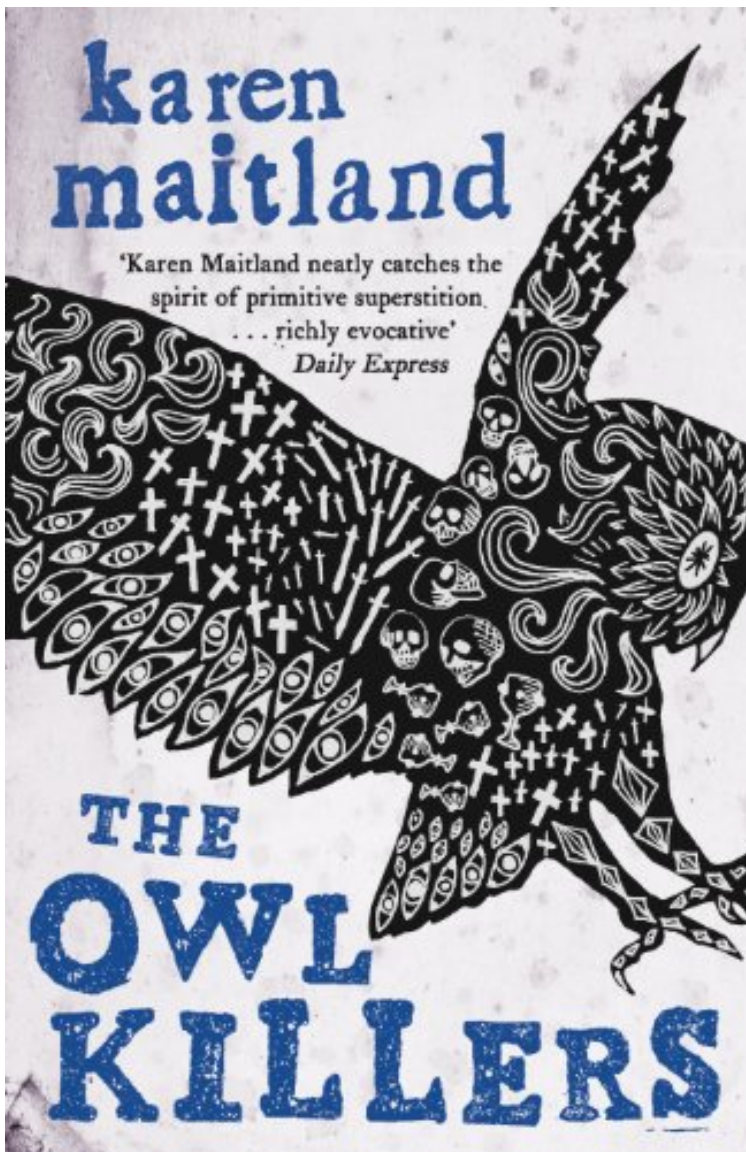


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# The Owl Killers



*Par Karen Maitland*  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteur'A richly evocative page-turner ... with a disturbing final twist worthy of a master of the spine-tingler, such as Henry James' Daily ExpressEngland, 1321. Deep in the heart of countryside lies an isolated village governed by a sinister regime of Owl Masters - theirs is a pagan world of terror and blackmail, where neighbour denounces neighbour and sin is punishable by murder.This dark status quo is disturbed by the arrival of a house of religious women, who establish a community outside the village. Why do their crops succeed when village crops fail; their cattle survive despite the plague? But petty jealousy turns deadly when the women give refuge to a young martyr. For she dies a gruesome death after spitting the sacramental host into flames that can't burn it - what magic is this? Or is the martyr now a saint and the host

a holy relic? Accusations of witchcraft and heresy run rife while the Owl Masters rain down hellfire and torment on the women, who must look to their faith to save them from the lengthening shadow of Evil ... a shadow with predatory, terrifying talons. Karen Maitland lives in Lincolnshire and is the author of *The White Room*, which won an Author's Club Best First Novel Award, and *Company of Liars*, published to outstanding critical acclaim in 2008.

