



Morality Play

Barry Unsworth

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The time is the fourteenth century. The place is a small town in rural England, and the setting a snow-laden winter. A small troupe of actors accompanied by Nicholas Barber, a young renegade priest, prepare to play the drama of their lives. Breaking the longstanding tradition of only performing religious plays, the group's leader, Martin, wants them to enact the murder that is foremost in the townspeople's minds. A young boy has been found dead, and a mute-and-deaf girl has been arrested and stands to be hanged for the murder. As members of the troupe delve deeper into the circumstances of the murder, they find themselves entering a political and class feud that may undo them. Intriguing and suspenseful, *Morality Play* is an exquisite work that captivates by its power, while opening up the distant past as new to the reader.

Morality Play Details

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Author : Barry Unsworth

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From Reader Review Morality Play for online ebook

Petruccio Hambasket IV says

Did you think the theme was overdone, too 'Umberto Eco-ish', too antiquated? Did you find the writing clunky and otherwise awkwardly direct?

So did I.

And then I didn't. And then I read the whole thing in one sitting.

Early on in the tale a group is outside lamenting their dead friend while being spied on by a runaway priest. The priest notes how the winter mist coming from everybody's mouth resembles the devotional fumes of funeral incense; almost immediately I realized I would like this book if the characters are gonna go ahead and make observations like this, and (SPOILER ALERT) sometimes they do!

I thought Morality Play was written in a very school book way. I don't think the points it makes are overtly simple, just that they're laid out quite plainly. Also, we could effortlessly give it to a teacher to beat their classroom to death with questions like: "What does the constant reference of snow symbolize throughout the novel?", "Is there any real justice within the narrative?", etc. Despite this, I couldn't help sinking into a trance with the story, the characters, and especially their fascinating transition from simple minded players (i.e. actors) to an ensemble whose real world bleeds into the fabric of their profession (and vice-versa).

Remember when Robin William quotes Whitman in "Dead Poet's Society"?

"..the powerful play goes on and you may contribute a verse. What will your verse be?".

Well this book repeatedly handles this idea: that in a way we are all actors in our own plays, subject to roles and actions we are not always entirely capable of mastering (even when we recognize them). It warns us that we must be careful to not slip into a 'role' we think genuine in our own real life, because "we can lose ourselves in the parts we play and if this continues for too long we cannot find our way back" (pg.206). As the book time and time again exposes, those around you will not break you from your chosen role, they are right there with you dreaming and contributing. The main character begins to find it increasingly difficult to separate the act of acting, from the act of simply living that is accomplished outside of the stage. He tells us "...the player is always trapped in his own play but he must never allow the spectator to suspect this, they must always think that he is free. Thus the great art of the player is not in showing but concealing" (pg. 33). But, if we are all just playing a role in our day-to-day lives, what exactly are we concealing? Our true nature? How then can we ever hope to retrieve it, if in displaying ourselves to the rest of the world we are inevitably forced to conduct our behavior in a certain fashion.

This theme is resourcefully explored in Morality Play, all while being wound up in writing that is more than capable of emulating the variety of human nature, at least as much as can be expected for a novel set in the Middle Ages. The brilliancy of Unsworth's writing is visible in the way he can get you captivated about the actual morality plays being performed. You get so caught up in the mechanism of the stage craft, and the group's collective experience, that you sort of lose interest in the actual murder-mystery aspect of the plot. I don't necessarily think this is a bad thing either. If the performances weren't an absorbing part of the text it would be dismally boring, considering there are at least four we get shown (not just as their audience see them, but a real behind-the-curtain glance).

Some of the characters are flatter than I'd like them to be, particularly Tobias and Margaret, but anyone who has accustomed themselves to Canadian winters (Autumn's for that matter too) cannot help but sympathize with their perpetually dark and numbing situation. I must also admit that the ending is almost too neatly wrapped up; it sort of caught me off guard with its simplicity. Other than that, what can I say? A hearty novel that certainly deserves to be read, studied, maybe even acted out.

