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Ken Follett
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Dear Ken,

I've read your outline quite avidly and here are some of my thoughts on it.

I see this as one book for lots of reasons, but mainly because I think you can -- and should -- give the reader a long, fat, feasting read about medieval England with the whole story right there. There are problems in stretching it out to two or three books and some of them are apparent in the outline, mainly that your hero and the tension and pace of his story don't really occur in this outline until the third projected book. Unless you can create three entire novels centering around this subject and this era the first two "novels" may end up being mostly background for the last. I think if you conceive this story presented in the outline as a whole book instead of three separate ones you'll do a fantastic job of it. (Philip may also gain the stature of a hero, but so far Jack is the only one you've got here.) And then if you still want to do a trilogy, the next book will follow more organically, and so will the last. But thinking in terms of a trilogy in this outline hasn't worked -- your head is still thinking one book. You've written it this way: the background, the build up, and whammo, the story.

That and one other point later in this letter are the main things I'd like you to be thinking of. Now I'll give you some random thoughts that occurred to me centering around your characters, plot, theme, etc.

Tom, the mason -- would he be a member of a masonic guild? Those guilds were more powerful and independent than you have shown them here. It seems that

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Tom should have a little more control over his fate. The Freemasons, with their secret rites, were even slightly feared. They claimed to be descended from an ancient, secret order that built the Temple of Solomon.

How did these people live --[^] houses, huts, castles -- what?

Ellen has to be slightly crazy to live in the woods. A young gentlewoman wouldn't take to the forest unless she's outside society in the first place. Why not make her a left-over Druid only slightly disguised as a Christian? That's not so far-fetched for that time, especially if she's a Celt. When her son Jack devises the flying buttress, he could remember the Druidic megaliths.

1135 when your story begins, to 1170 when it ends, is a short time in which to complete a cathedral, especially one with so many setbacks as yours. They often took more than a hundred years to build.

There isn't really all that much about cathedrals, except toward the end, with Jack.

William is a dull villain, mostly off-stage and all bad. A first step toward making him more interesting would be to make him a villain with the fear of God in his heart. Most people were like that then anyway. One of the most interesting things in this outline is the rise of a medieval town around a cathedral. The towns^{gate} away at the baron's power, which is why they opposed them, as you show that William does. And of course the towns threw their weight behind a king -- even though the kings were not yet so powerful in your era. But William instinctively knew that the town, therefore the cathedral, therefore Philip, was his enemy. But what if William, as a god-fearing man, had another sort of relationship with Philip? And what if William finally felt he had to get rid of Philip and sent his minions to knock him off, à la Becket? And what if then Divine Judgement turned against William? It's a thought anyway. You do need something more with William and a villain in conflict with himself, as you know better than anyone, is always interesting.

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Jack comes too suddenly as the hero of the book, and too much at the end. His lifelong love for Ann isn't credible, at least in this outline. Also, if he were an ordained priest he couldn't get out of that so easily. Priests didn't leave the church to marry as they do now. They did keep mistresses though. Jack himself is the son of a priest.

Ann's devotion to her brother Richard and Richard's cause is not quite clear. Aside from re-claiming his father's estates, did he have another?

It's too bad your period is just before the Black Death. That's always good for some drama. The Black Death did appear in Germany -- or whatever Germany was then -- in your era. (I looked this up). Maybe you could do something with that. When the plague struck England it hit the west country first, your locale.

You need another love story, a tragic one like Rowena and Ivanhoe, Heloise and Abelard, Guinevere and Lancelot. Ann is too cool and calculating to be a passionate heroine or "victim" of a great love. Ann is interesting because she is essentially a modern woman in medieval times -- making it against all odds as a rich wool merchant. Somewhere in this epic, you need to get a lyrical story, a heartstring tugger, a beautiful, vulnerable damsel and a brave young hero, the innocents. She could be sent to a convent for her sins, he dispatched to the crusades. It sounds corny as I say it, but you could make it wonderful. Maybe they could even have a surprise happy ending!

Be careful of too many rapes. The two important women in this outline, Ellen and Ann, were both raped. I've always been suspicious of rapes in a story -- they bludgeon the plot, get a knee-jerk reaction from readers, and make work easy for the writer. A rape can explain too much -- no need after that for subtle character creation.

Medieval times were a period of magic, superstition and religious fervor. And in your period, reform, via St. Bernard of Clairvaux, who returned the

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convents and monasteries to austerity and created the Rule for the Knights Templar. Philip would be bound to be affected by Bernard, as well as the crusade craze.

