

**Title: *The Merciful Crow***  
**Author: Margaret Owen**  
**Genre: Fantasy**

**Reviewer name and Grade: Jonathan Z. 10th grade**

**Date reviewed: March 29, 2020**

**Summary:**

The novel *The Merciful Crow* by Margaret Owen opens up with the line “Pa was taking too long to cut the boys’ throats.” Later on, the reader is informed of a variety of different terms and people that set the background information for the novel. Initially, the main character called Fie is introduced as a chief in training for the Crows. The Crows are one of the caste levels in this new world we are introduced to. In this world, there are a total of 12 different castes, each with their own unique ability or “birthright.” Furthermore, there is also something known as the plague in this world, anyone who is contacted by it is doomed to die. The only people who are immune are the Crows who serve as death in the regard that anyone who dies to the plague, is taken by them to stop the spread of it. The first taking of the victim we are introduced to is none other than the eldest prince and his body double. When each body is taken, the Crows require a payment. However, many people look down on the crows due to their lack of a birthright. Instead, they gain the power of other caste systems when using their bones. As a result, Crows usually take payments in the form of supplies and teeth. If by some chance, the Crows are harmed, they never return to that location and the plague spreads, killing everyone.

At the beginning of the novel, Fie has to take a payment from the royal family for clearing the plague-infected bodies. When the queen refuses to do so, the Crows perform something called the money dance. It is basically them preparing to leave the body here for everyone to suffer. The queen is forced to give in, and they leave with enough teeth to satisfy them for a long time. However, after traveling a safe distance away, the Crows begin to set up a pyre to burn the bodies. It is then at that moment they learn the prince and guard they took away weren’t infected with the plague and instead were forced to flee the palace from the new queen who wants to kill them for the throne. The queen doesn’t believe they are dead and sends the vulture caste as well as the Oleander group after them. After a series of arguments, fights and intense confusion, the prince and Fie’s Pa manage to make a covenant oath which basically binds the 2 parties for eternity or until it is completed. The conditions stated in the oath are that the Crows will never be persecuted again and the prince will be delivered to his allies.

After dodging a few attempts on their lives from the Oleanders, a group that hates the Crows and wants them dead, they manage to make it to a coastal town where the prince says he has allies. Instead, they are betrayed and their whole group is captured save for Fie, the bodyguard, and the prince. Split between the decision to help save her group or uphold the oath made with the prince, Fie becomes very unstable and finally decides on upholding the oath after intense consideration of what her father would have wanted her to do. Their next destination is in the Northeast, the master general who would protect them from any actions the queen would do to seize the throne. Along the way, they are attacked by the vulture caste which has the ability to smell their targets from far away. Throughout the trip, Jas the prince, Tavin the bodyguard and Fie the new Crow chief bond on their adventures. A few of the activities are teaching Fie how to write and use the sword. When they finally make it to the master general, they have lost Tavin and Fie’s entire group which is held hostage by the Queen’s soldiers. As a result, Fie and Jas head

to the camp to barter for the return of the hostages and instead burn down the entire camp and manage to recover everyone. The story ends with everyone safe and ready to fight against the queen.

Setting: The story takes place in a fictional world in a time period we would consider before the premodern era due to their lack of technology. There is a caste system with 12 different levels and each person in the caste has a special birthright, a plague that kills anyone it contacts and a country which is ruled by an absolute monarch.

Time Period: The story takes place in a fictional setting but if the time period the story took place was put into our history, it would most likely have taken place during the 13th century.

Main Events:

- A prince and his bodyguard flee the palace in caskets
- An oath is made between the Crows and the prince
- They make it to the prince's allies who betray him
- The entire Crow group is captured save for the Prince, his bodyguard, and Fie.
- They are almost killed by the Oleanders and Vulture caste groups.
- Tavin is captured
- They arrive at the master general's fortress.
- Fie and Jas the prince fight the vulture group that is holding the Crows and Tavin hostage. They succeed and save everyone while arresting or killing everyone that was part of the vultures.

**Questions:**

*Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for non-fiction) keep you interested?*

The story was interesting because it gave us a clear goal in which we believed would be the end of the story but that goal never happens. As a result, the characters have to adapt to a new situation, thus making the story unpredictable.

*Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?*

The pace of the book was too slow since the events that transpired weren't all necessary to the plot and thus gave it a filler sense. Of course, it developed the characters as a whole but the time spent on that aspect felt excessive, so it made the story pace a little slow.

*What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?*

I believe this story type is suitable for 9th graders or higher. Anyone who has taken the first year of AP world history should have a general understanding of the backgrounds on which the story takes place since it does feel like it happens during the 13th century. Furthermore, the Crows in the novel are said to wear some type of mask that resembles the one's doctors wore during the black plague.

*What type of reader would you recommend this book to?*

I recommend this book to any reader who wants to witness an adventure from home since the scenes that have action, are generally intense and immerse the reader in a new world.

