



READING GUIDE

The Pillars of the Earth

Ken Follett

INTRODUCTION

A spellbinding epic set in twelfth-century England, *The Pillars of the Earth* tells the story of Philip, prior of Kingsbridge, a devout and resourceful monk driven to build the greatest Gothic cathedral the world has known...of Tom, the mason who becomes his architect—a man divided in his soul...of the beautiful, elusive Lady Aliena, haunted by a secret shame...and of a struggle between good and evil that will turn church against state, and brother against brother.

ABOUT KEN FOLLETT

“Ken Follett is the author of seventeen bestsellers, from the groundbreaking *Eye of the Needle*, and is one of the world’s most popular novelists. He has sold approximately 90 million books. He lives in England with his wife, Barbara.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Ken Follett has said: “When I started to look at cathedrals, I wondered: Who built them, and why? The book is my answer to that question.” Why do you think the great medieval cathedrals were built?

Some things to think about:

How does the building of the cathedral satisfy the ambitions of the main characters – Tom Builder, Prior Philip, Aliena and Jack? How does it affect the lives of other important characters in the story?

2. Read the first scene in Chapter 10 and think about the prose style. Why do you think the author writes this way? Compare the last scene of the same chapter.

Some things to think about:

The number of words of one syllable; the length of sentences; the length of paragraphs; the adjectives used. What is different about the author’s purpose in these two scenes?

3. Although *The Pillars of the Earth* is fiction, it includes some real-life characters and incidents from history, such as King Stephen at the battle of Lincoln, and the murder of Thomas Becket. Why does the author mix fact and fiction like this?

Some things to think about:

Are the factual scenes told from the point of view of the real-life characters, or the fictional ones? Are the fictional characters major or minor players in the big historical events of the time?

4. Women were second-class citizens in medieval society and the church. Is this accurately reflected in *The Pillars of the Earth*?

Some things to think about:

What attitudes to women are shown by Prior Philip and William Hamleigh? How do Agnes, Ellen and Aliena respond to society's expectations?

5. Some readers have said that they look at medieval churches with new eyes after reading *The Pillars of the Earth*. Do you think you will do the same?

Some things to think about:

In the book, churches are usually viewed through the eyes of a builder. How does this affect your understanding of the architecture?

6. Ken Follett has said: "I'm not a very spiritual person. I'm more interested in the material problems of building a cathedral." Is *The Pillars of the Earth* a spiritual book?

Some things to think about:

What motivates Prior Philip? What does Tom say at the beginning of Chapter 5, when Philip asks him why he wants to be master builder? In Chapter 16, why does Philip ask Remigius to come back to the priory?

(Reading Group Guide credit: Ken Follet's official web site)