



# The Religion

*Tim Willocks*

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## **The Religion** Tim Willocks

This is what we dream of: to be so swept away, so poleaxed by a book that the breath is sucked right out of us. Brace yourselves.

May 1565. Suleiman the Magnificent, emperor of the Ottomans, has declared a jihad against the Knights of Saint John the Baptist. The largest armada of all time approaches the knights' Christian stronghold on the island of Malta. The Turks know the knights as the "Hounds of Hell." The knights call themselves "The Religion."

In Messina, Sicily, a French countess, Carla La Penautier, seeks passage to Malta in a quest to find the son taken from her at his birth twelve years ago. The only man with the expertise and daring to help her is a Rabelaisian soldier of fortune, arms dealer, former janissary, and strapping Saxon adventurer by the name of Mattias Tannhauser. He agrees to accompany the lady to Malta, where, amid the most spectacular siege in military history, they must try to find the boy--whose name they do not know and whose face they have never seen--and pluck him from the jaws of Holy War.

The Religion is the first book of the Tannhauser Trilogy, and from the first page of this epic account of the last great medieval conflict between East and West, it is clear we are in the hands of a master. Not since James Clavell has a novelist so powerfully and assuredly plunged readers headlong into another world and time. Anne Rice transformed the vampire novel. Stephen King reinvented horror. Now, in a spectacular tale of heroism, tragedy, and passion, Tim Willocks revivifies historical fiction.

## **The Religion Details**

Date : Published May 15th 2007 by Sarah Crichton Books (first published 2006)

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Author : Tim Willocks

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# From Reader Review The Religion for online ebook

## David Farlin says

This is the first book I've read in years that I felt was NOT written at a 6th grade level. Willocks' writing is like reading poetry. Even though in this particular book the "poetry" is about knights hacking each other to death on mounds of dead bodies. I felt like I was reading a book written at an adult level. No, not smutty, just smart and intelligent.

I'm not putting much here regarding the subject or plot other than the Knights I've mentioned. But if you like stories about Knights Templar AND you like (VERY) well written literature, pick up this book or any others by Willocks, and you'll be well pleased.

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## Justin says

I really wanted to like this book more. It's very well-written, and the Siege of Malta is one of my favorite periods in history. Though the violence was often gratuitous, I could get past that (barely). It was the several very graphic, drawn-out sex scenes I couldn't tolerate. I felt they cheapened the novel. From the other reviews I can see I'm in the minority.

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## murph says

Mack Bolan goes to Malta.

Historical fiction has a tough challenge: weave a narrative into history that has already been written. You can't flirt with changing history, because your audience will know what must happen.

Tim Willocks takes a slice of history that is outside of the modern zeitgeist - the siege of Malta in 1565. This allows him to be a guide to the dramatic ebb and flow of the battle. Good historical novels educate as well as entertain.

Willocks is unflinching in his descriptions of the brutality of the battle and in his use of the language of the period: *...hard on the jackhare's dust and scarcely less-swift, a bedlamite horde roared out from the purpled badlands, weapons and banners aloft, and baying like dogs in praise of their false god and his degenerate prophet.* Willocks is clearly enjoying himself. If you buy into it, his language can be great fun.

Any promise this book had fades because of the central character, Tannhauser. Having made a game attempt at the primary challenge of writing historical fiction, Willocks has foundered on a challenge common to all fiction:

He has made his main character too perfect.

Really, picture this: How do you create a character that embodies all that is stereotypically masculine - and then try to write their story without looking ridiculous?

Willocks creates his paragon and then dares his story to live up him. It can't. Tannhauser isn't merely heroic, he is superhuman. Women worship him, men want to be him - he is worldly, educated, a peerless warrior/lover and (in perhaps the most common mistake of any historical fiction) has an unerring ability to predict what his future holds.

Worse, Willocks has Tannhauser playing a central role in every aspect of the Siege of Malta. He tells the lord of Malta how to defend the city. He tells the defenders where to build walls, how to defeat siege towers, when and where to raid the enemy. It's as if the Knights Hospitaliers can do nothing without first asking Tannhauser.

There are some refreshing moments of character development (particularly with Tannhauser's nemesis, Ludovico) and great imagery throughout - but The Religion just can't get any breathing room with Mattias Tannhauser sucking the oxygen out of every page.

Good for a distraction, but less than what it could have been.

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### **James D. says**

This book was truly one of the most captivating novels I've ever read! Willocks develops his characters with great detail, and in that detail you begin to live through them as the story unravels. The battles have you feeling exhausted, the treachery has you wrathful, and the suspense is breathtaking. This is not an easy read, and it requires some patience as you get a feel for how Willocks writes and the vocabulary with which he is working. This is not a light read, rather a rich, chewy journey that leaves you sated and content. This book reignited my love for reading. I hope you enjoy it as I did.

