

1212: Year of the Journey

About the Author

Brought up the second youngest in a family of nine children, Kathleen McDonnell has never forgotten what it's like to be the underdog, to struggle to be heard over the crowd. So it's no surprise that she's so skilled in writing from a kid's perspective.

Born into an Irish-Catholic family in Chicago, Illinois, Kathleen moved to Canada and graduated with a BA in English Literature from the University of Toronto. She began working as a freelance journalist, and one day a friend suggested she try writing a play. She went on to win the Chalmers Canadian Children's Play Award for *Loon Boy* in 1994. More recently Kathleen has written a book about theater for young people, *Putting on a Show*, which includes several of her award-winning plays.

Intrigued by the impact of popular culture on her own children, Kathleen wrote two non-fiction books, *Kid Culture* and *Honey, We Lost the Kids*. She is a frequent commentator on kids and the media for TV and radio. She also speaks at conferences and conducts workshops in libraries and schools.

One of the themes that inspires Kathleen is children and the power of the imagination. She is working on a fantasy-adventure trilogy for young readers, *The Notherland Journeys*, that explores this theme. The first two books in the series are *The Nordlings* and *The Shining World*, and she's currently working on the third installment.

Her two daughters grown, McDonnell works at her home on Toronto Island, where she lives with her partner.

You can visit Kathleen's website at www.kathleenmcdonnell.com

FROM FACT TO FICTION: Writing *1212: Year of the Journey* by Kathleen McDonnell

Throughout my career I've found that the things I learn on one writing project show me the way to the next one, and this book is no exception. The seed of *1212: Year of the Journey* was planted when I was researching the history of childhood for my book *Honey, We Lost the Kids*. While reading about the lives of children in the Middle Ages, I came across a reference to an event that occurred in the year 1212 known as the Children's Crusade. I had no idea such a thing had taken place, and I was intrigued. It was one of those *aha!* moments. I knew right away that this was a subject that I would return to, and would one day write about.

I set out to find out as much as I could about the Children's Crusade. I soon discovered there wasn't a lot of factual information about it. As I point out in the Author's Note at the end of *1212*, it is mentioned in only a few documents of the time, and historians today don't agree on what actually took place. Besides historical sources there are also some fictionalized accounts of the Children's Crusade in novels and plays. What struck me about most of these accounts, both historical and fictional, was that the writers tended to treat the Children's Crusade as a singular, isolated event.

I was curious to find out what else was going on around the same time, and began to read more about the Middle Ages. I learned that the early thirteenth century was a tumultuous period in history, a time when many of the problems plaguing the world today emerged with full force. Christian armies were battling Muslim forces for control of the Holy Land, groups such as the Cathars were challenging the power and dogma of the church of Rome, and violence against Jews was becoming commonplace. In my reading I also discovered that from the earliest days of the religious wars, there were people of all faiths who believed in tolerance and who desired to live together in peace.

I decided to write a novel about the Children's Crusade that would connect it to the other momentous events going on at the same time. I knew this approach would give me gripping material for a novel and allow me to explore the larger theme of intolerance – how the struggle against it has been going on for centuries and how religious hatred divides us still.

Books were my most important source material and the main ones I used in my research for *1212* are listed below. I also found a good deal of information on the Internet, which was particularly useful for finding out details of everyday life in the Middle Ages and other bits of information. (If I had any doubts about the accuracy of a website's information I made sure to double-check it.) It amazed me that, where I once made numerous trips to the library, I could find much of what I needed with a Google search. Footwear in the middle ages? Pictures of thirteenth-century musical instruments? The name of the Pope in 1233? It was all there with a click of the mouse.

While I did my research, my imagination was also at work, as the book's three main characters – Étienne, Blanche and Abel – began taking shape in my mind. I created what are known as "back stories" for each of them, and over time I almost felt I was getting to know them as real people. Once my research was largely complete, I had to face the dilemma every writer must grapple with: How to put this pile of research into some kind of coherent order. Making an outline is the one of the hardest parts of writing, but I find that it's the most important step. And since I was writing a novel, I had the added challenge of creating a story that was engaging and exciting; one that didn't read like a historical textbook. I had to move from Fact to Fiction.

I began mapping out the story section by section, chapter by chapter. Of course it helped that I was drawing on historical events, and that the journey provided a ready-made spine for the story. Still, I couldn't just show the young crusaders traveling from one place to another. I had to create incidents and make things happen; I had to fill in the blanks. The subplot about Little Guinefort is an example of this kind of invention. In the Middle Ages people with physical disabilities were often outcasts living on the margins of society. I thought it would strengthen the story to create a character like this, and show how the other characters reacted to him.

