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THE GREAT STUPIDITY

Andy Lazris

BookBaby (278 pp.)

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BOOK REVIEW

In this farcical novel, a 14th-century blacksmith searches for part of a holy relic that could stop the devastating Black Death.

A plague dubbed the Great Mortality sweeps through France in 1350. People in blacksmith Jake's village take preventative measures, from isolating to waving hands in front of their faces ("to keep the bad air away"). Sadly, the plague strikes and kills many villagers. A local priest, certain that Jake, as a Mortality survivor, is "in God's favor," sends him on a quest. He's to recover half of St. Ambrose's toenail that someone stole two years ago. Surely making the toenail whole again will put an end to the plague. Jake heads to Montpellier to track down the priest who supposedly bought the relic from the thief. Along the way, he finds traveling companions: Cassandra, the pope's No. 3, and Isaac, a Jewish chief financier. The trio meets a motley batch of folks touting shocking ways to fight the Mortality, including performing daily flagellations and murdering Jews, whom many blame for the plague. But as Jake and his friends soon learn, apparently nothing works. Lazris unmistakably lambastes reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic, which he openly discusses in his preface. His biggest targets, it seems, are those advocating anti-Asian hostility; in this book, people are convinced, without evidence, that Jews are poisoning wells. But even the most spiteful characters come across as absurd or silly in this surprisingly lighthearted, engaging comedy. At the same time, endless plague-centric conversations spark copious dialogue scenes without much action. Still, these provide much of the humor—for example, amusingly misplaced contemporary dialect and profanity. The author calls this a "3-D book"—12 songs he wrote accompany the chapters. He includes lyrics, and readers can listen to the folksy songs (performed by other artists) on his website or a streaming service.

A funny, respectful sendup of the unpredictable responses to a widespread plague.

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