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### **Krbo says**

Chuck Norris se može sakriti, stigao je Mattias Tannhauser.

Kakva je to ljudina od ?ovjeka, mužjaka, borca, lukavca, jeba?a ..... (stavi ovdje što ti padne na pamet)..... Sre?om nema *light-sabre* pa je netko i živ ostao :) (ima još jedan ve?i momak, ali dosta tupaviji pa je Matt ostao glavni)

Imamo jedan ratno-akcijsko-avanturisti?ki roman namijenjen besramnoj i bezmozgovnoj zabavi prije svega mužjaka, a i poneke djeve lomne u struku i željne avanture smješten u sredini 16. stolje?a pokriven stvarnim turskim napadom na Maltu. (doba Sulje Veli?anstvenog)

Vrlo seksisti?ki (ima 2 cijela ženska lika + nešto si?e uz jedno 40.000 bijesnih mužjaka), prepun krvi, unutarnjih organa s krive strane tijela, svih mogu?ih izlu?evina i razmontiranih udova.

Svaki mogu?i klišej koji vam može pasti na pamet je unutra (vampira nema, sorry), beskrajne bitke s turacima (cca 150 stranica viška, možda i više) ,za?udne koli?ine mrtvog življa, pokvareni inkvizitori, silno juna?ki vitezovi koji više vole poginuti nego išta na svijetu koji savršeno funkcioniraju koliko god im udova uklonite, otvora priskrbite.

I sve to skupa može funkcionirati ukoliko znate što ste uzeli u ruke, imate dobar izgovor (višetjedna kiša ili uporno sunce na odmoru) te želite odmoriti malo vijuge ikakvog razmišljanja.

Svakako zavirite i u Mamanin prikaz

Skoro pa trojka.

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### **Eric says**

Incredible story about the Siege of Malta. I got more insight into life during the 1400's and the struggle between the Ottomans and Europeans. I'm curious to visit Malta now. I had always wondered about the Knights Templar. They used to have a mystique about them in my eyes. Now I get them in the everyday sense of an organization of Christian Aristocrats with a thirst for war. Whenever I get the everyday sense of an event in history I always feel more in touch with it.

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### **Henry says**

I am torn between giving four stars and five. The language and vocabulary are exquisite. It is only the incessant warring that makes one weary in the reading. The slaying and butchery would have been more striking had it not gone on and on and on and on.

The book relates the true tale of how the island of Malta (the stronghold of the Christian Knights who call themselves "The Religion") was besieged by the Ottoman hordes. The fictitious tale that runs parallel with this battle is about a man, Mattias Tannhauser, who has agreed to help Contessa Carla La Penautier to find her long lost bastard son. He sailed with her from Sicily to Malta at the time of war in search of the son. There is great adventure and a lot of thrills. Tim Willocks has done impeccable research and relates the story with great authority. Tim Willocks shows us the madness of religion to incite war, where each of the two sides believe they are the hand of God and the enemy is of Satan. Very interesting indeed. It is conducive to critical thought.

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### **Ned says**

This one is a bit too long but to tell you the truth I could not put it down. An ex-Janissary and adventurer takes up the challenge of finding a beautiful Maltese countess's illegitimate son on Malta just as the Ottomans begin their legendary siege of the Mediterranean island and commence a titanic struggle with the ruthless Knights of St. John. The battle scenes are so sickening that they must be true to life, and the intrigues involving the inquisitions, the Ottomans, the knights of St. John and sundry other parties are relentless. A really great, fat read.

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### **Jay says**

I found "The Religion" strangely entertaining. I listened to the audiobook version. Initially, and for the first few CDs, I found an excessive use of proper nouns. Everything and everyone had a name, and they ran

together. Thankfully, the cast was narrowed down after leaving Italy (or was it France) and setting off to Malta. Here, the characters were more fully drawn – heck, it was a siege so they had time. This is the flowery description of the attack and siege of the Catholics of Malta by the armies of the Muslim Ottoman empire. There are probably more descriptions of liquids in this book than any other I’ve read, mostly bodily fluids lost during battle. Willocks specializes in gore and violence. I found myself settling into the story and interested in where it went, and it went in quite a few directions I didn’t predict. I didn’t know the outcome of this battle until I neared the end of the book, cheating a look at Wikipedia. Accurate in the highlights, certainly. Willocks draws his hero, German adventurer Tannhauser, and some other characters to superhero specifications. You could almost picture an over-muscled comic book character walking through the wasteland that was the besieged village and battling against the Turkish army that he once belonged to, with broadsword, mace, and black dagger. Of course his friend had a two-handed sword. Come to think of it, this felt like a fantasy novel with some characters plopped down into a historical fiction book. Overall, I enjoyed the results.