Simon says

I enjoyed this book, and thought it was well executed, but it left me a little cold. It was a little too studied, a little too self-conscious in its use of the theatre as key to life trope that permeates the book. Also, given the book's brevity, we don't get very full pictures of its characters. No doubt psychology isn't what the author is after - morality plays themselves are a long way from Ibsen, or even Shakespeare - but there's enough of it in there to make you feel the want of more.

Perhaps, also, there was a bit too much history for such a short book, too many of the expected events and situations from historical fiction: the powerful lords in conflict with the King; plague; jousting; child murder; travelling players; corrupt clerics; heretical christians preaching the end of days, it's all there, in only 200 pages! It's as if the author had wanted to make sure and pack in everything any reader might expect from a novel about the 14th century.

The most interesting things in the book, and I'm assuming Unsworth did his homework and wasn't making this up out of whole cloth, were the descriptions of the theatrical performances staged in the course of the action. Learning about the kinds of gestures used by actors, the degree of ad libbing and secret signs the actors had to warn each other of their intentions, the costumes, the staging, all of that was absolutely fascinating. (In fact, it's made me want to read a scholarly book about medieval theatre!) Also interesting, though this was obviously less historical, were the ways in which the players wanted to change the constraints under which their art operated; and especially, the ways in which the players' rehearsals and performance of the story of a child's murder led them to deeper and better understandings of the events.

LJ says

MORALITY PLAY Hist. Mys-Nicholas Barber-England-1300s) – G+
Unsworth, Barry – Standalone
Doubleday, 1995, US Hardcover – ISBN: 0385479530

First Sentence: It was a death that began is all and another death that led us on.

Young priest Nicholas Barber has run away from his safe but boring position at Lincoln Cathedral to join a company of players. Deciding to do something different than has been done before, they decide to make a play out of the real murder which has just occurred. A young boy was found dead by the roadside and a girl has been condemned for execution. In order to create the play, the players must learn the truth of the crime and uncover, among other things, that the girl is deaf and mute.

Mr. Unsworth has clearly done his research on life in the 14th century. There is wonderful detail about the period and the elaborateness of plays during the time and a case for how plays changed from strictly presenting stories of the Bible into morality plays.

The author has an almost philosophic tone, bordering upon, but not quite crossing into preachy. He presents an interesting prospective on who are actors. It is a remarkably insightful book that causes one to think, question and acknowledge.

As usual, I had a problem with the overwhelming number of portents in the story. At the same time, I was thoroughly engrossed in the story.

Written in a style and cadence which suggests the period, this was not the easiest book to read, but it was well worth the effort.

Kate Vane says

Nicholas Barber is a fourteenth-century cleric who has left his position in Lincoln Cathedral through youthful restlessness. He is therefore a fugitive, and a hungry one, when he happens upon a group of players and they allow him to join them. Their journey takes them through a town where a woman is about to be hung for murder. They decide to perform a play about her crime but somehow the story refuses to fit the form.

There is so much packed into this beautifully crafted short novel. It is alive with the sights and sounds and smells (especially the smells) of the period and has all the archetypes of the Medieval hierarchy. However, it is an order under strain, where the conflict between the individual and the role that is assigned to them is about to come to the boil.

Nowhere is this seen more clearly than in the dramatisation of the murder by the players. The writing is impressive because we see everything from Nicholas' point of view as he performs, but we also get a vivid sense of what the audience sees. This is enhanced in the audiobook by the excellent narrator. He distinguishes not just the individual characters, but between their 'real' and their theatrical voices, as they move between artifice and realism.

As the players perform the play their understanding of the murder changes. They are not only learning the truth, they are creating it. In telling a story of their own devising, rather than the officially sanctioned account, they are questioning the very basis of their society, even though they know there will be consequences.

Morality Play is a book that stays with you, with its intricate drawing together of the visceral honesty of theatre and the role-playing that we call real life.

This review first appeared on my blog <https://katevane.wordpress.com>

Teresa says

The best of historical fiction is said to comment on the time during which it was written, not just the time being written about. Here, though, the focus is perhaps on a universal theme, the idea that nothing ever changes, especially concerning those in power controlling or suppressing the truth for their own benefit.