At every stage in the writing of this book I had to ask myself questions: What do I want to happen here? What do I want the characters to be doing and thinking? How do I want the reader to feel? And always I had to look for ways to illuminate my theme: Religious hatred and the damage it does to our common humanity. Through several years of research, writing and rewriting (I revised some sections of the book four and five times), *1212: Year of the Journey* has gone from being a tiny germ of an idea in my mind to a full-fledged book.

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References

Books

The Children's Crusade: A History by George Zabriskie Gray, 1872, re-issued in 1972.

The Perfect Heresy: The Revolutionary Life and Death of the Medieval Cathars by Stephen O'Shea, 2000.

Life in a Medieval City by Joseph and Frances Gies, 1969.

A History of the Jews by Cecil Roth, 1970.

Holy War: The Crusades and Their Impact on Today's World by Karen Armstrong, 1988.

Websites

My main source of information on the Internet was The Medieval Sourcebook, a comprehensive site maintained by Fordham University:

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>

I also consulted these two sites for details of everyday life in the Middle Ages. Students in grades 4-6 might find them useful:

<http://www.historyforkids.org/learn/medieval/>

<http://www.kathimitchell.com/middleages.htm>

Timeline

- 1096 The first of many crusades to wrest the Holy Land from Muslim control begins. Peter the Hermit takes part as leader of the People's Crusade. Crusading soldiers inflict massacres on Jewish communities in Germany.
- 1144 The murder of William of Norwich, England, is blamed on the Jews.
- 1190 Richard the Lion Heart sails from Marseille, in a crusade to win back the Holy Land.
- 1209 Francis of Assisi forms his band of holy beggars.

The crusade against the Cathars begins with the massacre in Beziers, followed by

- attacks on Carcassonne, Minerve, and other towns in Languedoc.
- 1212 Étienne of Cloyes initiates the Children’s Crusade, which ends in a shipwreck off the island of San Pietro.
- 1215 Pope Innocent III decrees that the Jews of Europe must wear a yellow badge to distinguish them from Christians.
- 1219 Francis of Assisi meets with Sultan Malek Al-Kamil at Damietta.
- 1233 Pope Gregory IX establishes the Inquisition to combat the Cathar heresy.
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Classroom Activities

1212: Year of the Journey is an excellent classroom resource for grades 4-9. It is written at a reading level appropriate for grades 6-9, and can be used for reading aloud to students in grades 4-5. Teachers can choose from the following activities and discussion topics, which pertain to a number of curriculum subjects, in particular history, geography, social studies, language arts, math and science.

History / Social Studies: Life in the Middle Ages

1. Clothing and textiles

People in medieval times did not have the wide variety of clothing and fabrics we have today. What are some of the things you learn about clothes and footwear in *1212*?

Wool was the most widely-used fabric for clothing in medieval times, and it required the work of many people to produce. What does Étienne’s “job” have to do with wool? What skill does Blanche have that involves wool? What other ways does wool play a part in the story in *1212*?

2. Work and professions

Abel’s father is a physician. What do you learn in *1212* about the practice of medicine in the middle ages? What are some of the ways it is different from the kind of health care we have today?

What other types of work are depicted in *1212*? Which of these jobs and professions still exist in today’s world? How are they the same and how are they different from medieval times?

3. Festivals and leisure activities

In the middle ages, theatre companies traveled from place to place in carts, which also served as stages on which they performed their plays. How is this different from the way most people experience live theatre nowadays? Can you think of examples today of theatre like it was in medieval times?

Midsummer Eve and the Feast of Saint Nicholas are two medieval festivals depicted in *1212*. What is being celebrated at these events? What activities did people do, and how did they feel about them? What was it about goings-on at the Feast of Saint Nicholas that made it so different from the normal church service?

There are a number of children's games mentioned in *1212*. Which characters played them, and when? From their names and descriptions, what can you guess about how these games were played in past times? Try making up your own game that fits the name of one of the games mentioned in the book, and play it. Can you think of some modern-day games that might have their origins in these medieval games?

4. Education and literacy

The vast majority of people in the middle ages could not read or write, and few received the kind of formal education that is universal for children today. Keeping these facts in mind, discuss these questions:

What is an apprentice? Who in *1212* served as an apprentice?

What difficulties did Abel face in writing a letter to his family in Troyes?