The benefit of an audiobook is that it can pull you through parts of a book that might bog a reader down. This had plenty of those parts with an abundance of names in some sections, becoming almost biblical. Once down to the story, though, this was a fun, although gory, listen. The English adventurer Bohrs, though, was voiced in a forced British accent. I kept being reminded of scenes from “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off” when Ferris’ friend Cameron did his fake British accent – this sounded the same to me. I kept picturing Cameron swinging a two handed sword, and that really didn’t work well. At least it was a humorous image. Sometimes the extras in listening to an audiobook aren’t good things.

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## Terri says

There are a lot of rare things in this world that I would like to get my hands on. Pink diamonds. Vintage John Paul Gaultier Corset Dresses. Black Limited Edition Burberry Trenchcoats. An Aston Martin Vantage (V8 or V12, I am not fussy) and.... lengthy books that stay consistent in pace and quality from front cover to back cover.

Obviously, for me, only one of these was ever going to be attainable. And it wasn't the Aston Martin Vantage. It was, of course, a lengthy book with pace and quality finish to end.

An enigma. A myth. Often whispered about, never actually seen. I have tried one or two, been tempted by a promise of cover to cover bounty many times. Was once wrongly directed down the Count of Monte Cristo path. A book that I felt suffered from much the same problem as many lengthy books. Too much waffle and could benefit from being a couple hundred pages shorter. Okay, so editors were less keen on cutting back then, but they should not be too scared of it now. And yet they seem to be.

I will concede that The Religion could have been shorter. Only nothing drastic. 50 pages at the most. But a few too many pages was kind of a small price to pay for a book that did not run out of prose in the first few chapters. It went on. On and on. On and on and on. Beefed up with excellent landscape and character creation, anchored by vivid portals into extraordinary battle scenes.

I could not put it down.

It was a gem as rare as any pink diamond, with as much pace at times as any V12 Aston Martin. As tight at the top as at the waist as at the back, as any Gaultier corset and with more movement than any Burberry trench.

It was quite a find.

A rare find that you will notice from the outset. With passages that wash across the page in fresh, vernal literary splashes.

Page 12

The Fagaras Mountains, East Hungarian Marches. Spring AD1540

*The yard was empty. The heavens at the rimrock's edge were reefed in vermilion cloud. From the village pillars of smoke quavered skyward and with them cries of anguish and crackles of flame.*

*He walked across the cobbles, sick with fear. Fear of whatever vileness afflicted his mother. Fear of shame. Of cowardice. Of the knowledge that he couldn't save her. Of the darkness that had housed itself inside his spirit. Yet the darkness spoke with a feral power that brooked no refusal nor hesitation.*

Plunge in, the darkness said.

*Mattias turned and looked back at the forge...*

Like the blade in the quench.

Plunge in.

\*\*\*

Through to the middle they surged on. The tautness of a well trained writer carving his skill in inked words.

Page 348

The Gauntlet – The Bailey – The Causeway. 11 June 1565

*Straighten up, breathe and blow, shake the sweat. He wheezed. His chest was tight, his gorge scorched. He felt nauseous and weak. He was too far forward. Get back.*

*The horde shouldered each other in their frenzy to get through the choke point, their weapons constricted, one shield obstructing another. Spot the openings. Swallow the scalding bile. Kill him, kill them, kill them all. A blow glanced off his helm and hammered into his pauldron. Spike him in the privities, stab him in the neck. The fellow fought on from his knees, blinded by the fountain from his arteries, still scrabbling with his blade for the joints in Tannhauser's plate.*

*Tannhauser drove the finial through his temple and stepped back. Now backstep again. Keep them at bay. He threw an upward swordcut to the thighs and backstroke to the guts and a thrust to the chest, in deep and twist. Don't look in his eyes. He's done. And breathe, you fool, keep the knees loose, ignore the battle cries. Get back.*

It goes on. On and on and on. But I think I have shown you enough.

Don't be dissuaded from trying this for fear it is too masculine. It is masculine, without a doubt, but there is beauty too. Beauty of the heart and of the lovelorn. The author has not forgotten you. You, the reader of the heart.

While I did not think there was much romance in this book, it is there. A tugging undertow that a reader like me - who does not read with the heart but reads with the mind - can easily ignore. I hardly even noticed the female characters most of the time. They did not take up much room in my mental landscape.

To me the book is perfect. Perfectly written. Fast paced from start to finish.

The story, however, had some personal taste flaws. They are not going to be flaws for everyone. Some of what I call a flaw, will be the things you will most likely value about the story.

It was, ahem, the sex.

