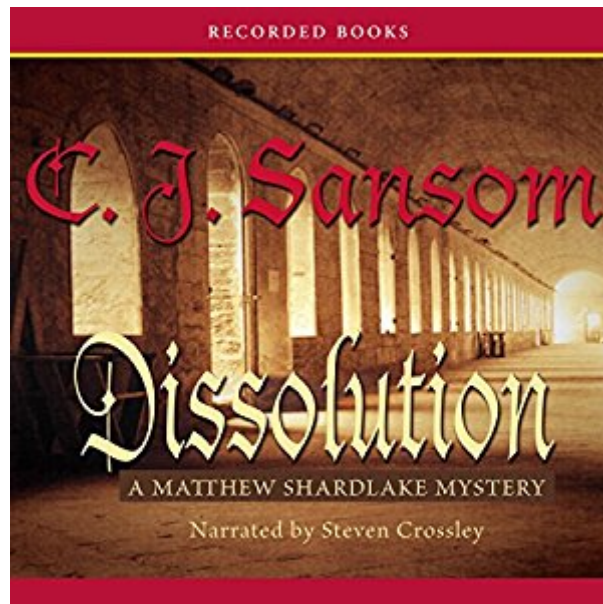


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Dissolution: A Novel Of Tudor England Introducing Matthew Shardlake



Synopsis

This riveting debut set in 1534 England secured C. J. Sansom's place "among the most distinguished of modern historical novelists" (P. D. James). When Henry VIII's emissary is beheaded at an English monastery, hunchbacked lawyer Matthew Shardlake is dispatched to solve the crime. But as he uncovers a cesspool of sin, three more murders occur - and Matthew may be the next target.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The cover of *Dissolution* is festooned with glowing praise from writers such as P.D. James and Colin Dexter. This praise overcame my natural allergy to historical mysteries and led me to buy the book. I was not disappointed. *Dissolution* is a surprisingly quick read for such a long book. It flows smoothly. The combination of skilled plotting and historical detail is a winning one. The length of the book is tricky to pull off. However, I believe that the complex nature of the subject would have been difficult to tackle in less time. *Dissolution* is as much an investigation of personal faith as it is an investigation of a murder. Matthew Shardlake is not only uncovering who killed Robin Singleton, he is also finding some deep pools of unease within himself at the methods and motivations of his beloved Reformation. While a whodunnit could have been covered in half the time, the themes of history and faith would have been short-changed had Sansom skimmed on the background. Mystery writing at its best is often an exploration of cynicism and loss of innocence. Like any good Noir detective, Shardlake begins his career as an idealist. This book is his fall from belief into a bitter awareness of corruption. If Sansom picks up this thread and continues with it, then the readers should benefit

from a very interesting series indeed. Dissolution suffers from a few first novel flaws. For instance, Cromwell is awfully forthcoming about his scheming. It was not necessary for Shardlake to get a confession from him to believe that Shardlake could have his faith badly shaken. This and a few other minor missteps seem like artifacts of a writer who does not yet trust his own material. None of these things are flaws that should dissuade you from reading the book. This book should appeal to fans of more literary mystery writers such as James, historical fiction fans, and armchair historians. Highly recommended.

Since Ellis Peters' passing, I didn't expect to read any new good murder mysteries set in English monasteries. Thankfully, I was wrong, as I thoroughly enjoyed this work by a new author. This book takes place centuries after Brother Cadfael's time, when the British monasteries were falling into the corrupt lifestyle of the pre-Reformation Catholic Church. Of course, Henry VIII's dispute over his wished for divorce sped things along, and the new officials who arose in their master's wake were for Reform, and wished to close the monasteries, as symbols of the "papist" devils. Our intrepid hero goes to a large monastery on the coast to strong arm the abbott into surrendering his monastery to the crown, after his predecessor was murdered there. The plot deepens when two other murders occur, and our hero and his assistant must work diligently to discover "whodunnit", from a list of several likely suspects. There are religious discussions, traces of disillusionment in some of the characters, and all in all quite an exciting tale from beginning to end. I look forward quite eagerly to further books from this author.

In 1537, having divorced his first wife and marrying a second, Henry VIII proceeded to close down the monasteries, which were a symbol of the power of the Catholic Church. This move was instrumental in the shaping of English society and politics during the 16th century. Although Henry had caused the Reformation in England to take place merely because he wanted an heir, he soon found that, like Martin Luther, there were problems with Catholicism- not the least of which was that the clergy were living much better than they ought to have. Their standard of living was so much higher than the average laypersons' that monks and their servants were living very long lives- sometimes into their eighties and nineties, uncommonly long for anyone to live in the 16th century. Dissolution refers to not only the process by which the monasteries were dissolved, but the process by which lives in England were irrevocably changed by the reformation. The dissolution of the monasteries left monks without a home, severed from the life most had known their entire lives. A commissioner working in the name of Thomas Cromwell goes to oversee the closing of the

monastery at Scarnsea- and is mysteriously murdered, his head cleanly sliced off with a sword. Matthew Shardlake, hunchback lawyer at Chancery in London and deputy to Cromwell, is sent to investigate the murder. He believes that the murderer is someone within the monastic community. Before leaving London, however, Shardlake encounters someone selling parrots, those bird which repeat things that are told to them. They are not unlike the political situation in England: people repeat back what the king wants to hear. Anything that is "wrong," however, can be viewed as treasonous. Shardlake soon becomes involved in the various politics that shape up the monastery, and learns some very interesting pieces of information about the monks who live there. A young, attractive female servant, a homosexual, a stuttering monk, a converted Moor, and a mad Carthusian are some of the most interesting characters, all of which have a motive for murdering the commissioner. At the end of the day, however, three more people are dead, victims of an inevitable tragedy for the monastery. This is an excellent, well-written book. If you enjoyed this, also try Dark Fire, the second book featuring the adventures of Matthew Shardlake.

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