If you're looking for a mystery (which I didn't read this as), the story might seem formulaic. The nature of the crime and the perpetrator came at me from a mile away and many characters are basically stock figures as befitting a morality play. While it's true the members of the troupe of players (the word 'actor' is never used), along with a woman who travels with them, delve into the mystery as if they were almost detectives, the novel is also a reflection on the nature of art, of storytelling, how it can get at truth even if all the details are not accurate, even if the ending is unknown, even if a first motive is profit.

The townspeople do not come out in droves for the players' first offering, a stock morality play, but they pack the area for a play that is about themselves, becoming vocal when something seems wrong. The audience intervention helps the players get at more of the truth, along with showing the benefit (and danger) of questioning a story put out by authorities. The revelatory play-within-the-play (or novel) reminded me of Hamlet's play *wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king*.

A different form of playing -- jousting for the entertainment of the upper classes -- is seen as a substitute blood-sport for those who send out their underlings to do the actual fighting in actual battles, another reflection on the political world of today, of just about any day.

Amalia Gavea says

"It was a death that began it all and another death that led us on."

In 2004, I watched a beautiful film starring Willem Dafoe and Vincent Cassel, among others, titled "The Reckoning". Since then, I was trying to find the book that inspired the movie. It wasn't until 2015 that my search finally ended and two years later, I can say that Unsworth created a very memorable and darkly beautiful novel.

Nickolas is a young priest that has broken his vows of chastity. Running away from his diocese, he comes across a company of traveling players who carry a macabre burden. They decide to stay in the nearest village and perform a play out of their usual repertoire which includes Biblical stories. However, a crime that has caused quite an upheaval in the community becomes the inspiration for a new play. And this is when the implications begin.

"....no one fears players...."

The book is a treasure for those of us interested in the tradition of Morality plays or Mysteries, as they are also called. Through pantomime and verse and with complex -for the time-special effects, the actors used to perform religious themes that would be well-known to the audience, peasants and nobles alike. Depicting local incidents and contemporary events was unheard of and would remain so for quite some time. Here, Martin, the leader of the company, decides to break the rule and perform the murder of a young boy. To do so, the company must investigate the disappearance and murder of young Thomas.

Nickolas and Martin are the main characters. In many ways, they're very similar. They are clever and brave but their morality is dubious. They understand one has to depart from the righteous path in order to eat and to defend those in need during harsh times. The rest of the company are people with interesting background stories, like Stephen and Margaret, but the book is too short and there is very little character development.

The writing is beautiful and powerful. The marvelous, haunting wintry atmosphere is very important to the feeling of the story and I could feel as if I was walking in the medieval market as the snow was falling silently upon the grey tower and the huts. There are many issues addressed in the novel. The Plague carries victims in its passing, but death doesn't come from illness exclusively. Humans are the worst, most ruthless murderers. Poverty makes people obey and bend the knee to every Lord that oppresses them in every level without question. Nickolas' thoughts and his interactions with Martin and the King's Justice provide much food thought on psychological and social issues. The freedom of choice, the notion of duty, the hypocrisy and violence. The crime and the punishment.

As I said, the only negative element is the small length of the novel. I wanted to see and understand more of the characters. I wanted to see a rounded closure to the stories of the players, to the fortune of the village and the justice performed. Apart from that, this is an excellent book that I can't place in one genre. Mystery, thriller, Historical Fiction, psychological study and the list goes on. It is fast - paced, memorable and full of vivid images. However, on my opinion, this is a rare case of the film being more completed and well-rounded than the book. The two complement each other in a perfect way.

Sandra Bašić says

Žao mi je što je knjiga pisana izvornim a ne modernim eng. jezikom pa je kao takva i prevedena. Prošlo vrijeme "izbodeno" aoristom i imperfektom ubilo mi je volju za ?itanjem pa sam prestala pratiti sadržaj a po?ela brojiti koliko ?u puta u re?enici dobiti "bijaše" i sl. ina?ice dragog nam glagola biti. "Maltretiranje" jezikom ovakvog tipa dozvoljavam samo Bibliji, ovo je bilo pravo mu?enje. Šteta, jer knjiga uop?e sadržajno nije loša.

