me laughing out loud.

Becky says

I picked this book up at a local discount store because the cover was cool and the author's name was one that I recognized as one that I liked. (I had previously read *Boomsday*, and loved the movie adaptation of *Thank You for Smoking*, which I own but haven't read yet.)

Anyway, so I had a few expectations from this, namely that it would be funny and irreverent, and it was... but it was also somewhat slow moving and just didn't grab me the way that I wanted it to. I've been "reading" it for 4 days, and for 3 of them, I seriously contemplated just not picking it back up. But then today, I figured what the hell, I'll give it another 50 pages, and if I end up bored, I'll call it a good effort and finish the other book I'm reading.

Thankfully, it ended up striking me the right way, and I finished it today, though I can't really say that it ever really HELD me. It was more a "What now?" kind of mild curiosity, mixed with a sort of quirkiness to the characters that kept me going. And even the humor wasn't really of the irreverent religious satire that I really wanted it to be (think Christopher Moore's *"Lamb: The Gospel According to Biff, Christ's Childhood Pal*, but more subdued and less in your face. It assumes that you know that the purchase of indulgences to shorten your Purgatory sentence is ridiculous and a money-making fraud, it doesn't need to point it out. If you don't... well hey, I have this nice finger bone I'd like to show you...

The characters were interesting, though in the beginning it was hard to track who was who. Two Albrechts didn't help much, though thankfully one of them just went by Durer most of the book. I liked the main character, Dismas, and really enjoyed his friendship (and sometimes lack thereof) with Durer. I grew to really love the three mercenaries. Magda... meh. Also, I really liked Markus and his countdown to corpses. Reminded me of Legolas and Gimli keeping score at the battle of Helm's Deep. In the movies.

The plot was a bit... wishy washy at times, and I found myself backtracking to try to figure out what was going on at least twice, but then just shrugged and moved on. It mostly came together, though there was one point where the end of left page and the start of right page just... did not make sense. The only thing that I could determine is that there was supposed to be a segment break that just... didn't make it in because of the natural page break between left and right sides, but that one took me re-reading like 3 times to figure out. NOT. COOL.

I do also have to say that the end let me down a bit. It just... ended. We never got closure on the penance that

was the whole point of the major plot. I wanted to know how the plan that failed was going to be explained, or why it wouldn't be, if it wasn't going to be explained. I just wanted a proper ending, and I didn't feel like I got one.

So... *shrug* All in all, a decent book, but I expected a bit more from it.

Bandit says

Christopher Buckley is done with political satires finding US politics (quite accurately) self satirizing, he's moved on or traveled back to history, specifically early 1500s. It might have been the best career move possible, because Relic Master is just awesome. Buckley's writing has always been clever and humorous, but the historical setting has added that extra dimension, at least for me and probably for any history buff. Present day affairs just don't hold the same appeal as events of bygone days. Relic Master is a classic quest story with elements of heist, comedy and adventure, featuring fictional (maybe, because really going back that far who knows for sure) and very real characters (both absolutely charismatic and engaging) in pursuit of an ultimate treasure. There are horny knights, damsels in distress, castles, feasts complete with tableau vivants, fights, intrigues, art, deceptions, more art. Not exactly a 16th century equivalent of Indiana Jones, but just as entertaining and wild and definitely funnier. Since history is in so many ways a fictional creation, one should hope more of it should be told in such a way. I, for one, am all for Buckley sticking to the genre. I've had so much fun reading this book and even learned a thing or two along the way. Excellent read. Highly recommended. Many thanks to the publisher and Netgalley.

Jake Forbes says

Wonderful setting and a fun cast of historical and fictional characters. Early chapters were a joy while protagonist Dimas is in his element as a relic hunter. The absurdity of his trade combined with his personal code of ethics makes for great dry humor from Buckley. It's in the second half, where it turns into a caper story, that things fall apart a little. The increasingly frequent action scenes are dense with beats but not at all interesting to follow. The villainy of the final act is jarringly arch. And the degree of dameseling foisted upon the only woman is off-putting. There is definitely potential in these elements to pull off a swindle with the charm of Ocean's 11 and the absurdity and irreverence of Monty Python (the comparisons in the reviews that caught my interest) but too often the action movie plotting invokes 90s Robin Hood, both the Prince of Thieves and Men in Tights.

Rob Atkinson says

Christopher Buckley is a gifted satirist, as anyone who has read "Thank You For Smoking" will know. His previous works have hilariously skewered contemporary politics, lobbying, and glib duplicity in America, particularly Washington, territory he obviously knows well. Assessing the current scene he decided -- correctly -- our current political scene is self-satirizing, having descended to a reality that already looks like it has come from a satirist's imagination. Hence his move to Europe circa 1517-19, an historical era rich in con men, venal clergy, and credulous fools for this new work.

