



The Last Witch of Langenburg: Murder in a German Village

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On the night of the festive holiday of Shrove Tuesday in 1672 Anna Fessler died after eating one of her neighbor's buttery cakes. Could it have been poisoned? Drawing on vivid court documents, eyewitness accounts, and an early autopsy report, historian Thomas Robisheaux brings the story to life. Exploring one of Europe's last witch panics, he unravels why neighbors and the court magistrates became convinced that Fessler's neighbor Anna Schmieg was a witch—one of several in the area—ensnared by the devil. Once arrested, Schmieg, the wife of the local miller, and her daughter were caught up in a high-stakes drama that led to charges of sorcery and witchcraft against the entire family. Robisheaux shows how ordinary events became diabolical ones, leading magistrates to torture and turn a daughter against her mother. In so doing he portrays an entire world caught between superstition and modernity.

The Last Witch of Langenburg: Murder in a German Village Details

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From Reader Review The Last Witch of Langenburg: Murder in a German Village for online ebook

Guy says

An excellent and detailed study of a late seventeenth-century witch trial in the Hohenlohe area of Franconia. The author uses court documents imaginatively and well in evoking an age in which modern concepts of evidentiary law are merged with (but gradually supplanting) theological suppositions about humanity, God's providence, and the power of Satan. As in all witch prosecutions, beneath the accusation lie deeper levels of family dynamics, economic and social rivalry, and the fear of loss. This case was particularly richly documented, and thus allows the interpreter to create an unusually vivid picture of the main players in the drama.

Frances says

He hooked me right at the beginning with the incredible premise, but sort of lost me in the middle. He makes lots of interesting observations from his historian's point of view, but they just never seem to gel. The unstated point seems to be that all of the players involved in the prosecution of Anna Schmieg (the purported witch) were basically just trying to do their jobs, and that we shouldn't think ill of them for it. Meh. Not as enthralling as I'd hoped. (Not gonna lie; I skipped a couple chapters in the middle!)

Margaret Sankey says

Nobody expects the Lutheran inquisition! Using microhistory and an unusually well documented witch trial from 1670s northern Germany, Robisheaux illuminates the volatile world of village life, discovering that the case is a lot less about religion than it is a conflict over new forensic medicine and chemistry at the local university, a generation clash between dazed survivors of the 30 Years' War and their ungrateful children, envy of the "kulak" peasants with a few more grains than everyone else, and the societal dynamite that is a drunken, argumentative old woman.

Helen says

Judging by the final chapter of this book, this case of poisoning and possible witchcraft in southern Germany is very well known and has featured in several plays, films, and novels. I'm glad I didn't know that when I found the book in the Hallowe'en display at the library because I could read the transcripts and Dr. Robisheaux's interpretations without any preconceived ideas.

The period following the Thirty Years' War in Europe is not familiar to me but I can certainly imagine how devastating it must have been to people, how fearful people must have been of losing whatever they had, how defensive they must have felt about their families. When a young mother died suddenly in mysterious circumstances the people around quickly thought of witchcraft and who most likely but the rather nasty outsider or her daughter.

All of the paperwork for the case has been kept and Dr. Robisheaux has done a fine job of providing the

background for the various witnesses and the circumstances. It was almost like being there, walking through the village, seeing people peeking from windows, spying on each other. I was never able to feel terribly sorry for Anna, who really does look to have been prepared to poison her daughter and son-in-law, but the rest of the family just seem to have made some careless choices and then finally given up.

Dr. Robisheaux created a logical scenario with the parents planning on marrying their daughter Eva to a nearby miller and their son to a young woman with money. These marriages would have set everything on a sure foundation with a mill alliance that would strengthen the Shmieg family and some money to set their mill into good working order. It all started to come apart when Eva fell in with Philip Kunstler and wanted to marry him. He may not have been the sharpest knife in the drawer but there doesn't seem to have been any reason why the marriage couldn't have succeeded if Anna hadn't taken so fiercely against him and if Eva hadn't been a rather loose young woman willing to take up with anyone it would seem.