Some may say it had to be there as sex is a natural part of life. In part this is true (although many live without

sex in their lives and I would never claim their lives to be unnaturally led), but the sex in this book is quite often odd. Poorly located. Unnecessary. Forced into the story.

There isn't a lot of it and if you blink - or skim read - you may even miss it.

When it does come (no pun intended) it is oddly placed, like an afterthought, or to please the authors own building sexual tension.

If an author wants sex in a book it needs to feel naturally placed. Not just plopped down because the author was randy or the editor told him it needed more sex.

It was a great ride while it lasted (the book, not the sex) and I was disappointed it came to an end. My forlorn need not last forever though, for there is a book to follow it called Twelve Children of Paris. I have bought it already and cannot wait to read it.

With any luck, it will be as well done as this rare gem, The Religion. As this kind of writing skill is not something an author loses down a bottle of whiskey while he tries to outdrink his writer's block. No, he clearly has command of his writing talent.

The only place I feel he can fall down will be story. Lets hope he gets that right again too.

Due to the odd sex. 4 1/2 stars.

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## U?itaj se! says

Tim Willocks u ovom nam je romanu odlu?io prepri?ati veliku opsadu Malte, povijesni doga?aj koji bi se mogao nazvati i modernijom verzijom Trojanskog rata, ali s druga?ijim ishodom. U svojoj pri?i, Willocks ostaje vjeran povijesnim ?injenicama, koriste?i se stvarnim osobama koje su sudjelovale u tom sukobu (i s jedne i s druge strane) za svoje likove, od la Valletea i sultana Sulejmana Veli?anstvenog do znamenitih vojnih zapovjednika Turguta Reisa i Pijalea.

Sam Tannhäuser, oko kojega se vrti cijela pri?a, izmišljen je lik, iako je i on baziran na poznatom vitezu i pjesniku iz njema?kih legendi. Tannhäuser je i lik i pri?a u jednom, jer dok se oko njega odvija sukob Turaka i Maltežana, unutar njega tako?er se s vremena na vrijeme pojavljuje sukob - dje?aka koji je odgojen i odrastao kao krš?anin i kojemu su Turci ubili majku i sestre; i mladi?a ?iji je odgoj bio nastavljen me?u janji?arima i koji je prihvatio muslimansku vjeru i obi?aje.

Unato? tim povremenim sukobima koje osje?a u svojoj nutrini, Tannhäuser ne mari za vjeru niti boga, a nakon godina i godina provedenim me?u janji?arima rata se sasvim dovoljno nagledao za cijeli život i nema nikakvu želju uklju?iti se u još jedan. No, on to ipak ?ini, zbog Carle i Amparo, dvije žene koje ga obje na neki na?in privuku i zbog kojih kre?e na Maltu, u još jednu bitku, unato? svom iskustvu i zdravom razumu koji ga vuku u suprotnom smjeru. Carla i Amparo su razlog zbog kojeg ?e Tannhäuser sudjelovati u opsadi Malte, one su okida? koji ga tamo odvede, ali iako je jasno da ga te žene privla?e, i u trenutku upoznavanja o?aran je njihovom glazbom koju mu odsviraju, to mi se ne ?ini kao dovoljnim razlogom da netko odbaci sva svoja uvjerenja i strmoglavno krene u bitku koju je cijelo to vrijeme namjeravao izbje?i. Istina, ljudi su zbog ljubavi u stanju ?initi lude i opasne stvari, ali ljubavni trokut opisan u ovoj knjizi ipak mi se ?ini previše nedore?en i neuvjerljiv a da bi mogao imati tako važnu ulogu, o kojoj ovisi nastavak ?itave radnje.

'Vjera' je opsežan roman koji u detalje do?arava jednu od najpoznatijih opsada u povijesti križarskih ratova, pa ako volite povijesne romane svakako posegnite i za ovim. Bez obzira što se radi o prvom dijelu trilogije, ovaj je roman cjelovita i zaokružena pri?a koja ne vapi za nastavkom. No, možda upravo zbog toga, bit ?e zanimljivo vidjeti što je Willocks dalje zamislio za svog Tannhäusera i koje ga to bitke tek o?ekuju.



## **Karla says**

I hated this book. I love violence and don't mind sex in my fiction, but this book was absolutely wretched, despite having those two ingredients. The main fault, I think, was the hero. He was too perfect and was therefore absolutely obnoxious. He knows how everything should be defended, he is looked to grudgingly for his experience in the Muslim world, he turns the loins of women to water and the hearts to men to envy. And unfortunately there are precious few scenes where he doesn't suck out the oxygen with his arrogance and "Dig me!" attitude. When he's not sassing Inquisitors, he's bending his concubine over an anvil and making her wonder how she could ever be luckier.

