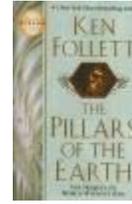


## **The Pillars of the Earth, by Ken Follett**



### ***About the Book...***

Ken Follett's most beloved and bestselling book tells the magnificent tale of a 12th-century monk driven to do the seemingly impossible: build the greatest Gothic cathedral the world has ever known. Around the site of the construction, Follett weaves a story of betrayal, revenge, and love, which begins with the public hanging of an innocent man and ends with the humiliation of a king.



### ***About the Author...***

Ken Follett was born on June 5, 1949 in Cardiff, Wales, the son of a tax-inspector. He was educated at state schools and graduated from University College, London, with an Honors degree in philosophy. He was made a Fellow of the college in 1995. He became a reporter, first with his hometown newspaper the *South Wales Echo* and later with the *London Evening News*. While working on the *Evening News* he wrote his first novel, which was published but did not become a bestseller. He then went to work for a small London publishing house, Everest Books, eventually becoming Deputy Managing Director. He continued to write novels in his spare time. *EYE OF THE NEEDLE* was his eleventh book, and his first success. To date, Ken Follett has written over a dozen international bestsellers.

### ***Discussion Questions:***

1. 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.
3. 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?

4. 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?
5. 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?
6. Women were second-class citizens in medieval society and the church. Is this accurately reflected in *The Pillars of the Earth*?
7. What attitudes to women are shown by Prior Philip and William Hamleigh? How do Agnes, Ellen and Aliena respond to society's expectations?
8. 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?
9. In the book, churches are usually viewed through the eyes of a builder. How does this affect your understanding of the architecture?
10. 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?
11. 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?

### ***Part 1 Questions:***

1. "Tom had been offered the post of builder to the Exeter castellan, repairing and improving the city's fortifications. It would have been a lifetime job, barring accidents. But Tom had turned it down, for he wanted to build another cathedral" (p. 23). Do you think Tom should have taken the position? Have you ever passed up a sure thing in pursuit of your life's passion?
2. After being released from building William Hamleigh's stone house, Tom demands payment for himself and his workers according to custom. William stops work because the Lady Aliena has refused to marry him, breaking tradition. What roles do custom and tradition play in the first part of the book? Which customs and traditions are upheld? Which ones are broken?
3. Why do you think William Hamleigh is so afraid of hell?
4. Tom leaves his newborn son to the elements after Agnes dies from childbirth. Do you think he did the right thing? What other options did he have?
5. Once Tom discovers where his newborn son is, he considers trying to get him back. What would you have done? Do you think Tom would have succeeded?
6. Tom proposes to Ellen very soon after the death of his first wife? Why do you think he did this? Can he truly love another woman so soon after the loss of his wife?

7. Compare and contrast Agnes and Ellen. Is one woman stronger than the other? How did their different styles of motherhood affect their children? Which do you think is a better complement for Tom?
8. When we meet Prior Philip, he reminds another monk of the importance of poverty, chastity and abstinence. How does Prior Philip invoke this general idea in other situations throughout Part One? Does it benefit his efforts, or harm them?
9. Why does Prior Philip agree to take in the abandoned baby? Are his reasons altruistic, or selfish—given the fact that his own family was taken from him? How is the order like a family? What needs does it fulfill, and which ones are still lacking in the brotherhood?
10. When discussing the crowning of a new king with his brother Francis, Philip thinks, "Stephen's relationship with the Church had been defined, right at the start of his reign, on the Church's terms. But perhaps even more important was the precedent. The Church had to crown kings but until now it had not had the right to lay down conditions. The time might come when no king could come to power without first striking a deal with the Church" (p. 105–106). What are Philip's motives? How could this benefit the church? How could it backfire? What relationship, if any, should church and state have?
11. What are your first impressions of Waleran Bigod? Is he a devout man at heart, or does he have something up his sleeve? Is Philip his ally or his pawn?
12. Aliena values happiness over honor and alliances. Did she make the right choice?
13. What effect does killing a man have on William Hamleigh?
14. William acts disrespectful toward women—berating Aliena and offering to buy Ellen. But after he successfully invades Earl Bartholomew's castle, he seeks the approval of his mother. "William's heart was warmed by her praise, and he grinned foolishly" (p. 208). Why does William respect his mother, but no other woman?
15. What do you think is the *real* reason Ellen decides to leave Tom and Kingsbridge?

