

Reading Between the Lines – October 30, 2011

Good morning! This is Dotty Cline. You are listening to “Reading Between the Lines” brought to you by the Friends of the Homer Public Library.

The Burren. I vividly remember the rocky beauty of this area in the far west of Ireland, boarded by the Atlantic on the west and Galway Bay to the north. The Burren has been described as: “Where there are no trees to hang a man. Where there is not enough water to drown him. And if you finally succeeded in killing him, it's too rocky to bury him.” I remember endless stone walls, megalithic tombs, portal dolmens, and ring forts.

The Burren, is the setting for a series of mysteries by Cora Harrison who grew up a bit south in County Cork, but clearly knows the Burren and its history well. These stories take place in the sixteenth century, and once you have seen the Burren it is easy to imagine the rocky landscape in 1509, since it is still sparsely populated and, well, rocks don't change that much!

In My Lady Judge author Harrison introduces us to Mara, Brehon of the kingdom of the Burren. A Brehon in medieval Ireland was a combination of lawyer and judge, a person of high status, second only to the king. Mara is highly regarded even though she is an exception—as women brehons were rare, though not unknown at the time. Like other brehons, Mara holds a school at her home, where students study brehon law. Once a month she holds court at the great Dolman where people bring cases before her. Not only is she expected to pronounce judgments in disputes, she must also solve crimes and sentence the perpetrators.

My Lady Judge opens on May Day with people from all over the Burren making the

pilgrimage to the top of Mullaghmore Mountain where they celebrate with singing, dancing, and lighting a great fire. In the gray dawn of the next day Mara is called to investigate why one man did not come back down the mountain, and his body shows wounds made by a sword left nearby, a sword belonging to one of her students. Mara's questions are met by stony silence. This mystery takes many twists and turns before attaining resolution only in the final pages.

In addition to intriguing mysteries, and fascinating characters, Cora Harrison gives insights into the culture of the time and the complex relationships among the residents of the area. Each chapter opens with an excerpt from the laws in place, also called Brehon law. One such law says, "The honor price of a king is deemed to be 42 sets or 21 milch cows, or twenty-one ounces of silver. The king loses his honor price if he works as a commoner, goes unattended, or flees his enemies." Once we get to know widowed King Turlough Donn O'Brien we are sure he would never risk losing his honor price. Indeed, he spends time wooing Mara, who does not want to give up her freedom and position to become his wife.

I read two more books in this series, Michaelmas Tribute and The Sting of Justice, and I can hardly wait to get my hands on the next ones. Look for the Burren series of mysteries by Cora Harrison and other books for your winter reading on the shelves of the Homer Public Library and through inter-library loan.

The Library hours are

Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday 10 to 6,

And Tuesday and Thursday 10 to 8.

Tune in next Sunday morning at this same time for "Reading Between the Lines" right here on KBBI AM 890, Homer!