*What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?*

The main background information teens should know if they read this book is medieval history such as monarchies and the black plague. The story also has some elements of the Hindu caste system since there are noticeable differences between the treatment of each different group that may require some outside information to understand.

**Rating:**

*3 stars: It was okay; I had hoped for better.*

The book has some intense moments between the characters. The dialogue between them is quick and witty. For example, the conversations between Fie and the Tavin after the prince makes an oath with the chief is intriguing and most importantly funny to read. It lets the reader connect with the people and seems like the type of conversation normal teenagers would have, which the people in the novel are. The only difference is the topics they talk about maybe more in-depth than the average conversation in school. However, the one problem that you can see with the plot is that it is very straightforward. The reader has the ability to predict what would happen way ahead of it due to the number of hints and actions the characters take. It was quite obvious that the first attempt for the prince to meet his allies would not succeed simply because this novel is the first in a duology and that the grand plan if it succeeded, would have happened before 200 or so pages in a 400 plus page book. As a result, the book has many events that occur that seem to be filler in the regard that it doesn't really have a large effect on the plot. However, this may change in the sequel to this book. On the other hand, some of this filler allows for some funny connections between the novel. For example, Tavin and Fie have a conversation in the beginning when they are traveling on what vegetation they can or cannot eat on the path. When Tavin is captured, he gets some of that vegetation and spikes the guard's drink with it. Later when the story is told to the audience, it gives the reader a closer feel to the characters. Overall, the book is just a little slow-paced but it does have a sequel, so some of the scenes may be solved later.

**Reviewer Name and Grade : Yujay A., 9<sup>th</sup> Grade**

**Date Reviewed: December 23, 2020**

In the kingdom of Sabor, there is a rigid caste system, with each caste being named after a bird. The Crows are the lowest caste and are hated, while the Phoenix caste is the royal caste. Fie is a Crow and the next in line to become the chief of her tribe of Crows. In Sabor, a deadly disease called Sinner's plague has been killing many. The Crows were believed to be sinners, people who had caught the plague, reborn to live as Crows. The Crows were immune to the Sinner's plague, and had the job of taking dead sinners out of towns and burning the bodies, earning a viatik as payment, which could range from firewood to precious gems. One day, Fie's band of Crows is called by a plague beacon to the palace of Sabor, where they discover that the crown prince, Jasimir, and his bodyguard Tavin have become victims of the plague. Queen Rhusana meets the band of Crows at the palace gates, and offers them a measly cat as the viatik. The Crows threaten to leave the prince and bodyguard to spread the plague, forcing Queen Rhusana to give them a bag of valuable Phoenix teeth. Each caste has a birthright, or a power, that witches from the caste can use. The Phoenix birthright is fire, the Hawk birthright is healing and damaging, and every other caste except for the Crows have their own unique birthright. The Crows have witches who can use teeth from each caste to use that caste's birthright temporarily. Fie is one such Crow witch, and is very powerful and learning how to control teeth magic from the leader of her band of Crows. When the Crows leave the palace and uncover the bodies to burn them, suddenly, the two boys reveal that they are alive. The prince explains that Queen Rhusana, his stepmother, was plotting to kill him and his father to take the throne and control all of Sabor, and in doing so give more power to the Oleander Gentry. The Oleander Gentry is a clan of Saborians from all castes who hate the Crows and want to eradicate the Crows. Jasimir and Tavin ask for help to safely get to a hiding spot where they can stay until it is safe to take back the throne. In return, Jasimir swears a covenant oath to give the Crows protection from the

Oleanders when he becomes king. Throughout the rest of *The Merciful Crow*, Fie, Jas, Tavin, and the Crows must battle the Oleanders, traitors, and the Queen's forces to retake the throne before it is too late.

*Did the plot (for fiction) or presentation of information (for non-fiction) keep you interested?*

The plot of this novel definitely kept me interested as throughout the novel, there was constant danger and suspense. The novel also had many cliffhangers between chapters, making it very interesting to read.

*Was the pace of the book too fast, too slow, or just right?*

The pace of the book was just right, and gave enough time to process everything that was happening while not being too slow and boring.

*What grade level(s) is this book appropriate for?*

This book is appropriate for 8th grade and up as it has a lot of violence and strong language.

*What type of reader would you recommend this book to?*

I would recommend this book to anybody who enjoys fantasy novels or anybody who likes a very suspenseful story.

*What other information do you think would be helpful for teens to know about this book?*

The novel is written in the third person, and is divided into three parts. This book is the first book of the *Merciful Crow* series.

I would rate *The Merciful Crow* **5** stars as the plot was extremely engaging, and there was a lot of action. The novel had a well written story with an ending that tied every loose end together.

There was constant suspense and drama, and the characters were very relatable. The book was very exciting and made the reader constantly guess what would happen next. The book addresses many issues that are present today in our society, such as privilege and discrimination. Overall, this book was extremely fun to read and I would recommend it to anyone looking for a good fantasy novel.