This was a fascinating book which I only picked up on a whim, but which has given me what I think is a clear view of the workings of the minds of small town people in the seventeenth century. The Hohenloh family still live in the schloss although they had to sell off another one to pay for the rebuilding that came after a massive fire. They have an automobile museum there which is apparently well worth seeing and which Queen Elizabeth visited some years back. The count is married to a relative of Prince Philip's. Somehow that just made the whole thing more real.

Jason says

I had no problems with the "dense" prose in this one. I thought the writing was very accessible for such a difficult topic, and I enjoyed the work thoroughly. The only caveat I would have is that Robisheaux doesn't quite make Anna Schmeig's story into a broader analogy, but he does do a great job in showing the governmental machinations running the witch trial. A good book that is easy to read.

Liz Danforth says

Fascinating view of life (and death) at the end of the witch craze that was so devastatingly pervasive in the 1600s. Small scale but dedicated (early) forensic efforts and a keen investigation of society both like and unlike today's world.

I would like to finish the book sometime -- it was interesting -- but there were too many other more compelling things on my TBR pile, and not nearly enough time to read. Definitely something I want to keep on my radar though (and thus, my comments here where it'll stay visible.)

Matt says

For those who are interested in early modern German history, this is an excellent introduction to German village life, culture, and politics, as well as legal and medical practices. Written by Thomas Robisheaux, a history professor at Duke University, the book begins in 1672, during the developments following the strange and untimely death of a local woman in the region of Langenburg. Anna Schmieg, the wife of the local miller, is thought to be responsible not just for her murder, but also of using witchcraft to bring it about.

To tell the story of Anna Schmieg's trial, Robischeaux uses a method known as micro history, in which a singular person or event is used to provide readers with an intricate look at life within a given culture, region, or national state.

The only aspect of the book that detracts from its overall experience is that it occasionally veers off course from the central narrative, especially when Robischeaux discusses the examinations of the Schmieg case by the medical and legal professionals at the universities of Altdorf and Strasbourg, respectively. The book also may not appeal to those who are looking for a light read, since it can be a little dense in some areas. However, for historians and readers who want a more intricate examination of German life and culture, Thomas Robischeaux's book is an undeniable treat.

Larry Brunt says

Perhaps my disappointment in this book is due more to my expectations than the book itself. I saw a review that described it as novelistic in its storytelling. "The Last Witch of Langenburg" is not that. It is not a gripping, lively description of the events and characters. It is, instead, a meticulously detailed examination of the cultural norms and legal machinations of 17th century Germany to explain the trial of a woman for witchcraft. It is as interested in 17th century law and the impact of Lutherism on the events as it is in the characters themselves (though Robischeaux certainly uncovers a wealth of information about their lives as well).

The focus on the legal implications of various points in the trial can be laborious, even if the research is impressive. At times, it was tedious to work through the political and social theory that is laid out in great detail to provide context to the story. It certainly is thorough, but it is, at times, a tedious read.

Sarah - All The Book Blog Names Are Taken says

A meticulously researched account of witch craze in the late 1600s, Germany. Very engrossing, full review to come

Alisha says

-The time has come to let these specters have their say, and free me from the burden of their tales.

-QUOTE (Gottlob Haag) "These days the names of the dead cast long shadows across our memories, and the silence of a lonely God can be heard in the whispering of the wind."

C says

B.A.B.A.E.L. The Last Witch of Langenburg is a fascinating look at the mechanics of witch trials as well as an interesting account of one of the latest convictions of a woman for witchcraft. Perhaps one of the more interesting things, and a blessing for readers, is how well-documented the trial is and author Thomas