Film je popravio dojam (naravno, britanski je) pogotovo moj omiljeni Paul Bettany kojem je dodijeljena uloga sve?enika Nicholasa.

Bijaše ovo zaista jedno neponovljivo iskustvo (bar se nadam da se ne?e ponoviti).

Ned Hayes says

Morality Play is a tight taut tale of a troupe of actors in 14th century England who enter a new village and find out about the murder of a local boy. In a twist unusual to their station in the culture and their tenuous place in life, they actually become involved in this local crime.

In fact, they choose to create an original play (which was strange to do in the period) around the crime, in order to put the facts before the local village population. In the time period, this brave attempt to portray the contemporary life -- and mysteries -- of the village on stage, was strange and provocative. Given the facts of the events, it is close to heresy and treason.

Rapidly, they become enmeshed in a mystery that involves far more than a boy's murder, and the play they thought they were creating has ramifications beyond this small village -- in fact, this drama includes some of the most powerful nobles in England at the time.

The story really plays with the idea that every person is an actor in their own drama. As another reviewer pointed out, this sentiment was expressed by Shakespeare in his famous quotation, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

In this novel, I personally loved the complicated period-appropriate characters. Nicholas, who narrates the story, is philosophical and has strong psychological insights. I also like Martin Ball, who is the head of the acting troupe. The other actors are fully fleshed characters with believable back stories.

In fact, I liked the acting troupe so much, that I gave them a small walk-on role in my own novel of the Middle Ages, **Sinful Folk**: <http://SinfulFolk.com> Nicholas, Martin and the other members of the troupe are briefly featured in a scene outside the Monastery, just after my own travelers have been sent out on the open road.

Morality Play is more than a commentary or a murder mystery. Instead, it functions as an analysis of the idea of drama and fakery, of stagecraft and lifecraft, of roles and the masks we all wear. I highly recommend the book.

Ivonne Rovira says

Barry Unsworth's *Morality Play* proves to be equal parts Ellis Peters' Brother Cadfael and learned explication of medieval life. Please don't let that put you off! This brief, thoroughly entertaining novel won the Booker Prize, and you'll see why almost immediately.

Wayward priest Nicholas Barber ran away from his diocese during the springtime. Having run afoul of a cuckolded husband, at Christmas time he has fled afield and crosses paths with a traveling acting troupe just at the moment when one of their number has suddenly died. Nicholas eagerly takes refuge with them, while the players reluctantly consent, as they are in need of another actor. In route to a gig, they stop on the way to make a little extra coinage entertaining at a village controlled by one Lord Richard de Guise.

That the decision will prove an unwise one Nicholas announces from the very first page. A 12-year-old peasant boy has been murdered, and a local woman charged with the crime. Hollywood today can't resist a brutal murder, nor could these medieval players, who adapt the story into a play of their own — a very novel move in Northern England at the time. However, the more they delve into the brutal killing, the less the authorities' version of what happened holds together.

Like *The Name of the Rose* before it, *Morality Play* brings the Middle Ages — and its scourges of war, plague, corruption, and grinding poverty — to life under the guise of a whodunnit. Enjoy the heart-stopping suspense and the shocking ending, and, as a side benefit, get an unvarnished glimpse into the plight of the common man in 14th century Northern England. Highly, highly recommended.

WarpDrive says

This is a historical novel set in a small rural town in fourteenth century England: it is winter, the landscape is snow-laden, the climate is freezing cold, and the Black Death is a constant presence.

This is a pretty nice, atmospheric novel, decently researched and written, with credible characters and a good and engaging storyline, with sparks of real originality: however it does not have the intellectual depth nor the ambitious scope of the "Name of the Rose", for example.

Overall, this is a nice and pleasant read, recommended to all readers interested in the Late Middle Ages. 3.5 stars.

