

Reviews

Of Sirens and Centaurs: Medieval Sculpture at Exeter Cathedral

Alex Woodcock

Impress Books

146 pages £9.99

This beautifully produced book illustrates the incredible range and quality of the medieval stone-carvings in one of Britain's most spectacular buildings, of which the extraordinary minstrels' gallery is probably the most famous. The author is himself a stonemason at Exeter Cathedral, as well as an archaeologist, and so is well qualified to expound on the many curious, often grotesque and always intriguing images which he covers in the book.

After presenting a concise history of the development of the cathedral from its early, Romanesque origins to its later gothic additions in the sixteenth century, and subsequent restorations, he groups the sculptures into loose categories which include animals, monsters and grotesques, musicians and angels, birds, fish and sirens, biblical figures and saints, and green men. The latter chapter will be of great interest to Pagans, folklorists and aficionados of the foliate face, as the author has some interesting and quite original views on their meaning and context in medieval culture. Exeter has some of the finest green men in Britain, including the famous double-headed example carved intricately into a roof boss in the presbytery aisle. There is also an early sheela-na-gig on the north side of the south tower. Woodcock is very good at explaining the contemporary folklore behind

some of the more obscure imagery — for example, a seemingly bewildering image of a man, naked but for socks and a net, and riding on a goat but not looking where he is going. The author's scholarship is exceptional and the copious references to other published works makes this book a very useful resource for further study.

This volume, produced with the support of the Friends of Exeter Cathedral, is a must for anyone visiting this magnificent building (no doubt it is available from the gift shop), or even for anyone interested in medieval art generally. With nearly eighty high-quality photographs reproduced in full colour, it is also remarkably good value.

Highly Recommended.

The Magus of Hay

Phil Rickman

Atlantic Books

464 pages £18.99 hb.

This, the twelfth Merrily Watkins novel, is set in the Herefordshire town of Hay on Wye, famous for its bookshops and literary festivals. A Pagan couple move into the town, hoping to open an occult bookshop, principally by selling their own collection and trawling charity shops for further stock; at the same time a body is found in a waterfall, and the American wannabe bookseller, Robin, through being in the wrong place at the wrong time, later becomes a suspect when a young policewoman is murdered.

As usual, the author skilfully blends his knowledge of occult subjects, and the folklore of the Welsh border counties to good effect, producing another real page-turner, encompassing New-Age gurus,