Extrait *Beatrice* I thought I heard a man dying in the great forest tonight, but now I'm not so certain; maybe what I heard was a corpse rising to life. He was shrieking and pleading, but he wasn't begging for mercy. He'd challenged Death to wrestle with him. He'd thrown back his head and demanded to suffer, as if he wanted the demons to do their worst and drag him down into the pit of Hell. If he was human, then he must have been mad. Staring at the moon can make you run mad, did you know that?

And tonight the moon was round as a woman's belly swollen with child. That's when men should fear it most. I can't ever tell the other women what I saw, not even Pega. How could I explain to them what I was doing out there alone in the forest at midnight? I'm not a lunatic, if that's what you're thinking, not like that madman. I hadn't gone into the woods trying to get myself killed, though I knew the dangers only too well.

God alone knows how many deadly creatures slither and prowl through those ancient groves. Venomous adders, wild boar, savaging wolves--even a stag in rut could kill you. And if the beasts are not terrible enough, there are the cutpurses and the outlaws who prey on any stranger wandering into their domain. Pega, though she's taller than any man alive, won't set foot in the forest after dark. None of the village women will.

They say the hungry ghosts, slipping like mist between the trees, will devour you if you should chance to step upon the spot where someone once died. And over the centuries, hundreds of people must have died in these forests and left no mark. So do you really believe I wasn't afraid to go into those woods that night? I tell you I'd had to gather up every shard of courage I had, but what else could I do? Jack-in-the-green must be gathered when the moon is fully ripe, for only then does the herb have the strength to bring back a woman's fertility. I dared not ask for any from the infirmary. We are celibate, that is the rule, and why should a celibate woman want to restore her childbearing years? But I do; I must. The moon floated yellow and round above the treetops, pouring light down over the branches, petrifying leaf and branch to bleached bone. I trembled violently at every squeak and cry, forcing myself to keep walking deeper and deeper into the trees.

I could not turn back empty-handed. Jack-in-the-green is always hard to find by sunlight or moonlight. Devil's prick, Pega calls it. The herb loves the dark, damp places among the tree roots and its spotted leaves easily conceal themselves. I knew I must be near the river. I could hear the water thundering over the rocks. I turned away, knowing that the herb would not be growing near the water's edge, preferring the deep forest shade. Then, as if the moon herself had parted the bush with her white fingers and revealed the pale sheath, I saw it. I knelt in the damp earth, and was reaching for my knife to dig at the roots, when I heard a new sound. This was not an animal grunt. It was a man's voice. My heart thumping, I scrambled up as silently as I could. With my back pressed against the rough tree trunk for protection and my knife grasped tightly in my hand, I peered round trying to see where the voice came from, but I could see no one. Did the hungry ghosts speak before they pounced? Treading lightly, I tried to edge away from where I'd heard the sound. I listened, holding my breath, but no footsteps followed me. Perhaps the voice had just been in my head. I crept softly on, praying my footfall would not crack a twig and I wouldn't stumble, betraying my presence. I had come to the edge of a clearing. A lake of quicksilver seemed to spread out at my feet. It lapped around the base of a great hollow oak tree in the centre of the glade. The oak's trunk was so massive that it would have taken half a dozen men to encircle it. The hollow inside the oak was as dark as a crypt, for even though it must have been open to the sky above, not a single ray of moonlight appeared to penetrate it. Suddenly I heard the voice again. It was coming from somewhere in front of me. Instead of escaping from the danger, I had stumbled straight towards it. "The blood of the white stag I pour out to Yandil, lord of the underworld. Let it be as my blood. Drink." The voice rang out no more than a few yards from me, but the clearing was deserted. Despite the chill of the night, my hands were sticky with sweat and my heart began to pound so violently that I feared it would burst through my chest. I wanted to run, but I was too scared to move in case I was seen. "The flesh of the white stag I lay bare for Taranis, lord of this forest. Let it be as my flesh. Eat." I clung to the trunk of a tree and stood shaking, certain that if I let go, my legs would give way beneath me. Then I saw something moving; a black shadow was creeping across the silvered ground towards me, and it wasn't human. A long narrow snout and a pair of branched horns grew out from its chest, and four or five long tails swung from its back. It seemed to be slithering straight towards the spot where I stood. It was lengthening and reaching out towards me. I shut my eyes tightly, trying not to scream. "The spirit of the white stag I offer up to Rantipole, lord of the air. Let it be as my spirit. Devour it." I opened my eyes, too terrified to run. The

creature stood facing the open hollow of the tree. It had its back to me. Now, as the moonlight fell full upon it, I could make sense of the nightmare I saw. It was no monster. It was a man, tall and powerfully built.