The female characters were atrocious. One, Amparo, is a borderline idiot and sperm receptacle (namely the hero's), and the noblewoman Carla is a frail flower whose only moment of steel occurs when she's channeling Jesus in the hospital. Everywhere else, she's imagining herself in Amparo's place getting peerlessly reamed by our randy hero.

The rest of the cast (for this book has "blockbuster" scrawled all over it) is peppered with stereotypes and cliches. There's Bors, the burly and gruff sidekick tailor-made for Ray Winstone or Brendon Gleeson in Yorkshire overdrive. Ludovico was your typical evil priest who lapses into lust and brings woe unto all who cross him. There were others, but everyone pretty much was overshadowed by his Badassness Mattias Tannhauser.

And then there was the feces. Holy crap! It's no lie to say this was the sh!ttest book I've ever read. Literally. Practically every 5th page, there was some mention of sight, smell, or the act of evacuating one's bowels. (The part during Sabato Svi's torture was my favorite, when Tannhauser is fighting one of the baddies and "panic squealed forth" from said baddie's arse. My #1 LOLarious line of 2009.) Whether it was in battle, a streetfight, a hospital, or just passing an alley, the subject of excrement came up with full-on detail. It was so bizarrely repetitive and single-minded. Just what does Mr. Willocks get up to in his spare time? Are glass coffee tables involved?

There's a plot in there somewhere about finding Carla's & Ludovico's long-lost son bred in mutual love/lust, but it was swamped by swiving, long-winded speeches, purple prose, and characters that were as dull on page 100 as they were 500+ pages later. I went into the book with reasonable expectations and left utterly disappointed that only a couple of my tormenters were killed by the end and baffled that the ALA thought this was noteworthy.

I have no problem with my carps being in old bodice rippers. In fact, I love the un-PC nature of those books with troglodyte heroes and less-than-steely-spined heroines, but historical fiction is supposed to be better. In fact, we're often told that. Then be "better." And when it wins an award, it better be "better."

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## **Bryn Hammond says**

From the sublime to the ridiculous. But I figure the sublime earns four stars, without taint from ridiculous content. You don't get sublime often, do you?

Has a big dose of swashbuckler. When the swashbuckler's in the cockpit this isn't 'real-feel' historical, because Mattias Tannhauser has been everywhere, can do everything. I was comfortable with that, I've swashbuckled of old, the secret is don't try too hard to believe.

It's more realistic when it comes to the war, and most of the book is war, and that's where he lifts to the sublime. He goes for broke on the writing. But if ever there's a time to overwrite... other reviewers say that. How else to paint for us mad hell on earth, as is his intention, other than by his wild similes? Like this, like that – as he stretches for a phantasmagorical similar. Besides, if he didn't, he'd only have his human pudding to talk about, and that would wear. I took the graphic depiction in my stride, never grossed out, did not suspect him of exploitation – and I can't tell you why, when I not infrequently complain about cheap violence in histfic. Don't know you can possibly get more violent than this one, but it's done right – for me. As we went along I began to often think of WWI, I was transported back to my 'WWI Lit' class, perhaps the atmosphere or the intention was like that protest literature. On the other hand he doesn't scrimp on the allures of war, the gallantry, the glory, the strange exhilarations: at an earlier stage I admired the book for that, for not being a 21st century anti-war tract. This novel, yes, has a stab at tackling religious war, I came to feel, as we saw sides and further sides to the subject. I liked La Valette, the head Knight of St John, even though he's a crazed old loon: the knights of the Baptist were magnificent, the Turks were magnificent, I knew I'd fight for either cause, and Tannhauser, who tries not to be swept away, watches the glamour, of war, heroism, religion: both the glammers and the horrors absolutely presented in this book.

Then there are the bad bits. Badder than I can politely say is the romance. Think of the worst of romances. With the indulgent fantasy of a guy. And hopelessly, hopelessly sexist. That's a pity, because when Carla is away from Mattias she has a story of her own, in the hospital – these are the Hospitallers, sworn to 'serve the poor', who call the sick 'our lords' – a story that moved me deeply. The other woman, Amparo, seemed unusual at first – until she hooked up with Mattias, then she sank without a trace for the rest of the book.

We have a sublime scene on the horror and the pity of war. Next we have a scene torn from a trashy romance. What a drop. I felt like the Moslems they hanged one a day, dropped from the castle walls. The strongest section, I thought, was the 'Maltese Iliad'; the final drama was too melodrama.

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## John Wiltshire says

I came to this novel from the author's outstanding work *Green River Rising*, which is one of the most memorable books I've ever read. Hauntingly captures the effect it had on me. So when I read that this was a book about the Knights of St John defending Malta by the same author who wrote such a powerful novel about a contemporary prison riot I was intrigued. And how timely, a novel about the defence of European civilization. Yes, this is the 1500s, but times, apparently, don't change all that much.

