



A heady mix

Author conjures a sweeping story about love, power ... and ale

BY Tallulah Grey

ANNEKE Sheldrake is the daughter of a successful merchant in 15th-century England. When her father dies at sea, and she discovers that all her family's possessions are being claimed by the local lord, Anneke makes a scandalous decision: she works to pay the rent, and in a profession not acceptable for someone of her position.

To keep her family and household together, this strong protagonist brews ale using family secrets passed down to her by her Dutch mother.

Along the way she makes a friend in the crippled Sir Leander, an unpredictable man as likely to insult Anneke as to help her on any given day.

Friendship eventually begins to turn into affection. Anneke also makes a dangerous enemy of the monks who control the local ale trade. The abbot has a reputation for not letting competition succeed, especially not an unmarried woman.

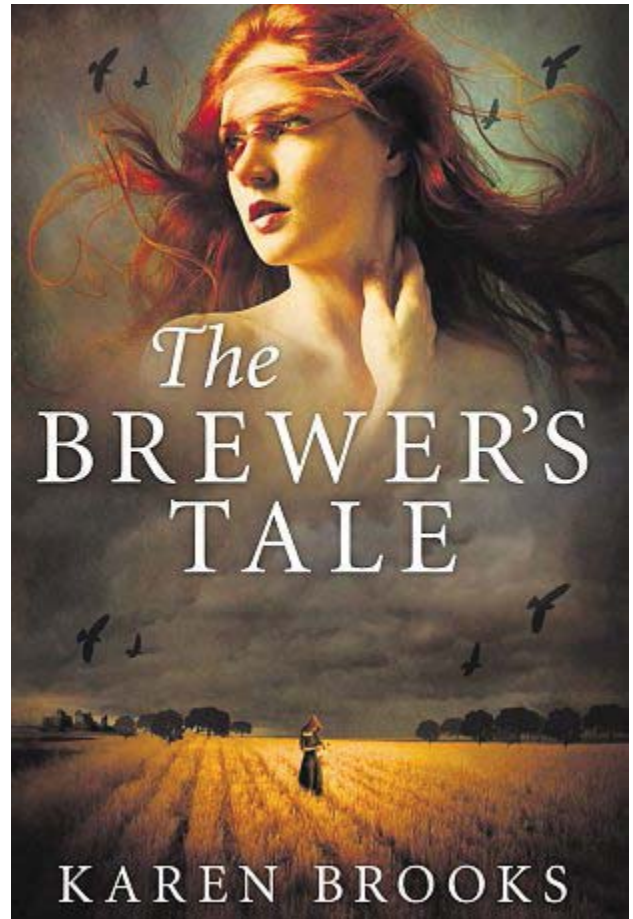
Anneke's story is a harsh one. At each small victory, a greater tragedy is just around the corner. When the worst occurs, Anneke is forced to flee her home town of Elmham Lenn for the anonymity of London with what is left of her family. New friendships and alliances are forged, as well as new enemies.

This is a novel that reminds me that I'm lucky to be living today. Although there are times when I fear not that much has changed, I live in a time when I can choose to work, or marry, or both, or neither. No life has been forced upon me by circumstance and societal expectation.

Australian author Karen Brooks has written mostly fantasy so far in her career. While *The Brewer's Tale* is a historic novel, it contains a special magic all of its own. Love and faith are shown to be powerful things, as is the strength of women.

This beautiful novel had me weeping, laughing, clutching at my chest and staying up to finish reading it well into the wee hours. And yes, it was worth losing a few nights' sleep. It was definitely worth it.

I can't wait to see what Karen Brooks does next.



✦ *The Brewer's Tale* by Karen Brooks is published by Harlequin.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

Tallulah writes lightning-fast reviews at
www.5secondreviews.tumblr.com