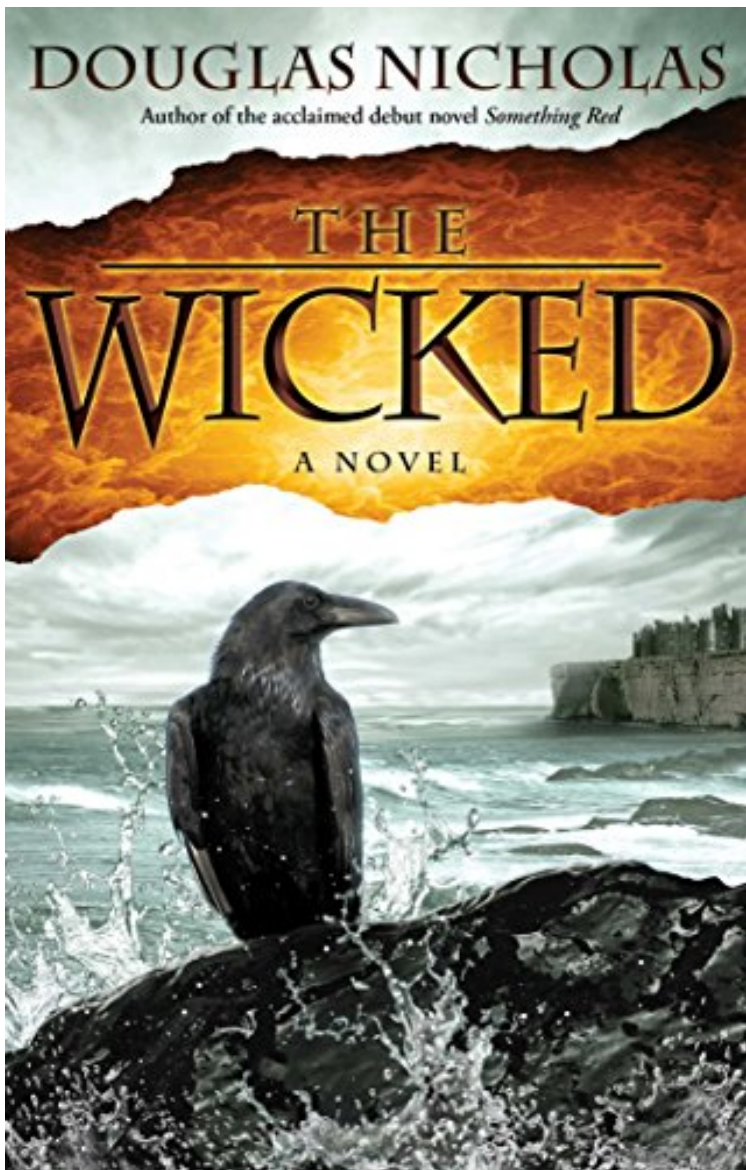


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The Wicked: A Novel (English Edition)



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe mesmerizing and highly anticipated sequel to *Something Red* transports readers to the harsh and enchanting world of thirteenth-century England, where a group of unlikely heroes battles an ancient evil.In the critically acclaimed historical fantasy *Something Red*, the young warrior Hob, his mentor Jack, the mystical Irish queen Molly, and her powerful granddaughter Nemain travelled far and wide, battling shapeshifters, sorceresses, warrior monks, and otherworldly knights. Now, a new type of evil has come to reside in a castle by the chilly waters of the North Sea. Men disappear and are found as horribly wizened corpses. Warriors ride out and return under a terrible spell. Only Molly, with her healing powers, can save the people from a malevolent nobleman and his beautiful, wicked wife. As all are drawn into battle,

the young Hob and his adopted family must vanquish the dark powers before they themselves are defeated. An unforgettable blend of fantasy, mythology, and horror, *The Wicked* is just as chilling, beautifully written, and historically rich as *Something Red*, drawing readers into a world both magical and haunting where nothing is ever as it seems.