Jane says

An excellent medieval mystery involving a renegade priest, Nicholas Barber, who, having broken his vow of chastity, has run away from his diocese of Lincoln. He tells us his story of how one bleak December he has joined with a troupe of travelling players and his life with them. They give what is termed 'morality plays': on Biblical subjects, and good triumphing over evil. They are on their way to Durham, the castle of the lord of the area, Sir Robert de Guise, to provide entertainment at the lord's Christmas feast. When Nicholas first meets them, one of their number has just died and they stop in a small town in order to have him buried. In the town, a boy, Thomas Wells, has been murdered, and the players decide to investigate and to present as a morality play 'The Play of Thomas Wells' to the townspeople. This will be something new; they feel they will attract a larger audience. The performance is so successful, the players decide to dig deeper into the crime, to prove innocent the deaf-and-dumb girl accused of the murder, and to present 'The True Play of Thomas Wells' to the villagers. In this second performance, apparently they have come too close to the truth and are in danger. They are hauled off to the lord's castle and are forced to give him a private performance in his private chambers...

This was very well written and I learned something about the medieval theatre through the players' rehearsals and presentations. I got a good feel for the atmosphere of 14th century England. I liked the description of the jousting tournament in the tilting yard at Sir Robert's castle.

This short novel is highly recommended.

Hugh says

Sometimes the best discoveries start as chance events. I saw this book in a second hand shop and thought little more than "oh Barry Unsworth, he's the one who wrote *Sacred Hunger*, that might be interesting". As it turned out this was an inspired choice.

This is on one level a tautly plotted murder mystery, secondly fourteenth century social history, and thirdly and perhaps deepest an investigation of the birth of modern theatre.

The narrator, a fugitive monk bored with his work, stumbles upon a group of travelling players whose trade

is in religious mystery plays, and joins their company to replace a dead man. Their need for money in a strange town leads them to improvise a play based on the murder of a local boy, and as the play and the story evolve, a dark truth emerges.

Marita says

I loved this murder mystery which is set against a backdrop of the Black Death and the other terrible events of the fourteenth century. If you're thinking "I don't like murder mysteries", perhaps give this one some consideration as it is not your average murder mystery.

What we have is a group of itinerant actors who stop at a certain town for the purpose of burying a dead comrade, and to perform some plays in order to earn some money to survive. Taking the place of the deceased actor is Nicholas Barber, a renegade priest. Nicholas has had to learn this new trade very quickly, and he also observes how the players in the group interact: **"And it came to me then that all the members of this company were playing parts even when there was no one by but themselves. Each had lines of his own and was expected to say them."**

On arrival in the town they find out that a murder has taken place and that a young woman has been found guilty of the crime. It is soon decided by the players to perform not the traditional miracle plays, but to perform a play of the events that have taken place in the town. This is as much of the plot as I'll reveal.

What I particularly liked about this novel was the recurring theme of the world being a stage. I loved the descriptions in Barbara Tuchman's *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century* of medieval theatre, and much of it is described in this novel. There is also powerful imagery of masks slipping, etc. Soon it becomes a question of what is reality and what is not as the play becomes interwoven with the story of the events that had taken place in the town. Nicholas, who has a foot in both camps, i.e. he is an actor in the play, but he is also a priest in the real world observes: **"But I was confused between the playing of the thing and the living of it."**.. As the facts of the murder case become known, the play changes. According to a colleague: **"The play is not the same now as it was,' Straw said. 'And we are not the same, the parts have changed."**. Later Nicholas states: **"We no longer had any notion of where the play was tending, we were drowning in it, we had to snatch words from the air, as drowning people snatch at breath."** and **"We were all without masks now – our sense of the roles we played was shifting, changing"**.

There are many excellent pieces that I might quote, but I leave them to you to find. Let me conclude by saying that there is some horror (echoes of the Gilles de Rais story) and the Black Death, but there is also some humour to be found, particularly in the descriptions of the players dressed up for their acts and the execution of the plays. I also found some details of the transportation of the dead friend humorous in a macabre sort of way. It does not mean that the subject of death is treated disrespectfully or without sympathy, but there is some light relief from the misery.