I'm 11% in and have very mixed feelings about the book. Some of it is superb, but it's extremely verbose and overblown as well. Bodices and swooning and golden stallions and crimson dresses and beryl eyes and ... *Game of Thrones* on steroids, and that's pretty exhausting to read at times. But for all that I'm quite caught up in the tale and will persevere.

I'll update when done.

20% in and I'm not letting Radulf read this book. A whole heartbreaking chapter about the slaughter of the dogs on Malta before the siege. The Head of the Order of St John determined that the barbarians would not reduce them to eating dogs and rats, and so to prevent this he calls for a total cull of dogs on the island. His own beloved hunting dogs killed by his own hand first. It's almost too painful to read, but such powerful

writing too. I am seriously caught up in this story now, possibly real life mirroring fiction mirroring real life a little too much for comfort though. The brave Christian defenders of the tiny army are facing overwhelming odds...

60% in now and so grateful I gave this book a chance. My mother lived in Malta as a child; my father was stationed there for many years, and I went there in my early 20s, so I have extremely fond feelings for the island. I haven't read anything that has stirred my blood like this book has for quite a long time. I've never read such accurate, honest, brutal descriptions of war in any other novels, and I've made a bit of a study of military books. Brutality, yes, beyond comprehension, but where this book is so astounding is the way the author also captures the transcendent bravery, the heroism, the glory of it all that has drawn men to war in every age. And to their religions, come to that. I highly recommend this novel to anyone who watched the Lord of the Rings movies (or read the books) and really only enjoyed the epic battles such as at Helm's Deep and Minas Tirith and wished those scenes could have gone on for longer. This novel is thousands of pages of a siege that makes Helm's Deep read like a walk in the park. Sure, there are quieter moments with some women doing boring things with musical instruments and dresses, but if you skim those pages the Knights of St John will steal your heart (or make you wish you'd never left the army and could rejoin).

I'll update when fully done.

Finished, and very glad I read this amazing novel. Highly recommened.

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### **eric says**

I was really disappointed with this book. It's essentially a Harlequin romance with a heavy dose of graphic violence. Willocks is clearly a very bright man, but his writing is schmaltsy, to say the least. Try this on for size:

>>>>

[Tannhauser compliments Carla]

Carla felt her cheeks burn. She felt inadequate to the compliment and to acknowledge it seemed improper. A sense of sin clenched inside her. Such fears and doubts had hedged her life for as long as she could remember. Yet in these few moments he'd blown through all that dust like a wind through a long unopened room.

She said, "Do you believe in magic?"

>>>>

The characters are cliché to the extreme. The protagonist, Tannhauser, is a battled-scarred, highly skilled warrior who has sworn off violence until his friends and a damsel are threatened. Yet there is darkness and emotional vulnerability lurking just underneath his hard appearance. How many times have we seen this?

If you really like mawkish romance and violence, then you'll likely enjoy this book. Otherwise, I'd suggest reading something else.

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### **Nate says**

I guess *The Religion* is a good title...it's cryptic and kinda ominous sounding and does have a connection to the actual contents of the story. Despite that, I think that *Fucking, Killing & Shitting: Malta 1565* might be a

bit more appropriate here. While I can certainly agree all three of those things are an unavoidable part of life and can be an enjoyable part of fiction, I really don't think that's what Mr. Willocks was intending for me to see as the identity of his story--but that's what I came away with. The book doesn't seem to know whether it wants to be a thoughtful, profound telling of this event or a lurid historical novel packed with cheap thrills.

It sucks, because the author certainly writes well. His prose is pretty and can be ornate, even. He's done his homework and writes the setting and events vividly and with authority. The siege of Malta was more like a grueling, epic battle fought over the span of a few months and Willocks certainly paints it well. You can see the banners swaying and the massed white hats of the Janissaries and hear the cry of the war horns with ease and very little force of imagination, which is always, always a great litmus test for writers of historical novels. It's easy to see where Willocks is strong. Once you get a bit deeper than that, it becomes more problematic.

The characters are the first issue of this confusing book. The main character is Matthias Tannhauser, a Saxon dude who saw his family slain when he was a child then promptly joined their murderers--the Ottoman Empire. Eventually he comes to employment as badass gun smuggler or whatever. It all sounds cool, but the man himself is relatively boring. He's hardly flawed--Willocks makes a point of his creepy love of killing the absolute shit out of the Ottomans, but that's it--and is very typical anti-hero with his "playing both sides" thing. Then there's Bors, his likable English companion. This is what I'm talking about--you don't have main characters that can be summed up as "likable English companion" in the kind of novel that Willocks seemed to occasionally be striving for.

