

Introduction for launch of *The Arrows of Mercy*, by Jill MacLean.

Writers' Federation of Nova Scotia, Halifax.

Sunday, April 16 2023. 4:00 p.m.

By Brian Bartlett

If you want a novel that casts a literary spell and takes you back to England of the 1300s, pick up *The Arrows of Mercy*. If you value lively, pungent language and characters so clearly drawn you might call them people (not “characters”), this is a book for you. If you like having your imagination and sense of history broadened by artfully selected sensuous details—of cold and fire, food and vegetation, clothes and medicines, sweaty physical work—enter the world Jill MacLean has created for us. If you don't shy away from thorny questions about religious traditions, physical and psychological damage, fraught relations between parents and children and between siblings, buy this novel and begin reading.

Jill's book is that rare thing, a work of fiction centered on the life of an essentially *good man*. Edmund, renowned as an exceptional archer even before his time as an Englishman fighting on the continent against the French, says, “I'm weary to the soul of what war has done to me.” As the narrator reports bluntly, “War gouged his soul open.” Upon his return from France, his repulsed mother calls him “a ghost from Purgatory.” While a haunted man, painfully conscious of having “more death on my hands than I can ever wash off,” Edmund isn't destroyed by hopelessness or morally poisoned by the terrible things he has seen and taken part in. *The Arrows of Mercy* is not so much a war novel as a post-war novel, though it

includes interpersonal battles of wills and words between various characters—okay, *people*—in Edmund’s life. The narrator avoids hard-and-fast judgements of Edmund’s family and neighbours. The books most memorable, appealing women are a healer, Agnes, who faces both suspicion and neediness; and a servant girl, wonderfully named Hawise. Several people eventually surprise us, becoming more vulnerable with time. One such case is Father Thomas, with whom Edmund has a difficult dynamic; the priest undergoes a maturing into guilt and greater self-awareness before he asks, “Am I clinging to the ragged shroud of God’s love?”

Jill skilfully captures a sense of how the world surrounding people in Medieval Europe helped shaped their thoughts and language. But the use of phrasings alien to our speech never gets bookish or overdone; Jill’s depiction of Edmund’s society is detailed enough that moments like “Home, a word sharp as verjuice,” “His thoughts prance like demons in his skull,” “A new moon rises, like a leper’s bowl,” “jealousy like the itch of lice,” or “The years when starvation was lord of the manor” feel utterly in keeping with their time and place—natural or even off-hand. Though Edmund suffers from religious doubts, one of the most striking questions he asks, in the author’s narrative paraphrase, goes: “Could God be like a rainbow that hovers over the woods, and no matter how deep you walk into those woods you cannot find where the rainbow begins or ends?”

The book’s title is apt, both in its reference to Edmund’s skill with archery and in its underlining of *mercy* as the novel’s most significant repeated word. To jump ahead to the language of contemporary times, Edmund might be suffering from PTSD, and he has learned that sometimes mercy killing is compassionate and wise.

In one tense exchange, Father Thomas, critical of Edmund's confessions of having killed brutalized strangers as acts of kindness, says, "Mercy is God's work," but Edmund replies: "Killing is the work of men. You would deny that mercy can also be the work of men?" That is the key question resounding through the novel.

Having read Jill's one poetry collection and all of her five YA novels—including reading the manuscript of the first of them aloud to my young son—and having admired their clear-eyed sympathy, their vivid imagery and reliable polish, I expected to enjoy *The Arrows of Mercy*—but its evocation of a distant time and its creation of women, children and men we care about didn't feel so much to-be-expected as astonishing. Thank you, Jill, for a transporting experience, and for all your humane understanding of struggles faced by humans not only in the fourteenth century but also today, in the twenty-first. Truly, every minute you spent imagining and writing your novel has been worth this gift of a book you have given us all.