Extrait
CHAPTER 1 BENEATH THE HUM AND CHATTER

of the lower hall, the bang of wooden dishes and the clink of pewter, the crackle of flames in the fireplace, Hob could hear the tick of Sir Jehans bronze fingertips against the arm of his chair. The lad sat at the high table in the great hall of Castle Blanchefontaine. The castle, high in the forested ridges of the Pennine Mountains, had been built by Sir Jehans ancestors a hundred years ago in the twelfth century. Around Hob were his adopted family: Maeve, called Molly, and her granddaughter, Nemain, both out of Ireland, and the strong-bodied Jack Brown, Mollys lover. They were here at the invitation of Sir Jehan, the Sieur de Blanchefontaine, and they awaited another knight that they were to meet this chill spring evening. Sir Jehan, never one to sit quietly, was fidgeting in his impatience. He lifted his chin to indicate one of the diners in the lower hall, a young man-at-arms with new-washed hands, but with a thin gray layer of road dust in his hair and on the shoulders of his leather gambeson. That man there, madam, he said to Molly, is one of Sir Odinells outriders; he says their party will be here within the hour. I had messages from him this winter past, and when I knew you were to visit us, I sent for him. I believe that you will be of much benefit, one to the other. We are old friends. He has family he is one of the De Umfrevilles, although a minor branch, and he has connections with the De Lucys and the Nevilles as well. You are perhaps familiar with them? I have heard somewhat, said Molly. These are magnates of the North, said Sir Jehan, and have lands here and in Scotland and in Normandy; their influence, or even patronage, would be no small matter. Sir Odinell has wealth, he has knights; when you are ready to return to Ireland, he can be as a stout shield to you. As will I, as will I but he has greater kinfolk, and... With his left hand he toyed with his trencher for a few heartbeats, then pushed it aside; drew his goblet toward him, but did not drink. But he is much vexed; has a burden upon him; strange neighbors have come to him, and his people are plagued with horrid doings. He has written to me, entreating me to advise him.... He looked at Molly, a heavy but shapely woman, with startling blue eyes and a thick mane of gray and silver hair, a handsome woman a few years past her half-century mark, sitting calmly across the wide table, hardly a daunting figure, and said, I believe you to be, madam, the one person I would commend to him in this... this odd and perplexing trouble.... He took the stem of his goblet between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand and, twirling the stem, turned the goblet round and round on the tabletop. I will let him tell you of his woes, and I will try to explain to him why he must trust you so fully. He may disbelieve at first; still, he has seen so much that is... His voice trailed off; he turned a little in his chair so he could see the fire, and lapsed into silence as his gaze was drawn toward the flames. The firelight played over his rather lupine features: the prominent cheekbones and strong chin that formed a triangle, accented by a broad brow and deep-set blue eyes, a carrot-colored widows peak. The Sieur de Blanchefontaine stretched his long legs out before him, then drew them back. Hob had the sense that the knight active, lean, athletic was restive; this waiting, this enforced idleness, chafed him, which seemed a kind of proof that he had recovered from the terrible events of a year and a quarter ago. Sir Jehan was in no wise so restless as he had been when first Hob had encountered him last year, but there was yet an abundance of energy that would express itself now and again in fretful movements, as at this moment, when his beautiful, immobile right hand tapped lightly and persistently, Sir Jehan himself all unaware of it. The hand was hollow: the knights ruined real hand fit inside as in a glove, the fingers that remained to him slipping into the hollow bronze ones, the rigid metal supporting his hand. The fingers of the hollow hand bent in a slight natural curve; the fingernails, the wrinkles of the knuckles, even the veins on the back, had been delicately fashioned by an Italian, a master craftsman from that land of cunning master craftsmen. A hinged bracelet proceeded from the back of the bronze glove, clasped Sir Jehans wrist, and helped to secure the hand. Were it not for the color and the rigidity, it might be thought a true hand, though perforce a bit larger to accommodate the living hand within. Sir Jehan had had his secretary and chaplain, Father Baudoin, write out, in the priests angular Norman characters, a motto for the Italian to copy. Graven across the back of the hand, just behind the knuckles, facing the observer, the grooves of the letters filled in with green gold, was the legend *Cave Sinistram: Beware the Left Hand*. And indeed Sir Jehan had become, by dint of the force of his will and a near-frenzied devotion to practice, as dangerous with his left hand as he had been with his right. He had another metal hand that he wore on campaign: this was of iron, and the fingers hinged, so that he could close and lock them on a shields bracket, and the iron hands bracelet was reinforced by stout straps that ran up above his elbow. The motto was the same, *Cave Sinistram*, but picked out in silver letters. It was,