Next we have Carla, who I actually liked. She seems to be more human than the rest of the cast and I loved the scenes of her taking care of the multitude of injured in the hospital. I'm not a Christian, but I find generalized and bullheaded anti-Christian rhetoric irritating and boring as much as I do generalized and bullheaded pro-Christian rhetoric, so it was nice to see piety rendered as a positive character trait in such a modern-thinking novel filled with the baser parts of life written by someone I'm guessing to be a fellow heathen. The conflict between her pious and erotic natures was an interesting part of her personality. Piety as interpreted by the Inquisition as written by Willocks--not as nice, however. The main antagonist here is Ludovico Ludovici (I'm pretty sure that was his name, and I did laugh writing that out) who is a former inquisitor and burner. He's a pretty decent bad guy--Willocks makes the effort of making him a human being gone wrong and not an innately evil villain.

Then we have Amparo, whose presence as a character was completely mystifying and aggravating for me. She's Carla's best friend and maidservant...her family was predictably killed when she was a baby in a horrible way and she went through hell until she met Carla or whatever. She has this aloof yet passionately intense kind of personality that no human in fucking history ever had. She predictably falls in love with Tannhauser and serves as his sex doll for the rest of the book, stopping occasionally to play with virtuoso skill on violin. It's just all so...dumb. Any time she was on the page if she wasn't having some inane overwrought thought process she was having ridiculous sex with Tannhauser that serves to further the incredibly dull love triangle. Who has sex in a fucking WOODEN TUB OF BRINE? Dumb and even offensive in its dumbness. People have sex and realistically drawn adult characters in fiction should have sex, but not like this. I know this rant probably makes me sound like a prick, but her whole existence really was an incredibly annoying invention by the author.

Anyways...three paragraphs of ranting about the lukewarm characters. I'm sure that's a joy to read...that was basically the whole issue with this book--the back and forth between something more concrete and profound and just an orgy of violence, defecation and sex. A note about the poop content: I think that more authors need to include the fact that their characters have to use the bathroom. It's not a pleasant part of life but it

certainly brings a gross realism to the book. I remember the characters shat a lot in *Shogun* and I thought it was cool Clavell had the balls to include it. The thing is I could probably enjoy both of these possible books; the garbage cheap-thriller or the insightful epic. But the schizophrenic nature of both combined was a huge problem for me. I don't know, maybe this kind of species of book should exist anyways--one straddling the line between trash and true substance. I liked it--but I could have liked it a lot more, easily. Or maybe I'm just being pretentious.

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## Lectrice Hérétique says

Je n'avais rien lu des polars de Willocks avant de m'attaquer à ce pavé de plus de 800 pages. Ce titre me faisait envie depuis longtemps, et il a comblé mes plus folles espérances.

C'est mirifique, épique, grandiose, sanglant, cruel, dégueulasse, violent, puant, chatoyant, apocalyptique, véhément, échevelé, passionné, trépidant, viril, sensuel, sexuel, animal, tendre, sauvage, poétique, tumultueux, puissant, cinématographique, hypnotisant, envoûtant, obsédant, émouvant.

C'est énorme.

L'introduction nous dévoile le passé de Mattias Tannhauser, et plante le décor de ce que sera le reste du récit, horreur, mort et amour.

L'auteur situe son action en 1565 à Malte, sur le point d'être attaqué par l'Empire ottoman. Les Chevaliers de l'ordre de Malte vont devoir affronter un siège historique. L'islam et la chrétienté s'apprêtent à se déchirer sur ce petit bout de terre perdue en méditerranée, mais dont la localisation stratégique risque de causer la perte.

Un contexte déjà lourd, où le fanatisme religieux tient le premier rôle. Mattias Tannhauser, saxon et turc à la fois, ancien janissaire, actuel marchand d'armes et homme à femmes, a bien roulé sa bosse. Devenu athée d'en avoir trop vu et trop fait au nom de Dieu ou d'Allah, il semble être un homme très demandé. Son expérience de l'armée ottomane en fait un allié et un conseiller de choix pour la Religion. Sollicité à la fois pour œuvrer à une cause qui lui paraît désormais étrangère, et par une comtesse française, Tannhauser va voir ses projets compromis.

Carla de La Penautier, jeune veuve d'origine maltaise, souhaite retourner à Malte afin de retrouver un fils qu'elle ne connaît pas. Accompagnée d'Amparo, jeune Espagnole étrange un peu devineresse qu'elle a prise sous son aile, Carla n'a aucun mal à convaincre Tannhauser de les escorter jusqu'à Malte et de passer outre les évacuations de rigueur.