Over his shoulder swung the hide of a stag with the horned head still attached. The beast was freshly slaughtered and the heat from the skin was still rising into the cold night air. I could see blood glistening wetly in the starlight. I could smell it. "I am come to the doorway of the three realms. Give me leave to enter. Ka!" The man pulled off his hood and tossed it aside. Then he lifted the stag's head and placed it on top of his own head. The blood dripped down over his hair and skin. Gripping the two sides of the hide, he wrapped the steaming skin around himself, like a cloak. As he raised his head, the antlers reared upwards as if he was challenging the moon. "Hear me, Taranis, lord of destruction, a great wrong has been done to you and to us your servants. Once your creature, your creation of despair and darkness, ruled this place. This valley was named for him. Your demon brought to all who defied you death in this world and torment in the world beyond. Every man learned to fear him and in their fear they turned to you and to us, your servants. But a century ago, on the eve of Samhain, the women came to this doorway. The women could not kill your demon, but they sent him into the twilight time, the place of the shadows, where the days pass unnumbered and the years pass unmarked. "This night I enter the doorway to seek the knowledge that will call the demon forth again. Others have dared to brave the stag's hide before me, but they perished before cockcrow, for they were not strong enough to bear your test and you destroyed them for their weakness. "This night the hag Cailleach dies. This night Cernunnos, lord of fertility, is born. I have hunted. I have slain. I have taken his sign and his strength. As he is reborn this night, so shall I be." The man raised his great arms, fists clenched and bellowed up at the stars. "Taranis, lord of the night, grant me the knowledge to summon your creation, the power to call him forth, and the strength to control what is raised from the darkness! Ka!" The man bowed his head and in one swift movement ducked into the black hollow of the bull oak. I stared at the place where the man had disappeared, too horrified by what I'd heard to move. Silence flooded back across the clearing. The trees shivered, holding their breath. Suddenly, as panic seized me, my legs started move. They were trembling too much for me to run and I managed only to stagger a few paces when I heard a loud rustling behind me. It was as if a violent wind had sprung up and was whirling the dry leaves, except that there was no breeze. I couldn't help myself; I had to turn. I had to look back. The clearing floor was still bathed in the ghost light, but it was no longer still and silent. Everywhere I looked, the ground was heaving. The leaf mould and newly sprouting plants were being pushed up as if a thousand moles were all trying to burrow their way to the surface at once. The mounds rose higher and higher, until suddenly they burst open, and insects began to pour out of them--beetles, worms, centipedes, engorged spiders, and great white maggots--all the creatures that feed upon the dead were crawling up from the dirt and into the moonlight. It was impossible to see the ground, for every inch of it was writhing with the bloated insects and all of them were scuttling towards the great oak. The wings of the beetles clicked and rattled as they swarmed around the trunk towards the tree's black maw. From inside the hollow I heard the man gasp as creatures began to slither into the oak tree where he lay. Then, as the vast tide of insects swarmed over the bark and crawled into the hollow, the man's moans gave way to a great cry of defiance and pain. "I give my blood, Yandil, I give you my . . . blood!" And from inside the cavernous hollow, his cry rose to shriek upon shriek of agony as if all the creatures of the grave were feeding on him, stripping his living flesh to the bare bone. may day the second of the three beltane fire days and saint walburga's day. + walburga was born in the kingdom of wessex, england, in the eighth century. + she became the abbess in charge of the double monastery of heidenheim, germany, ruling over both monks and nuns. agatha Excited barking jerked me awake. Every hound in the Manor was yelping. And no wonder, for it sounded as if the hunt in full cry was thundering past our gat... Revue de presse Maitland is a marvellous storyteller. . . . The Owl Killers is absolutely her best so far. Globe and Mail This powerful, enthralling story of treachery and magic is multilayered, atmospheric, and complex. Tucson Citizen Highly recommended . . . taut, compelling. Historical Novel Society Gripping . . . a real page-turner. Library Journal From the Trade Paperback edition.