Glenn Russell says

The Black Death gripped Europe in the years 1348-1350, wiping out nearly half the population in cities and

frequently every man, woman and child in villages and towns. People could be healthy in the morning, feverish at noon, covered in boils, spitting blood and writhing in agony in the evening and meet their death that very night.

Not even close to understanding the true biological cause of this blackest of plagues and perceiving the ugly, stinking buboes popping up on family and neighbors as the wrath of God, inhabitants of Europe lived in a collective psychological paralysis.

The aftermath of the great pestilence left the surviving population in chaos: fields lay waste since there were fewer peasants to farm, murdering brigands terrorized the countryside and the traditional protectors of the oppressed, nobles, knights, monks and priests, frequently became the oppressors.

Not surprisingly, disease and the fear of disease did not go away; rather, more fears piled up: fear of being the victim of such things as famine, torture, rape or hacked to death by bandits or soldiers. All very real, ongoing possibilities. In a word, not a happy, feel-good time to be alive.

Thus, taking place a dozen years after the Black Death hit England, we have the backdrop of Barry Unsworth's gripping novel of a band of traveling players, including a renegade priest turned player (the story's narrator) entering a town and, half-starved, resorting to playing out the town's current event: the murder of a twelve year old boy by the name of Thomas Wells.

Unsworth's tale has the intrigue, suspense and pace of a hard-boiled detective novel, a storyline simply too good to give away any of the details. Since Mr. Unsworth did his homework on the historical facts and fine points of the fourteenth century, I will focus on several colorful scenes the author includes in his portrayal of these turbulent times.

Decked out in their costumes and ready to take the stage, the band of actors has to deal with some medieval competition. We read, "While we were preparing to put on our play a band of jongleurs came to the inn to the sound of drums and bagpipes, and began at once to set out their pitch against the wall of the yard, opposite the entrance – the best place. Jongleurs traveled in groups and entertain people wherever they can, in great halls, at tournaments and archery contests, at fairs and marketplaces. In this they resemble players, but unlike us they have no leader and there is no general meaning to what they do, they can combine together or break away." Darn, life is tough for a poor, starving acting troupe; if it isn't abuse and scorn from the innkeeper and town officials, it's another band of entertainers invading your space.

Sitting around a fire at night, the head player, Martin by name, recounts how small traveling groups of players such as theirs are being squeezed out not only by jongleurs but by all the big, powerful, wealthy acting guilds who stay in one place and perform an entire cycle of elaborate plays. Rather than playing a set piece like *The Play of Adam*, Martin comes up with a new idea; he tells the group they should play the murder of Thomas Wells.

Such a unique approach provokes much discussion and debate but the troupe senses all the townspeople will show up for such a play and pay handsomely. From this point, the tension and drama of the novel builds chapter by chapter.

Throughout the story there is telling detail of the way the fourteenth century players acted their parts, which adds real spice to the reading of this novel. For example, here is a description of one of the players, Straw by name, "But there was in Straw an instinct for playing, or rather a meeting of instinct and knowledge, a natural impulse of the body. I do not know what to call it, but is something that can neither be taught nor

learned. For the part of the temptress he had devised a strange and frightening way of bending the body stiffly sideways with the head held for a moment in inquiry and hands just above the waist, palms outward and fingers stiffly splayed in a gesture of his own invention. So for a moment, while he made the pause to see the effects of his tempting, he was frozen in wicked inquiry. Then he broke again into sinuous motion, gesturing the delights that awaited Thomas Wells."

On a road some way from the town, the priest/player/narrator relays what he sees when he looks down the road: "The snow made a mist and at one moment there was nothing but this mist and at one moment there was nothing but this mist and at the next there were dark shapes in it, advancing slowly up the hill, two riders and with them a great black beast whose head rose high as theirs and it had red eyes and above its head there moved with it a shape of red, dark red in the white of snow, and I knew this for the flame of the Beast's breath and I knew what Beast it was and what manner of riders there were and I crossed myself and groaned aloud in my fear, seeing that the Beast had come and my soul was unprepared."