Tannhauser et son ami Bors de Carlisle, géant anglais fidèle et belliqueux, s'engagent donc auprès de Carla et de sa protégée mystérieuse et sensuelle. Le périple commence, de nouveaux personnages tout aussi attachants ou répugnants vont faire leur entrée en scène. L'intrigue se noue subtilement, les événements se précipitent, le lecteur est submergé et envoûté.

Les armées ottomanes débarquent à Malte, la violence, la mort, l'Enfer débarque avec elles.

Les descriptions sont d'un réalisme saisissant. Ça tranche, ça décapite, ça éventre, ça vomit et ça se chie dessus, avant de pourrir et de nourrir les vers. Chez Willocks la guerre ressemble à une guerre, dans tout ce qu'elle a de plus abject et de barbare, il ne nous épargne rien. La religion en prend plein la poire, l'endoctrinement, le fanatisme, la croyance bête, tout y est, mais l'auteur a assez de délicatesse et d'intelligence pour ne pas prendre parti, à l'image de Tannhauser, qui n'agit que dans un seul but, mais jamais celui qu'on lui prête. Son regard sur les événements est celui d'un sage, d'un philosophe désabusé qui a une mission à accomplir. Mais le philosophe est aussi un homme, et le charme de ses deux protégées aura sur lui un effet des plus inattendu, dans un environnement digne des pires enfers.

L'auteur nous promène entre des scènes barbares et sanguinaires et des purs moments poésie et de tendresse, tout en développant ses personnages avec finesse et profondeur, avec une maîtrise parfaite de l'action, de l'intrigue et des rebondissements. Du très grand roman historique, des très grands personnages, et une

histoire magnifique.

La Religion est le premier volume d'une trilogie, mais peut se suffire à lui-même, à moins de tomber sous le charme de l'écriture de Willocks comme je l'ai été.

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### **Jane says**

This was most interesting as to the time period -- 16th century -- Knights of St. John [Hospitallers] enduring the siege by the Ottoman Turks under Suleiman the Magnificent on the Island of Malta. Enter our protagonist, Mattias Tannhauser, the larger-than-life picaresque hero and soldier-of-fortune. As a former Janissary, Tannhauser can infiltrate the Turkish camp as necessary. The battle scenes were very good; however they were much too graphic in places -- too much mention of body parts and bodily functions. I learned much of the Janissaries and their way of life. I was glad to see that not every Turk was presented as a villain. The conclusion of the book was most satisfying. This is the first novel of a projected trilogy on Tannhauser. I feel that any sequels will be anticlimactic and unnecessary.

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### **Mandy says**

I cannot describe how I felt about this book. As anyone who knows me can tell you, I don't usually put a book down. I will stick it out to whatever end it brings, horrifying or otherwise, as I am an avid believer in redemption, whether of the author or character(s), and I understand that characters do not always reflect the nature of the author. After all, writing (in my case, anyway) can often be a form of escape, or assuming an identity opposite of reality. In the case of *The Religion*, however, I closed it at page 47 after enduring more than I could bear of gore, boring content, and unnecessary cases of over-information, in which a character would describe obscene thoughts/feelings that were completely avoidable and could have been worded with more discretion. I simply could not finish the book. The thought of reading one more sentence was enough to make me cringe in repulsion. Perhaps this is just not a book aimed toward the female audience, and I should excuse myself, although I myself do love a good action-packed, testosterone-driven book every now and then. In conclusion, I am not a fan of *The Religion*, nor will I be finishing it anytime in the near or distant future.

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### **Adam Nevill says**

Book Recs: Extended action scenes, battle scenes, meaningful depictions of large scale violence, can be hard to depict in prose. I don't tend to enjoy reading them; maybe the screen is a better medium in this area. But there are some masterly literary practitioners of combat on a large scale (Abercrombie, McCarthy, Doctorow spring to mind). Willocks is another writer who excels in this area, and not only does he excel at depicting the appalling savagery of historical warfare, he also excels at recreating history and making the past, and its citizens, live so vividly.

Two epic stories here, often heartbreaking, with excruciating inner struggles that characters endure between baseness and grace. 'The Religion' probably remains one of my favourite novels. I read it on publication in 2006. It takes *The Siege of Malta (1565)* as its subject. Reading it left me feeling physically and mentally fatigued. A desert island book for me. Not long finished 'The Twelve Children of Paris'. Also a masterpiece imo, and based on the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris (1572); this one requires a strong stomach.

Particularly poignant in a world still addicted to sectarian violence and both novels left me relieved that I was born in the late 1960s and not the 1560s. Each story completely transported me as a reader.

If you like grim but marvellous adventures of humanity in times of inhumanity, these are the first two books in the Tannhauser trilogy. I look forward to the third installment. One of the finest living British writers that I've read.

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