You need some nuns! The abbesses and prioresses of the great convents were the most influential women of their day. Philip would be sure to have an ally among them -- or perhaps an enemy, maybe even a dear enemy. You could make a marvelous story out of that sort of friendship/relationship.

Whatever happened to Agnes's baby, the one Ellen rescued?

Maud (known as Empress Maud in the Brother Cadfael books) is someone you obviously disapprove of, but what if you rewrote history a little and made her a little more sympathetic, give her a bigger role. You need more romance anyway, and that means more women.

Book III has more tension and shape than the rest. Jack's firmly on the scene, a strong hero. You've got surprises, the phoney relic for instance, and you've got a fine climax -- the two kings unknown to each other as father and son (did you make this up?). But all this doesn't happen until the last book, which of course, I hope will be one book.

Now I've come to my next big point; you are a writer of thrillers, a thrilling writer of thrillers. In these three books, but I hope one book, whatever -- it will be a big book so all the more reason for suspense to help carry it. And your readers will still expect chills, thrills and suspense from you, no matter how different the subject from your previous books. They'll expect it for no other reason than you are so good at it. So -- you need a mystery, a chase, a pursuit, and the climaxes that these things bring. I think you also need an underlying theme beyond the cathedral, but perhaps connected to it, that unifies this whole medieval epic, and in the best case, that would be connected

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to the mystery, suspense, pursuit, etc.

Here are some ideas for you to think about, nooks and crannies of history where you might find characters and plots to create suspense.

The reformer-monks as opposed to the fat-cats. Peter in your outline was a reformer but more a Savonarola type, and you don't take him seriously. But there must have been some mighty conflicts when the high-living clerics thought their goodies would be taken from them. The prelates of those times were awfully good at intrigue.

Your period was the time of the birth and rise of the Knights Templar, a powerful order of fighting monks vowed to win back the Holyland for Christendom. They have a fascinating history, some of it ominously occult, according to their enemies. Philip of France in the early 1300's accused them of heresy, rounded them up one night and put them all to the stake. He wanted their lands and money of course but he accused them of horrible things. In your era, 1135-70, they were well established. Here's the interesting part: Bernard of Clairvaux claimed that anyone who committed an act of violence could redeem his soul by joining the order. What a great place for a rogue to hide! The Templars were a law unto themselves and nobody could touch them in your era. They could also take limited vows so that they didn't have to remain celibate for life. You may know all this already, but this is to remind you the Templars can be a great place to poke around for suspense.

Relics: You've already used a relic marvelously in Jack's part of the story. However relics were taken very seriously in those days -- no cathedral could be without one -- and people would kill and die for them. The journey of a relic from wherever to the cathedral could be a subplot that could supply lots of chills, thrills and suspense. But maybe that's been overdone.

Somewhere in my library I have a fascinating book called The Devils of Loudon by, I think, Aldous Huxley. It was the re-creation of a true episode of a convent of nuns who went crazy -- all of them -- and started doing all sorts of wild, obscene things because they were "possessed by devils." I think that period was later than medieval, but religious hysteria and its strange

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manifestations were part of life in your era too.

The masons: the masonic guilds were roving bunches, and they could decide to walk off a cathedral, for whatever reason, and the builders were left high and dry. Maybe William could infiltrate a guild somehow and scare the masons off the cathedral he hates?

If all this stuff seems to have little to do with what you actually wrote -- well, I just want to suggest other places where you might find suspense, mystery and all that. Also, the possibilities of your book stirs my imagination and I'm off and running. All over the place. It's probably because of my Catholic education. I remember who the Visigoths were and that makes me an American rarity. Medieval times always fascinated me, a crossroad between the new and the old.

Another reason for my meandering is that your outline relies heavily upon history for its story. Quite naturally too and all to the good. But at some point you've got to translate history into people, the barons, kings, prelates, reformers, eerie knights, love-lorn damsels, high-born nuns, adventurous crusaders, merchants, builders, masons, villeins and villains, saints and pilgrims. Among them you can look for that element of suspense that makes a story riveting.

Well now, need I say I think it's going to be fabulous? You've set yourself to quite a task, but when it's done I think -- even predict -- it will be your biggest and best. This is going to be great fun. I'm having a good time already!

Love,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Pat". The letters are fluid and connected, with a large, sweeping "P" and a stylized "t".