Robisheaux delivers this bounty of information in a very engaging narrative. While it is historical non-fiction, it reads, at times, like an historical thriller. Robisheaux makes the smart move of diving immediately into the story, beginning with the miller's daughter, Eva K?stner traveling around her village delivering small cakes for the holiday of Shrove Tuesday, Mardi Gras' more tame cousin. From court testimony, we learn of her neighbor's deep suspicions about the delivery of the cakes, which will help lead to the accusation of witchcraft. Then the dramatic death of villager Anna Fessler the evening after eating one of her cakes seals the deal. It is only then that Robisheaux goes into some of the more dry background details of the holiday of Shrove Tuesday, the tradition of baking cakes for it, and why witchcraft, rather than simple murder by poisoning, was K?stner's neighbors' conclusion. A wise decision, I think, to begin with the dramatic, involving the reader before moving on to some of the more academic material. Robisheaux continues in this vein, giving the reader a bit of the story and a bit of the background as the town's leaders and citizens become embroiled in the investigation of witchcraft. Most fascinating to the modern reader is the contrast between the rising notion of justice, fair trials, forensics, and the consultation of scientific experts, versus the almost medieval notion of witchcraft. How the contemporary town leaders reconciled the two makes for a great narrative and one that Robisheaux explores to its fullest. Luckily for the reader, it is also this commitment to the proper legal process that produces all the documents that make this account such a full story. Rather than relying on speculation and reconstruction based on typical attitudes of the time, we get to hear the opinions and statements of the persons involved in their own words, a treat not often found in accounts of persons not royal or very famous in their times. I also appreciate that Robisheaux mostly sticks to information relevant to the case. Although some of the information about the Thirty Years War, for instance, was a little dry, it was also very necessary background information. However, because of this, I would not recommend this book to anyone who does not usually enjoy reading historical non-fiction. While as a reader of both historical fiction and nonfiction I appreciated the narrative portions of the story and the attempt to create a more dramatic development, this book is firmly rooted in the world of practical, academic information. However, for those who are interested in history, witchcraft, the justice system, or simply looking for a great history book, *The Last Witch of Langenburg* is a very satisfying story that will certainly fit the bill.

Elaine Nelson says

A curious and very detailed history of the last witch-burning in part of Germany, in 1672. The time period -- in an overlap between the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern era -- provides for a strange treatment of the problem of witches. In places it reads like a murder mystery, although we never actually get to find out whodunit. In places, it's a treatise on early modern law and medicine. I also learned a bit more about the Thirty Years War and the Treaty of Westphalia. (That last is a bit of an injoke at MetaFilter, so it's nice to get some context!) Writing can be a bit dense in places.

Jeff Jellets says

A scholarly success that might be a bit too detailed for the casual reader.

With *The Last Witch of Langenburg*, author Thomas Robisheaux uncovers -- in meticulous detail -- the story Anna Schmeig, who was tried for murder and witchcraft in a small German principality at the end of the seventeenth century. Schmeig was accused of poisoning several small cakes, which her daughter then gave to

neighbors, killing new mother Anna Fessler, who died gruesomely in the night after consuming one of the pastries. The amount of information Robisheaux is able to coax out of records more than 300 years old is nothing short of amazing and allows the author to develop a meticulous picture of life, superstition, progressive thought, and jurisprudence in a medieval village.

Unfortunately, detail can also create its own weight, and as a casual reader, I found this material very, very dense. Robisheaux painstakingly dissects evidentiary, legal, and theological practice and adds context by delving into the lives of the trial judges, religious leaders, the local prince, and medical and legal scholars. While I understand Robisheaux's intent in painting the larger picture – and he is very successful in portraying the trial of Anna Schmeig in a much larger social context – much of this material is very academic and the effect slows the overall pace of the book from the drama of the first and second chapters to a slow, historical study. It probably marks me as a bit of a philistine, but I found myself brushing past a lot of the ancillary detail just to find out more about the fate of Anna and her daughter.

The Last Witch of Lagenburg is undoubtedly a scholarly success, and I would highly recommend it to those with a deep interest in medieval history. For the average reader, though, I would approach this one with a bit more caution.

Jarrad Holbrook says

Pulling from remarkably preserved court document, this 17th century true crime tales delves into the criminal justice system and gender roles of the time. May be a bit too procedural for some, but I enjoyed it.

Lezley says

Recommended by Geoff. After the signing of the Treaty of Westphalia the Thirty Years War was over. However, times were still very unsettled as there was discord between Catholics and Protestants, several years of crop failures, and entire populations had been decimated by the long war. Looking for reasons for social destabilization, both governments and ecclesiastical courts blamed older females who they felt were guided by diabolical seduction. This book is an intense examination of one of the women who was executed for witchcraft, Anna Schmeig. Thomas Robisheaux does a remarkable job of uncovering old documents in order to give us an idea as to how a witchcraft trial was conducted. Were a similar inquiry to take place today, we would be looking at a government commission costing many millions of dollars.
