

TLC Showcase

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Introduction to *The Seeker of Mercy*

In 1346, midpoint of the most perilous century of the Middle Ages, an intelligent, illiterate peasant named Edmund was conscripted into the English army as an archer and sent to France. He survived months of brutal warfare there, during which he killed not only when he was ordered to, but for mercy's sake. Scarred in body and spirit, he eventually made his way home to a village unchanged by anything but the rhythm of the seasons – and this is where the novel starts.

He has to face the brother who terrorized him as a boy and the parish priest's enmity when he dares question God's role in the blood-soaked fields of Normandy. The woman he loves wants him solely for his stories. The ambitious wise-woman challenges him in ways he deplors, while an ill-kempt servant-girl and the village whore are blackthorns in his flesh. Worse, he cannot make peace with the memories that besiege him. Then plague arrives in the village and everything changes.

The Seeker of Mercy explores the slow uncovering of family secrets; the moral complexity in a faith-based society of taking the life of another person; the human desire for intimacy juxtaposed to the difficulties of loving the deeply flawed or badly damaged; and the search for meaning true to harsh experience.

I sent the manuscript to TLC because after working on it for four years I was too close to it to judge where the momentum sagged and whether certain aspects of the writing were working. My report from Michael Langan was specific, astute and generous, and now I'm back to revising, convinced that if I can follow his suggestions I'll end up with a better novel.

The following excerpt is taken from the last third of the manuscript. The first victim of plague in the village is Ezekiel, the lord's groom, owner of a prized flock of hens and a ramshackle house. Gervase and Jericho are his brothers. Nell sells tallow candles to the villagers and herself to anyone willing. Heriot, the death duty owed to the lord, was claimed either as coin or as the best beast, usually an ox or a cow.

The Seeker of Mercy by Jill MacLean

Priest and wise-woman have left him alone with a man whose brothers are afraid to come near him and whose heriot, should he die, will be a five-toed cockerel. At dusk Edmund hustles cock and hens into the coop, fills buckets in the river and, after lighting one of Nell's tallow candles, eats the bread and cheese in his pouch. Flame and faggot natter in the hearth. Dark patches now stain the skin on Ezekiel's chest; when Edmund tries to make him drink, his tongue is blackened and his breath vile. He groans and cries out, sometimes gabbling words that make no sense, and though the evening is cool, he is on fire with fever.

At full dark he comes to himself. "Take me to the river," he croaks, "for I burn in Hell."

"I can't, Ezekiel, you're too ill. Here, drink a little."

Ezekiel pushes the cup away. "The river, Edmund, for the love of Christ let me lie in the river."

Could he do it? In the dark? The current runs fast below the toft, what if it caught Ezekiel and he drowned? With a chilling of his blood Edmund hears the church bell toll Compline and pictures the priest hanging on the rope. Soon every villager will know that Flintbourne has not been spared God's wrath. Famine within Mam's memory, war within his own, and now plague. What kind of love dwells in the heart of the Almighty?

To his great relief Ezekiel falls back on the bed; and with a creak of hinges the wise-woman comes through the door, the cloth around her face making a stranger of her. She bathes Ezekiel's face in rosewater but cannot make him swallow her potion, which dribbles down his chin and drips to the mattress. Edmund says, "He's beyond help, Agnes."

"I can't even lessen his pain."

"Go home and rest. If the sickness spreads you'll be called upon day and night, and there will be those you can help."

"If not, tis clear proof I am no sorceress." She thumps the jug of potion on the table. "Perhaps you can make him drink some. God be with you both."

Father Thomas comes next, spreads a white cloth on the bench by the bed, arranges a crucifix and two beeswax candles, and as Edmund drops to his knees, makes the sign of the Cross with holy oil over Ezekiel's closed eyes. "*Per istam sanctam unctionem...*" A similar anointing follows for the sins of ears, nostrils, lips, hands and feet, the quietly spoken Latin invocations in antiphony to the sick man's groans. When the sacrament is done, Edmund stands up. His feet are cold, his heart colder.

The priest gives him a keen look. "We cannot fathom the ways of God, Edmund."

"To be unfathomable, tis a useful trait in times like this."

