



# The Pillars of the Earth

**By Ken Follett**

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## 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?

## Interview with Ken Follett

By DAVE ITZKOFF – New York Times

Published: July 21, 2010

On a recent visit to New York Mr. Follett talked with Dave Itzkoff about the his career trajectory, the creation of “**Pillars of the Earth**” and the secret to writing very, very long. These are excerpts from that conversation.

**Q.** What advice would you give to people who don't believe their careers can have second and third acts?

**A.** Well, for people who want to write best sellers, the best advice I can give is to say that the novel has to engage the reader emotionally. All the dramatic things that happen in thrillers — chases, interrogation, deception, romance — only work if the readers care about the people involved. If you have two men having a fistfight, it can be mechanical and boring, like watching two drunks hitting each other on the street.

**Q.** What compelled you, when you were still a newspaper journalist, to write your first novel?

**A.** The spur was a financial crisis. My car broke down, and I couldn't afford to get it fixed. And another journalist at the newspaper had written a thriller and the advance he got from the publisher was £200, which was pretty much exactly the amount of money I needed to get my car fixed. I did not figure that out until life began to show me I was a so-so newspaper reporter, and as a novelist I might have something special.

**Q.** You don't seem to mind taking confidence in your work, which doesn't necessarily fit the stereotype of the insecure writer.

**A.** Early in my career [my agent] Al [Zuckerman] said to me, “You know, your only real problem as a writer is that you're not a tortured soul.” [He laughs.] And that's true. A lot of people write out of some inner pain or difficulty. And I'm in general a fairly cheerful being.

**Q.** What inspired you to write “The Pillars of the Earth” — that is, a 900-page novel about the making of a Gothic cathedral?

**A.** I went and looked at one of these great cathedrals one day, and I was blown away by it. From there I became interested in how cathedrals were built, and from there I became interested in the society that built the medieval cathedral. It occurred to me at some point that the story of the building of a cathedral could be a great popular novel. Not everybody agreed with that idea.

**Q.** How long did it take you to write?

**A.** The whole thing took three years and three months. After two years I only had about 200 pages, and I felt this was a crisis. And as a novelist the only thing you can do if you want to write faster is work more hours. So I started to work Saturdays and then Sundays as well. The difficulty is simply that you've got to keep on making up more and more stuff about the same people.

If you write 100,000 words of a thriller, then it's finished. But after 100,000 words of "The Pillars of the Earth," that's like that much. [He holds open first quarter of the book.] I had all that to go. [He holds open the final three-quarters.] That was the great difficulty.

**Q.** Was it challenging to sell such a long work for a television or film adaptation?

**A.** I made a stipulation that I would only sell it for six or eight hours of television, and in fact that was a deal breaker. We had negotiations with a couple of people over the rights, where they would say, "Look, just contractually, in case things go wrong, we have to have the right to make four hours or even a two-hour movie of the week." And because it's such a special book to me, I made that stipulation, and that stopped us making a deal until [Ridley \[Scott\]](#) came along, and he said, "Yes, I'll commit to eight hours."

**Q.** Is it hard, as an author, seeing your book being changed and condensed in the adaptation process?

**A.** It's not really hard. You look at the actor, and you think, "Oh my God, he's not supposed to look like that." [Matthew Macfadyen](#), for example — Prior Philip in my mind is a small, slight man. And his strength comes from the force of his moral courage. And Matthew Macfadyen is, what, 6 foot 5? And terribly handsome. So initially you think, "Matthew Macfadyen?" But you accept that. I don't mind it at all. It amuses me.

**Q.** Would you next like to write something a little shorter?

**A.** I have a new book coming out on the 28th of September, called "Fall of Giants." It features five families, one Russian, one German, two British and one American, and it follows their destinies through the first World War, the Russian Revolution and the struggle for women's rights. And it's the first of a trilogy which I hope will tell the story of the 20th century.

**Q.** Are you already getting critical feedback from your publishers about it?

**A.** I ask for — I demand — critical responses from them. Certainly, I'll get that from my agent.