### ***Part 2 Questions:***

1. Tom convinces Prior Philip that he is more than just a "jobbing mason" but doubts his own abilities. As he passes the rubble of the old church he thinks about how many years it will take to build the new one. "He wondered if he was really capable of it. Then he thought what a thrill it would be to create something from nothing; to see, one day in the future, a new church here where not where was nothing but rubble, and to say: I made this" (p. 291). Have you ever been

- intimidated *and* inspired by something? How did you rise to the challenge in front of you?
2. When Prior Philip sees what has happened to Earl Bartholomew's castle, he feels responsible. How would you expect a man of God to rectify the situation?
  3. Describe the relationship between Waleran Bigod and the Hamleights. Are they friends, or in an uncertain alliance? Why does Bishop Waleran Bigod really want control of Shiring? Why do the Hamleights?
  4. In a time when women were often considered subordinate, Regan Hamleigh and Ellen seem to operate outside of social norms. Why do you think this is? How are the two women similar? How do they differ?
  5. What do you make of William Hamleigh's penchant for violence, yet fear of hell? Is character a result of his upbringing and situation, or is he pure evil?
  6. While riding with William Hamleigh, Philip says, "Heaven and hell is what I deal in. Virtue and sin, forgiveness and punishment, good and evil. I'm afraid I can't shut up about them" (p. 316). Philip may see the world in black and white, but he later makes a deal with Regan Hamleigh. Do you think that is a gray area? What other gray areas do you see in the novel?
  7. Why does Aliena force Richard to kill the outlaw?
  8. Between Aliena and Richard, who do you think the promise to their father to reclaim his lands rests most heavily upon?
  9. Do you think Ellen should have returned to Tom?
  10. There are many deals made in Kingsbridge. Does Philip always operate in the best interests of the Church, or does he make selfish bargains? If he continues to get what he wants, is he any better than Waleran Bigod?

### ***Part 3 Questions:***

1. William Hamleigh blames the decline of Shiring on the growth of Kingsbridge and Prior Philip. How much of the blame is to be placed on Kingsbridge, and how much of it on his own family's mismanagement?
2. Otto Blackface once refused to fight for the quarry. When William's men invade, he leads the defense against them. What made Otto change his mind? What were the stonecutters really fighting for?
3. Jonathan turns five years old in Part 3. He dresses like a monk and continues to be raised at the monastery where Philip loves him like a son. Do you think staying at the monastery is in Jonathan's best interest?

4. As a squire, Richard impresses King Stephen and the court as a brave, strong fighter. What are his weaknesses? Is his financial dependence on Aliena based on a lack of ambition or simple necessity? Is he helping Aliena keep their promise to their father to reclaim Shiring?
5. What are your impressions of King Stephen as a ruler? Is he the right choice to rule England, or would Maud bring more justice?
6. Was it right for Philip to pray for King Stephen's defeat? Is he overstepping his role as a man of God by taking sides in the country's civil war?
7. Prior Philip wants Jack to become a monk. Does he want Jack for selfish reasons, or does he really think it's Jack's best path? How much control does Jack really have over his future? Would he have had more or less freedom if he and his mother had remained in the forest?
8. Why is Ellen reluctant to tell Jack the truth about his father? Is she trying to protect Jack or herself?
9. William Hamleigh's savagery leaves Kingsbridge in limbo at the end of Part 3. How has Kingsbridge risen from the ashes before? Is fire a tool of destruction or cleansing? What do you think the future of Kingsbridge holds?
10. 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—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?

#### ***Part 4 Questions:***

1. As Part 4 begins, we learn that Waleran Bigod and Bishop Henry have switched political sides, realigned once more with King Stephen. Waleran will not give William absolution until he, too, joins King Stephen's side. Waleran already has an alliance with Bishop Henry, a direct link to the king. Why do you think he still needs William? What can the bishop gain from him?
2. Tom's death has a profound impact on young Jonathan, even though Prior Philip has been more of a father figure to him. Do you think Jonathan somehow knows that Tom is his father?
3. After Aliena loses everything in the Kingsbridge raid, Richard tells her he cannot take care of her, even though she has cared for him for six years. Is Richard being selfish, or simply being practical? If you were Aliena, how far would you be willing to go to honor the oath she swore to her father?

4. Ellen has a tendency to curse situations she thinks unjust. Do you think her curse on Alfred and Aliena's marriage has an impact on their problems? Could Ellen really be a witch?
5. There are many explanations for the cathedral's collapse. Some said Alfred was not a competent master builder, others blamed it on Philip's rush to finish, and Waleran blames Philip's arrogance. Why do you think the cathedral collapsed?
6. While in Spain, Jack is offered the hand of a wealthy merchant's daughter. How are Aysha and Aliena similar? How are they different? Why does Jack make the decision that he does?
7. Through Jack, we get a glimpse of the building of the greatest cathedral of the time—Saint-Denis in France. 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? How does the building of Kingsbridge 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?
8. Philip is preaching the story of Job when Jack and Aliena return to Kingsbridge. Why do you think Ken Follett chose to include the story of Job? What omens does the tale hold for Kingsbridge?
9. Do you think the Weeping Madonna truly brought about a miracle for Meg? Or is it the miracle that Philip prayed for so long ago?
10. Jack doesn't learn the truth about his father until he is 20 years old. Ellen says she didn't want him to spend his life avenging his father's death. Do you think she had other reasons for not telling Jack the entire story? If you were Jack, would you want revenge? How far would you go to get answers?
11. Richard brings news of William Hamleigh's impending raid to Kingsbridge, but Jack is the one who makes sure protective walls are built in time. Who do you think is the bigger hero? Does Richard grow as a man after assuming some responsibility in his life?
12. William Hamleigh sees absolution as a "get out of hell for free" card. Waleran Bigod uses his position in the church to help William take his revenge on Jack and Aliena. How have faith and religion been twisted to justify the plans and ambitions of each main character? Is God's will responsible for the various stories in this novel, or is it simply man's will at work?