"You blaspheme." Father Thomas closes his missal with a most unpriestly snap. "I'll return at Lauds."

Does the man never sleep? Edmund stokes the fire, bathes Ezekiel's wax-pale, swollen face with cool river water, wrings out fresh cloths to wrap his chest and listens to himself talking. "My best hen is sick, Ezekiel, I need you to tell me how to dose her. Your own hens need you and you're the one to stop the boys in the vill tying their cockerels to a stake and stoning them until legs and wings are broke, such a mix we are of cruelty and goodness. They say stoning makes the meat tender, cockerels being known for toughness – do God's stones loose our own tender feelings or do they break our legs and wings?"

He wants to weep. He wants to lie down on the floor and sleep. He wants to be anywhere but where he is, the lone and helpless witness to a man's agony, breathing in the stench of his dying. The slow hours pass. His backside is sore from the bench, his eyes scratchy. Ezekiel is now making noises as terrible as those of the man who was hung over a fire in a Norman hovel, and the nightmares that bedevil Edmund's sleep prance in the shadowed corners of the room. He adds more wood to the hearth, the flames bright, hostile; his whole body jerks when Agnes walks in the door. She says sharply, "Are you ill?"

"Nay...I'm glad to see you."

"You are good to keep this vigil."

She goes to the bed, parts Ezekiel's lips and drips potion between them. When he starts to choke, Edmund hopes for an end; but the desperate rasp for air gives way to the fast, shallow breathing he's grown accustomed to.

"What use is such suffering, Agnes?"

"None that I know of. I thought the beatings my husband doled out would make me kinder to other women similarly trapped. Instead, I scream at them to leave while they can and despise them when they don't." She sighs. "Suffering is born into us. We are creatures who can glory in a sunset, but if we touch flame we feel pain like the lowest beast. Go home, Edmund, I'll look after him."

"I promised Nell I'd be here at dawn."

"Then get as much potion in him as you can and tell her I'll come by before Terce."

He settles down to keep watch again and is almost asleep, chin to chest, when Ezekiel rears up, tears at his armpit with his dirty nails, screeches and falls back. His eyes, wide open, lock to Edmund's, filled with a horror unleavened by any understanding. It would be so easy to fold the blanket over the man's nose and mouth, press down and wait until his breathing ceased. He should never have told Father Thomas how in the army he slew the hopelessly wounded for mercy's sake. Vainglory drove him to that confession, for he wanted to show that he was different, that he brought Christ to the battlefield and the lanes of French villis.

The woman cowering against the church wall in the shadows of a chestnut tree, the six soldiers waiting for the first one to make a move – she wasn't wounded and he'd slain her. She might have been alive when the soldiers were done with her and, in time, might have been glad to be so. Regret, repentance, contrition, the words swirl around him, and none can undo that single arrow to her chest.

Our sins do indeed find us out, he thinks, drenches the cloths in the bucket and lays them across Ezekiel's body, then spoons a little more of Agnes's potion down his throat. But Ezekiel's tormented movements of arms and legs worsen, Edmund now fearful that his groin is also infected by the dread swellings. How impossible to feel the pain of another human being, no matter how visible and piteous; yet his nerves are raw from the watching and it seems forever until Father Thomas arrives at Lauds.

The priest looks down at the bed. "May God have mercy on his soul."

The words burst from Edmund. "How much more must he bear? Tis like witnessing a man being tortured to death."

"Anger is one of the seven deadly sins, Edmund."

"Hell could cause no worse suffering than this!"

"It is not for you to say what Hell is like – pride the first of the company of seven."

"Your answers pour forth bounteous as holy water." Edmund drops his head to his hands. "I'm weary to the bone, Father, and aye, I'm angry. Go back to the church. Once Nell comes, I'll go home and sleep."

The priest rests his hand on Edmund's shoulder. "Your distress is a measure of your charity. I've heard of no other cases of sickness in the vill, we may yet escape lightly."

His distress a measure of his charity? Not so, not so.

He stares through the hole he made in the daub when he forced his way into Ezekiel's house. We build walls of mud and wattle against the night, he thinks, yet how easily they tumble...what if God is but another of our walls? A thought counter to everything he's been taught. Sweet Jesu, he has to stop this.