Turns out, this is only a knight and his squire and horse traveling to a joust. But the tenor of the times is in the projection -- in his fear, the priest sees the fourth horseman of the apocalypse. I can't imagine a more powerful and compelling story of what it was like to actually live in the wake of the Black Death.

British author Barry Unsworth, 1930 - 2012

Annet says

It was a death that began it all and another death that led us on....

A grand historical book, shortlisted for the Man Booker prize, about a band of poor travelers, performing plays in the times of the Middle Ages, stumbling into a crime scene that will place them in unforeseen circumstances....

Enjoyed it immensely, last two days I breathlessly read through it.

Great book indeed. Beautiful read. The top of historical reads.

Recommended.

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books (hide spoiler)]

Patty says

Honestly, it took about 40 pages for this book to really engage my attention. Once it did, though, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Couldn't wait to get back on the subway so I'd have time to sit and read, and never figured out "who done it" on my own. A very unique murder mystery. Thank you, Maureen, for recommending it and for giving it to me.

Maureen says

this was my introduction to the historical novels of barry unsworth and i really appreciate his idea of telling a story set in the past. he doesn't overwhelm the reader with his precious research; rather he provides in morality tale a whodunnit set in the middle ages. his style of historical writing is like a high-end manicure: the story is buffed and polished, and then painted with two or three coats of in the colours of the era, in the reflection of historical context in which he has chosen to set his story. that's not to say research isn't done -- it's just not overwhelming, and unsworth allows himself to speculate about how things might have been. short, sweet, intriguing little novel. i highly recommend it.

one proviso: i do not recommend discussing this book with somebody you brought home from the bar. they might ask you if it is a based on a true story (the doings of a band of travelling players who try to figure out the murder of a boy by creating a play based on the facts they are able to gather was likely to be well documented, right?) and you might just look at the cross-eyed, and tell them you'll call them a cab.

not that that ever happened to me, or anything. :P

Kinga says

Well, well, well, Barry... Didn't think we would meet again after that ghastly horror that 'The Land of Marvels' was. But this wasn't half bad.

The book takes place in late fourteenth century and tells the story of Nicholas, a fugitive monk ,who joins a travelling troupe. As the narrator says:

"It was a death that began it all and another death that led us on."

Now, writing a literary crime fiction novel revolving around medieval theatre is a very original concept in itself. Unsworth moves very well within the constraints of the world view of the times, and his characters are accurate representations of medieval mentality where fear is the most familiar feeling of all. In the world of war, feudalism, plague and the cruel God punishing you for all sorts of random things, there is indeed a lot to fear.

Unsworth brings the Middle Ages to life with its smells, sounds and sights – most of them aren't pretty. The atmosphere is so real that you feel like you need a shower afterwards. While Unsworth paints the landscape masterfully, he is, sadly, not as skilled with portraits. The characters melt into one mass of a generic medieval man. This inability to create memorable characters was also my main complaint about 'The Land of Marvels' and by 'memorable' I mean that if you read their name of on the page, some image comes to your mind. To be honest, the characters remained strangers to me and if I passed them on the street I wouldn't recognise them. In 'Morality Play' there was at least a pretty good story to back it up.

The troupe arrives in a small town where a twelve year boy was recently murdered allegedly by the Weaver's daughter and she has already been sentenced and is now awaiting execution. When the troupe's regular biblical plays fails to attract as much attention as they hoped for, Simon, unofficial leader of the

group, has an idea to present a play that would depict the little boy's murder. If you think that's not a big deal, you obviously never lived in the Middle Ages. Back then you went to hell for things like that. You can't just play out actual local events! It's wrong and it's a sin. Yet, the troupe's bellies are empty and the promise of money together with a challenge that playing something new and original would present are enough to convince the players to give it a go.

Here is probably, where most of us will have to suspend our historical disbelief, for Martin and his troupe have just singlehandedly revolutionised the theatre. If they hadn't, there would be no story, so let's cut Unsworth some slack.