### ***Part 5 Questions:***

1. In the novel, civil war has decimated the economy and morale of the country. How has history repeated itself since the 1100s? People like Aliena and Prior Philip fight to bring about a change. What other figures in history can you think of who have fought to repair the destruction of war?
2. For a man so terrified of hell, why do you think William did not think to call for a priest during his mother's last moments? Was it out of self-centeredness? A lack of faith? Why, of all places, would William choose to visit Kingsbridge Cathedral in the days after his mother's death?
3. When Aliena sees Elizabeth, she sees the life she escaped by refusing to marry William when she was a girl. Have you ever made a decision that completely changed the path of your life? Have you ever been in the position to help someone else avoid an undesirable fate?
4. Why does Philip take the builders' strike so personally? How does his reaction make the situation worse? If you were a mason in the situation, would you have stayed at Kingsbridge or left for Shiring?
5. Ellen appears quite a bit in Part Five. In which ways does she function as both an outlaw and a member of the Kingsbridge community? What attracts her to this dual existence? Does she truly fit in either world?
6. When Jonathan asks Philip about his parents, he asks why God drives people to desperate acts like abandoning a child. Philip replies: "Once you start asking that question, you can end up in confusion. But in this case I think the answer is clear. God wanted you for himself" (p. 825). Do you think it was God, or Philip, who wanted Jonathan?
7. Describe the relationship between Philip and Francis. Do they act like true brothers, or more like political conspirators? Is Francis more loyal to the church, or to the ruler he is working for at the time? How does each brother use his role in the church to further his own interests?
8. After Richard is made Earl of Shiring, Aliena tells her father she must now go live in peace. What keeps her from finding the peace she seeks? How does she react when things stand in her way now, as opposed to before her promise to her father was fulfilled?
9. Why does Philip forgive Remigius? Is allowing this traitor back in the monastery a dangerous move?
10. From ruling a kingdom to overseeing the building of a cathedral to running a monastery, the question of who will lead is asked constantly throughout *The*

*Pillars of the Earth*. Which of the characters do you think are the strongest leaders? The weakest?

### ***Part 6 Questions:***

1. Compare and contrast Kingsbridge from the beginning of the novel to the end. How has it changed? What do you think the most defining events were? Who were the most influential characters?
2. Two of Philip's rivals—Ellen and Remigius—come to his defense at his ecclesiastical trial. What does it take for both of them to speak up? Why did they decide to defend a man who has caused them difficulty in the past? What do their actions say about Philip as a person?
3. In Chapter 17, Ken Follett writes: "Philip had made Jonathan cellarer at a young age, and had now promoted him to sub-prior. Did I do that for my own pride and pleasure? he asked himself. Well, yes, he thought" (p. 911). In Chapter 18, Philip discusses King Henry and Thomas Becket's disagreement with his brother, Francis. Their conflict has escalated because, Francis says, "It's become a question of pride, now" (p. 939). Why is pride so important to these men of God? How has pride created conflict throughout the novel?
4. Part 6 reveals a different side of William, from his regretting the missteps that prevented him from having success and a family like Jack to his reluctant leadership in the plot to kill Thomas Becket. Do you think old age has changed William? Is he any wiser? Is he any less of an evil character or a more sympathetic one?
5. 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? 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?
6. Why do you think Philip's march after Thomas Becket's murder touched so many people? Were Philip's actions a religious statement or more of a statement on society?
7. Describe Aliena's reaction to William's hanging. Were you surprised at how she reacted? How did you feel when William met his death?
8. What do you think about Waleran's confession to Jack? If you were Jack, would you have handled it another way? Have you ever been in a position where you had to tell someone a difficult truth? How about being on the receiving end of such a conversation?

9. Some readers have said they look at medieval churches with new eyes after reading *The Pillars of the Earth*. Do you think you will do the same? In the book, churches are usually viewed through the eyes of a builder. How does this affect your understanding of the architecture?
  
10. 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?