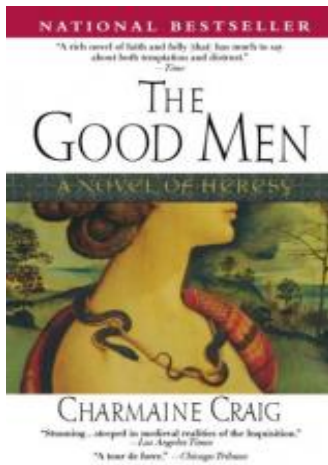


# The Good Men: A Novel of Heresy

by Charmaine Craig



## About the Book

Inspired by the historical testimony of Grazida Lizier, a young woman changed with Heresy by the Inquisition in medieval France, **The Good Men** is a passionate, sweeping story of human tragedy. The heresy of the Cathars, also known as the Good Men, flourished in the Languedoc in the latter 12th and early 13th centuries. Extreme dualists, the Cathars believed that while God created the soul and its spiritual domains, Satan created the body, the earth, and all matter. They conceived of Christ not as a man, but as a pure spirit, with merely the illusion of human form. Their followers led ascetic lives in anticipation of spiritual salvation. Alarmed by the rising popularity of the Cathars, Pope Innocent III launched a brutal holy war against them in 1208. By 1321, the last known Good Man had been killed. Against this backdrop, Charmaine Craig sets her story of the people of medieval Montailou, a village in the Pyrenees.

Spanning three generations, **The Good Men** follows the passions of characters torn between desires for spiritual grace and fleshly pleasure, and caught between the power of the written word and the pull of the natural order: Bernard, the young Dominican Friar, who enters the monastery as an orphan and, at an early age, takes on the charge of the Inquisition; Pierre Clergue, the village priest, whose physical shortcomings, insecurities, and fierce attraction to the young Grazida lead him to betray himself and countless others; Fabrisse, Grazida's mother, who squanders her youth and desire on Pierre, never realizing they are blood relations; Arnaud, a doctor's son, whose love of Ovid and one youthful sexual encounter make him a target for the Inquisition; and Grazida herself, whose devotion to nature and thirst for knowledge lead to her undoing.

**The Good Men** is remarkable not only for its historically accurate feel?Craig traveled to France and extensively researched the Inquisition against the Cathars?but also for its moving dramatization of how small, and at times barely comprehensible, differences in faith that were the impetus for terrible destruction. Through beautifully drawn characters, Craig reanimates questions of religious belief and faith that are as relevant now as in the fourteenth century and, in the process, exposes human nature in all its baseness and beauty.

## Discussion Guide

1. Do you consider the forms of religious extremism found in **The Good Men** the extreme asceticism practiced by the Good Christians and the violent persecution of heretics by the Catholic Church to be in any way related or similar? What drives Bernard to become an Inquisitor? What drives the Good Christians?
2. In her deposition, Grazida Lizier says of her illicit love affair with the rector Pierre Clergue, "Because it gave me joy and him also when we made love, I did not think that with him I was sinning." What is Grazida's view of the relation between flesh and spirit? Can the presence of joy be seen as a viable way to judge the morality of human behavior?
3. What kind of man is Pierre Clergue? Why does he become a priest? Why is he attracted to the heretical beliefs of the Good Christians? In what ways does he embody the novel's central theme of the struggle between body and soul?
4. What are the main tenets of the Good Christians's theology? Is Fabrisse right when she thinks that "They hated life?. In the name of salvation, they destroyed" [p. 67]? Why does the Catholic Church fear and persecute the Good Men?
5. Why is Bernard so obsessed with punishing Pierre Clergue? To what extent are his feelings personal? To what extent are they religious? How does he feel as he regards the men "rotting slowly under his command" [p. 331]?
6. What effect does Echo have on Pierre? How is she able to make him see "God in everything living and thriving?in the roots of the trees and in the nests of the choughs"? Why does he come to believe that "the soul shimmered through the senses of the body" [p. 283]?
7. How does Arnaud's struggle with his sexuality compare with Echo's feelings about the body and pleasure? How does it compare with Pierre's struggle?
8. Does learning to read change Echo's view of the world? What role does literacy play in the novel, and what questions does it raise about how we view the world? Is Arnaud right to later regret having taught Echo to read?
9. What is the role of nature in the novel? Is it benign, infused with meaning, menacing, innocent, holy? Why is Grazida constantly drawn to the woods outside the village? What is Arnaud's relationship to the natural world?
10. In what ways does **The Good Men** even though it is set in 13th- and 14th-century France illuminate many of the emotional, sexual, religious, and social problems that plague our own times? Does its historical distance increase or diminish its relevance?

## Author Bio

Charmaine Craig received her B.A. from Harvard and an MFA in writing from the University of California at Irvine. Also an actress, she starred in a film from Walt Disney Studios. She lives in Laguna Beach, California. **The Good Men** is her first novel.

## Critical Praise

"Craig's remarkable debut novel, **The Good Men**, is an epic tale of faith, doubt, love, betrayal, and the conflict between the flesh and the spirit."

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