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Crusade

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It's no coincidence that, as radical political movements claim the mantle of Islam and Jihad, and George Bush resorts to the language of good and evil to justify United States policy in the Middle East, the Crusades once more emerge as a subject of films and novels. Laird has already written convincingly about contemporary Palestine in **A Little Piece of Ground**, now she turns to the 13th century, to Saladin and Richard, and to another aspect of the tangled history and politics of Christians, Muslims and Jews. There are two gradually converging stories here, on opposite sides of the battle lines at the siege of Acre: Salim is a Muslim boy apprenticed to a Jewish physician, who serves Saladin; and Adam is a serf who looks after his lord's dogs on crusade with Richard the Lionheart. Laird's intention is to engage the reader's sympathies with both boys and to provide alternative views of the same conflict. She also develops plots for each of them: a straightforward one for Salim as he grows in confidence, and a more melodramatic one for Adam, which it might spoil the book to reveal. The boys, and the characters, great and humble, around them, are clearly drawn, and Laird, for the most part, manages to balance her implicit message of tolerance with the requirements of depicting a time in which unreflective brutal righteousness was more the order of the day. As in her previous historical novel, **Secrets of the Fearless**, she has an inclination to historical romance, which strains against an impulse to show medieval life and war for what it was. And, I wonder, would a real Adam and Salim have worked together with the relaxed mutual respect that their fictional counterparts do in the book's final adventure?

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