He begins talking to Ezekiel again, telling him about the glory of his new bow, about his winter rye and his sow. "I named her Melicent, even though next November I'll be the one to stick a knife in her throat. But Melicent she is, and a happier pig I never knew."

His eyes feel like holes in his skull. He lifts Ezekiel's head and gives him a little ale to drink, ale that's spewed back moments later. A few drops of the potion stay down. Three more, then Ezekiel vomits a stinking black bile. Grateful for the cloth over his nose, Edmund cleans him up, scrubs his own hands, stokes the fire again and describes the fearsome Channel waves that reared above *Cogge of All Hallows*, the vast sands on the French shore where a vaster army spread itself like ants kicked from an ant hill, the pitiful state of so many of the horses. The muffled crowing of the cock inside the coop barely registers because he's busy telling about the black hens of Normandy, the gloss of their feathers and the plumpness of their breasts.

The door swings open. He leaps to his feet. Nell steps over the threshold, blinks in the firelight and crouches beside the bed. "Ezekiel," she says and strokes the hair back from his brow. As she winces from the heat of his skin, he jerks his head away and for the first time Edmund notices new swellings at the base of his throat, dark as bruises. One arm flails at the mattress. The lump in his armpit is now oozing a black liquid. Nell stands up, covering her mouth and gagging.

"He grows worse," Edmund says. "The pain is unending and Agnes's potions have little effect. You shouldn't be here."

She whirls to face him. "Why not? I don't see his brothers nor anyone else save you 'n' me. And you look like a pile of shite."

"You're not wearing a cloth over your face as Agnes ordered."

"If I ain't caught the burning sickness all these years, I doubt the plague'll do me in." Her voice changes. "Edmund, can naught be done?"

"So you do care about him."

"I tol' you what he be to me. Not more, not less."

"You can keep wet cloths on his body to try and bring the fever down. Tis desperate hard to watch him suffer."

"I ain't afeard. If he don't die, will you stay tonight?" As he nods, for what choice does he have, she walks closer to the hearth until she's clothed in smoke. Points of fire in her eyes, she lifts an amulet from beneath her chemise, holds it Heavenwards and chants, "In the name of Hretha, I beg surcease from suffering for Ezekiel, keeper of horses. I call a curse upon Gervase, I call a curse upon Jericho, may they die in agony, may the wolves of Hel devour them."

The amulet drops, to swing on its leather cord, and she steps away from the fire, her features once again Nell's, close-crowded and marked by pox. Edmund's skin feels tight as ice over a puddle. "Have a care," he says uneasily, "we might all die in agony."

"Sir Roger? Cosh? Dame Edith? Every cloud got a topside."

"I wish I could believe so. Agnes will be here this morning and Father Thomas. Do you have your confession ready?"

"Polished like a brass pot."

"Don't blind the poor man with it. I'll let the hens out and fill their water bowl."

Because his mind isn't on what he's doing, the cockerel gives him a hearty peck.

About the Writer

Jill MacLean has lived most of her life on Canada's east coast, although she was born in Berkshire, the county where *The Seeker of Mercy* is set. She is herself a seeker of islands: the Faroes, Bon Portage, Iceland, Ellesmere and Machias Seal Island top the list.

She began her writing career with genre fiction, then switched to poetry, its polar opposite; her collection was shortlisted for two awards. At the request of her grandson, she wrote him a book (it had to have snowmobiles and hockey in it – what *is* the blue line?). It was the first of a trilogy, followed by two Young Adult novels, all five published in Toronto and altogether winning four awards and receiving numerous nominations, four of them international. She's conducted school presentations and readings, many for the Canada Council, from coast to coast. Her initial school visit was, to say the least, terrifying.



After the fifth novel, she felt in danger of falling into a literary rut: four were set in northern Newfoundland and bullying was a theme throughout. She'd long been fascinated by the medieval period, so she dove in and read for a year; a high point in the research was being driven by her son around the lanes of southern Berkshire in search of the setting (the pubs were great, too). Two years to write the book, two years to revise it, and then the serendipitous discovery of TLC.

You can read her blog on her website: <https://jillmaclean.mywriting.network>