Obviously with the superiority of centuries of experience a modern reader can tell right away that the poor girl is innocent but the players don't realise that until they start acting the whole murder out and things are just not quite right. And before they know it they are investigating a crime through a play.

'Morality Play' is what you call a cracking read, and would be a lot better if Unsworth didn't constantly interrupt to drone on about how we all wear masks, and we get so into our roles that we forget that they are roles, and the world is a stage and we are all actors, and it is all so unbelievably revelatory, Barry. I am sure no one has ever thought of it before. Except for, maybe, Shakespeare. There really was a little too much heavy-handed symbolism made for eye-rolling only, because it didn't enrich the story in any way.

All in all, I am not a Barry Unsworth convert. I still fail to see what the big deal about him is, but 'Morality Play' was fairly enjoyable and I would even recommend it. Especially to people who like short books, chop, chop, chop.

Andrew says

Morality Play by Barry Unsworth tells the story of a troupe of actors in 14th century England who become involved in the murder of a young boy. As they investigate the crime for the purposes of producing a play based on it, they become increasingly aware of the inconsistencies that pervade the case against the girl accused by the authorities. The actors soon find themselves well over their heads, embroiled in a mystery that involves far more than a peasant boy's death, a play whose actors are the most powerful men in all of England.

Unsworth's characters make up one of the strongest points of this novel. The narrator, Nicholas, is insightful and philosophical yet not to the degree that he becomes alienating to the reader. He is given a fully fleshed out and flawed personality so that he does not merely become the lens through which we view the novel's world but is instead a character on par with any of the others in the book. Martin Ball, the head of the group is perhaps the most fascinating of the actors. From the outset, Unsworth prepares us for this man's uniqueness and consequent dangerousness. In a time where creativity is not looked highly upon in the ranks of the peasantry, Martin is a dangerous person to be associated with. He is not content to continue performing the same tired out, formulaic Biblical plays and wants to experiment with an entirely new method of theatre. Casting aside convention, he attempts to depict contemporary life through art, a risky move even in today's culture and outrageous in the 14th century. Martin is very much a visionary, and I had the impression while reading this novel that had he been born a few hundred years later, he would have been a successful and famous playwright. Thus, Unsworth adds a sense of mournful irony to the character of Martin Ball, for both author and reader are aware of the subsequent developments in theatre that would allow men like Martin creative liberty in their writing. For his own time however, Martin is an oddity and is the driving

force behind the group's investigation of the town's murder.

Throughout this short novel, we are presented with fascinating snippets of Nicholas' philosophy. His commentary contains deep insight into issues relevant to his own time as well as the world in general. My favourite of his reflections is this one that he gives as he witnesses a tournament. He says:

"We were the people now, in our turn they [the nobles] the players. And the play was their own valor and pride. I had seen jousting before, in courtyards and open fields, combats of single champions and melees with a hundred fighting, sometimes with weapons blunted, sometimes not. It is a spectacle very popular with the people now. They crowd to see it with great advantage to pickpockets and whores. But now, perhaps because I had become a player myself, as the trumpets sounded again and the heralds shouted, it came to me for the first time that this was the greatest example of playing our times afforded. We were players by profession and borrowed roles as seemed fitting. The nobility had only the one but they persisted in it, though denounced by popes and kings for the violence and vainglory of it and the expenditure of money which might have been better spent in maintaining those same popes and kings."

In this passage as well as others, Nicholas extols the idea that everyone is an actor, performing upon one of the many hierarchical stages that make up the world. It is a similar sentiment to that expressed by Shakespeare in his famous quotation, "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Unsworth takes the often cited analogy of the world being a stage and explores the depths of their likenesses. By the end of the novel, Unsworth has you seeing the world in the same way as Nicholas, who, his transformation to actor complete, views the entire world as a series of ranked stages. *Morality Play* is more than just a mystery; it is a profound examination of the nature of acting and the effects of role-playing. I highly recommend it as a deep and compelling novel with an unusual take on both historical fiction and mystery.