The problem is that despite his research (a bibliography ends the novel, something I can't remember

encountering before with a work of fiction, even historical) he seems out of his depth here. While his characters are well drawn and the adventure hums along well enough (and often amusingly), avid readers of history and historical fiction are liable to spot quite a few historical errors and anachronisms. While one is prone to cut an outright farce or satire some slack in this regard, it can take one jarringly away from the scene Buckley has set, spoiling even that tenuous credulity that successful satire or historical fiction depend on. When one of the more odious villains, an Italian, is called a 'Dago' in 1519, it necessarily rings a false note. These kind of issues are frequent enough that one must conclude that either Buckley was lazy with his research/fact checking, or that he simply didn't care all that much about historical verisimilitude.

Allen Adams says

<http://www.themaineedge.com/buzz/shro...>

Christopher Buckley is a veteran of the best-seller lists, known for quirky works of wit and intelligence that take on the nuts and bolts of American government – works such as “Thank You For Smoking,” “God is My Broker” and “Boomsday” that are sharply satirical and wildly funny.

But Buckley’s latest offering finds him traveling farther outside the Beltway than ever before, leaving the machinations of Washington D.C. far behind in terms of both space and time.

“The Relic Master” takes us to 16th century Europe – the year 1517 to be exact. Dismas is the titular relic master; his job is to procure authentic religious relics and artifacts for wealthy benefactors. His primary clients are Frederick the Wise, Elector of Saxony, and Albrecht of Mainz – soon to be a cardinal. The two men could not be more different – Frederick is protecting the rogue theologian Martin Luther from the wrath of the Pope on principle, while Albrecht is simply looking to find any way possible to gain more power.

Frederick has assembled a collection second only to that of Rome itself, doing so out of a pure fascination with the religious power of the pieces. Albrecht, on the other hand, is a morally questionable fellow who seeks more and more relics so that he might find ways to make more money through the sale of indulgences – a dubious practice in which people might buy their way out of years to be spent in Purgatory.

When Albrecht’s demands for bigger and better relics prove to be too much, Dismas hatches a plan with his good friend Nars (the German painter Albrecht Durer – “Nars” is short for “Narcissus” for reasons that rapidly become abundantly clear) to manufacture a counterfeit relic – a forgery of Jesus Christ’s burial shroud. Due to some questionable decisions by both Dismas and Durer, however, their ruse is discovered.

Their punishment? To steal the real burial cloth – known as the Shroud of Chamberay – and hand it over to Albrecht. Accompanied by a quartet of deadly German mercenaries, Dismas and Durer are dispatched to procure Europe’s most celebrated religious relic. Along the way, they encounter mad and lustful noblemen and brilliant apothecaries...and they soon discover that they might not be alone in their desire to translate the shroud into other hands.

The subject matter of “The Relic Master” is a clear departure for Buckley, yet the standard features of his work – the meticulous research, the attention to detail, the cutting satire and the biting wit – are all present in abundance. It’s a wonderful exploration of a particularly tumultuous time in history – religious history in

particular – rendered with the same thorough observation that makes Buckley’s takes on contemporary history so engaging.

Dismas is a fascinating character, one generated almost entirely from Buckley’s imagination, yet he fits perfectly into this long-ago landscape. He stands alongside real-life historical figures and establishes relationships that are striking in their genuineness. Those relationship dynamics combine with a rich understanding of history and a breakneck narrative pace to create a novel that is truly exceptional.

There’s no doubt that the 16th century was a dark time; the fracturing nature of the church meant that men lacking in morality were easily able to ascend the ranks. These men – up to and including Pope Leo X himself – had no problem using their sizeable power for the purposes of vengeance and/or personal gain. While Buckley never shies away from that darkness – indeed, he mostly confronts it head on – he still manages to mine the circumstances for humor. Sure, more often than not, it is gallows humor, but it is humor nevertheless.

The story of Dismas and company makes for a thoroughly enthralling narrative. Buckley’s grasp of the history is unquestioned, but it is his creativity in filling in the gaps that truly makes “The Relic Master” soar. The end result is part caper and part satire, part love story and part adventure - a tale that feels both fantastic and feasible. It might be a new direction for Buckley, but there’s no doubt that he knows exactly where he’s going.

Bob Milne says

This just didn't work for me, and that's a shame because it had such potential. The writing is solid, with lots of humorous flair, and the characters were instantly likable, but there was just too much religious history for my tastes. I understand why it's there, and some of it was interesting (in small doses), but I found it became very distracting when I just wanted to get on with the adventure.