How did the other pilgrims react when they saw him composing his letter?

Why did the Marseille ship owners seek out Abel and Blanche to sign the contract for the voyage to Palestine?

Why was Abel so moved and overwhelmed by Sultan Malek al-Adil's library?

5. Wealth and poverty

Why did the pilgrims encounter so much difficulty finding food as they traveled south?

Role-play: Have someone in the class play the part of a beggar and beg from other students. How do they respond to the beggar? Discuss how it feels to be the beggar, and to be the one begged from. How are beggars in medieval times similar to homeless people today? How are they different?

Francis of Assisi grew up in a wealthy family, but left it all behind to live a life of voluntary poverty and encouraged his followers to do the same. What were his reasons for this? What are some examples of “doing without” in today’s world?

6. Weapons and warfare

The story of *1212* takes place in an era before the invention of guns and explosives. What is the name of the weapon that Blanche must learn to operate in Chapter 15, and how does it work? Do some research on this and other weapons of medieval times. Draw diagrams or make models to show how they worked.

7. Transportation

Walking was the main mode of getting from place to place for the people of the middle ages. What other modes of transportation are depicted in *1212*? Which characters use them, and why?

In Chapter 12, Blanche sets out on foot from Marseille in the early morning, and arrives at Arles two days later, at dusk, making for three days’ walking. Look up the distance between these French cities on a map, and calculate roughly how far Blanche walked in one day. Figure out how long it would take today for a car driving at 50 kilometers per hour to travel the same distance?

Étienne and Abel embark on one of the ships from Marseille, then are separated at Alexandria. Étienne continues on to Baghdad, Abel to Cairo. What mode of transportation does each of them use to get to their destination? Trace their respective journeys on a map, and figure out the total distance each of them travels. Do research on these four cities today.

8. Science and seafaring

During the voyage in Chapter 11, the pilgrims witness a strange sight which the sailors say is caused by the Hermit of San Pietro. Abel believes there must be a rational, scientific reason for the phenomenon. Do some research on this kind of mirage, known as a *fata morgana*, and find out about the various theories of what causes one to occur.

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Topics for Discussion

1. Dreams play an important part in the story of *1212*. Each of the three main characters – Abel, Étienne and Blanche – has an important dream at some point. Talk about what happens in these dreams, and about the effect the dream has on each of their lives.

2. What do you think about Abel's decision to hide his Jewish identity from Étienne? What would you do in his position? Do you know of some situations in modern times when people felt it necessary to hide their religion, and why they did so?
3. Why is Blanche so unhappy living in the convent? What do you think of her behaviour – hiding the *vielle* and taking food from the convent kitchen? How do you think you would have behaved in her situation?
4. Étienne's preaching and storytelling have a powerful effect on the crowds who come to hear him. Think of some examples of people today who have this kind of charisma. Who are some of our modern-day Étiennes, and what is the source of their appeal?
5. Étienne, Abel and Blanche come from different religious backgrounds and have very different attitudes toward religion. Discuss some of these attitudes, and compare them with ideas about religion in today's world.
6. Why did some of the pilgrims want to leave Little Guinefort behind? What do you think you would do in a similar situation?
7. What would your daily life be like if you lived in 1212 as a peasant, like the characters in the book? What modern technologies – or viewpoints - would you miss most?
8. Children's activism isn't just limited to the medieval era. Free the Children, which campaigns against child labour, was started by a thirteen-year-old Canadian named Craig Kielburger. Do some research on this group and other social justice movements started by children. How do you think a "children's crusade" today might be different from the one in medieval times? How would the existence of things like email and corporate sponsorship change the process? If you could start a movement to advocate for a cause, what would it be and why?

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Vocabulary

Religious terms:

alms
blasphemy
carnal
cathedral
clergy / clerical
crusade
exodus
gentile
heathen

heretic
hermit
infidel
manna
martyr
mendicant
multitude
nunnery
pagan
pilgrim
prophet
relic
saint
sanctuary
seder
sepulchre
yeshiva

Medieval terms and unusual words in *1212*:

Bitterois - residents of Beziers
bobbin
catapult
confit
crookback
cutler
dowries
fortnight
gangrenous
goiter
harbinger
Massilians - residents of Marseille
panoply
parchment
runt
scythe
trebuchet
vellum

Musical terms:

lute
estampie – a type of medieval dance
lai – a type of medieval love song
tabor
troubadour

vielle / *vielle-a-roux* – a stringed instrument with a drone produced by turning a crank,
also known as a hurdy-gurdy