



Interviewee: Brenda Rickman Vantrease

Title: Freedom of speech in Tudor England

Duration: 6 minutes, 30 seconds

Introduction

When you consider that the Hebrew and Christian Bibles and the Koran represent the top best selling books in the world today, it's a little amazing to remember that Europeans in the sixteenth century died for the right to read the Bible in English.

In this Skype-recorded episode of Bookpod, Brenda Rickman Vantrease talks about *The Heretic's Wife*, a novel about the risks that brave individuals once took to begin thinking for themselves.

Presentation

The Heretic's Wife is the third book in a series of three books that deal with the development of the English Bible and the religious dissent that eventually led to the Reformation. *The Heretic's Wife* is set during the Reformation in Tudor England. It also deals, peripherally,



with the Lutheran Reformation on the continent.

Now, those were two different things. The English Reformation was more a political reformation, while the Lutheran Reformation on the continent was a truly religious reformation.

The Heretic's Wife is about the selling of banned Lutheran materials. And the heretic's wife, Kate Gough, is a bookseller of banned materials.

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Kate Gough and John Gough are brother and sister who are descendants of the families that were presented in *The Illuminator* and in *The Mercy Seller*. Of course, there's several generations have passed. But they come from a long line of dissidents against the Catholic Church.

And they are operating a bookshop in Paternoster Row when her brother comes under the sharp eye of Thomas More. Now, Sir Thomas takes John Gough – and this is a matter of



historical record, that he did interrogate many of the booksellers and book distributors in London – in his secret place in the garden.

In the center of his garden he had a whipping post. And he called it his Jesu Tree, or his Tree of Troth. And he would interrogate the people that he suspected of heresy there. And in one of his sweeps, he gets Kate Gough's brother.

And young John Gough is married. He has a wife and a child. And he recants. And Kate is embarrassed by that.

I mean, she thinks that he should uphold his beliefs. He should be stronger in the faith. And Kate continues to try to distribute the bibles, even after the sweep. She continues to try to distribute the bibles that are coming in from William Tindale on the continent.

And then she meets a young scholar named John Frith. Now, John Frith was kind of a protégé of William Tindale. William Tindale has fled to the continent to try to do his translations of the Bible there. But John Frith is still at



Oxford. And he's imprisoned in the fish cellar at Oxford with four other young men who are talking Lutheran talk, and that's not popular.

When he's imprisoned there, three of the young men die. They are left in there for three months during the summer. John Frith escapes and he meets up with Kate Gough, who is trying to distribute her books, and they marry. And they flee to the continent together.

All I knew about Kate – I didn't know her name. All we know about her is that John Frith had a wife. And that's all we know. We don't know where she was from. The historical record says that in one of William Tindale's letters to John Frith – while he was imprisoned, before his execution – he was told, by William Tindale, that his wife doesn't want him to do anything against his conscience on her account.

That's all I knew. But I took that and just had the most wonderful time building this strong female character who was part of his mission, but who was also going to be a



mother. So, what kind of impact did his decisions have on her?

Of course, she comes to confront Sir Thomas as he gets ever closer with his torches.

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The Thomas More in my novel is more villain than he is a man of honor. Now, that's not to say that all of the things that were presented in *A Man for all Seasons* – he did die well. He did die for his belief. But in my novel, he was willing to kill for his beliefs. And he became so fanatical about them that the man who dreamed up *Utopia*, now dreamed of burning flesh.

He wanted the Church's enemies to be squelched and to be punished and to be severely punished and it was a discount into fanaticism that just warped his entire image of the world. He saw any dissention against the Catholic Church – which, to him, I think, represented order.

Thomas More was not even a churchman. I mean, we think of



him – most of us think of him who have brought up with the saintly legend – as being a man of the church because he died taking a stand. But really he died taking a stand for the law. To him, the Church and the law were one in the same. And Thomas More's God had more to do with the law – at least as he's presented in my novel and the way that I came to see him through the research I did. His God has more to do with the law and with order and with received structure than it had to do with a Galilean on the cross.

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All three of my books have dealt with the same subject – with the freedom to write, the freedom to publish, the freedom to refrain from or to embrace the received wisdom of the age. They are books about religious freedom, essentially, and so is *The Heretic's wife*.

Valedictory

For more information about the librarian-turned-historical novelist, visit www.brendarickmanvantrease.com.



Bookpod producer is Barbara Finkelstein. Music is by Kevin MacLeod.

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