however, unlikely that a foe of Sir Jehan would have the leisure to take advantage of the warning one who had survived an encounter with him said that engaging the Sieur de Blanchefontaine was like finding oneself in the midst of a four-dog fight, a storm of blurred sharp-edged danger. Hob looked around at the whitewashed plaster of the great hall, stained above the huge hearth by swirls of pale gray, dark gray, and carbon-black soot. He felt happy and secure here in Blanchefontaines high-ceilinged hall, with its lattice-screened balcony for musicians to play unseen, its two hearths, its wide-planked floors spread with rushes, the rushes freshened with sprinklings of lady-of-the-meadow and germander. The walls were adorned with the brightly colored escutcheons of the household knights; with displays of battered and age-darkened weapons, including a spray of angons and other ancient throwing spears; and with adroitly made tapestries. Some of these tapestries depicted the hunt and some depicted martial scenes; three others illustrated certain songs of the troubadours. These last were the work of blithe little Dame Aline, the wife of Sir Balthasar, Blanchefontaines stern castellan. Dame Aline, ever eager to hear the latest song or poem from the continent, had woven the large tapestry that now hung behind the pages bench, a favorite of Hobs: a scene from an alba of Guiraut de Bornelh, in which the lovers embrace in a shadowed garden, while their accomplice, a watchman in a tower, calls down to them that dawn approaches, with its danger of discovery. Over the last year Mollys little troupe had returned to the castle at intervals, staying a few weeks at a time. During these visits Molly tended to Sir Jehans injuries, physical and otherwise, from the disastrous winter of the year before. Her deliverance of the castle from an evil invader had made fierce partisans of Sir Jehan and everyone else in the castle, high to low. Hob himself was under the tutelage of Sir Balthasar: both that fearsome knight and Sir Jehan had promised that Hob would be trained in the Norman fashion, and would be made a knight, and addressed him now as Squire Robert. Whenever Mollys troupe sojourned at Blanchefontaine, the two subjected Hob by night to intricate instruction in castle etiquette, and by day to brutal lessons in weaponcraft, horsemanship, and the destruction of ones enemies. The intense exercise when they were at the castle, along with Jacks insistence on activity designed to increase Hobs strength whenever they camped along the road, had wrought a change: Hob was no longer a boy, but a sturdy muscular youth.

Some of Castle Blanchefontaines junior knights including Sir Tancred, who had by sheer good fortune escaped the events of last year unscathed shared the high table. They had withdrawn to the far end, for there are no secrets in a castles community, and it was known that Sir Jehan was to conduct a matter of some grave import that night, and was not to be intruded upon. From the hall led four archways: one that gave onto the steps that went down to the guardhouse and so out to the bailey, and three that gave access to interior stairways. From one of the latter came a burst of high-pitched laughter, and a moment later a party of women appeared: the wives of two of the married knights, as well as Dame Aline, and Lady Isabeau herself, Sir Jehans wife. Sir Jehan and the other knights stood; he greeted his wife and murmured something to her. She nodded, and swept Dame Aline and the other women down to the far end of the table, there to preside among the castles resident knights, for Sir Jehan was to excuse himself as soon as Sir Odinell arrived. Hob, who was beginning to grow bored as well as hungry, took the occasion to contemplate Lady Isabeau and Dame Aline. He was now well into his fifteenth year he had turned fourteen last October, and here they were, halfway through April and betrothed to Nemain, whom he adored. But in his newly awakened manhood, he found himself acutely aware of the appeal to the eye that women more beautiful than flowers, more graceful than cats presented. These two women, close friends, presented a contrast in appearance, each with her own virtue. Lady Isabeau was tall and slim. Her hair, black and lustrous as raven-feather, her dark eyes, her dark brows, all were set off by her ivory skin; the long and very thin scar that interrupted her left eyebrow and curved to the corner of her mouth only enhanced an expressionless, almost eerie beauty. Dame Aline, pretty rather than beautiful, was short and sonny, lightly freckled, with features that, lit from within by a sweet and merry nature, achieved a kind of radiance. As Hob watched, the two women gathered all attention to themselves and, by dint of question and comment, drew every knight and lady into the circle of banter and discussion. Soon their end of the high table was alight with jest, conversation, even snatches of song, while the other end, where sat the Sieur de Blanchefontaine and his party, seemed somber by contrast. At the opposite end of the hall from the dais where Sir Jehan and his guests sat at table, there was a stout wooden screen. For all its decorative carving, it was thick, and securely fastened, and several feet wider than the doorway it concealed. This doorway, with its two heavy leaves, led to the top landing of an external closed stairway, which descended one storey to the ground, and doubled back on itself, and ended in a strong guardhouse. The whole was intended to slow attackers and so prevent surprise attacks, and to make entrance as difficult as possible. There was even a pitfall on the stairway that could be uncovered. The screen itself

obliged anyone who sought entrance to turn and walk a few feet in the narrow space between the carved wood and the plaster of the wall. Sir Jehan stationed guards at all times within the hall, clustered down by the screen, and in the doorway behind it as well. Among these guards now arose a stirring: murmured questions, men standing up and drawing nearer to the entranceway, loosening weapons; a gradual increase in the noise down-hall silenced those on the dais; then the detail commander stepped around the end of the screen and announced, crisp as a trained herald: Sir Odinell de Umfreville, Sieur de Chantemerle. And around the screen came a burly knight of medium stature, clean-shaven, hard-eyed, his broad forehead continuing on to a head quite bald in front and crowned with a horseshoe-shaped fringe of salt-and-pepper hair. Behind him came three of his knights, and twice that many of his household guard, surrendering their swords to the door-watch. Sir Jehan stood to receive him; then, impatient as ever, lithe as ever, sprang from the dais and strode to meet him. They embraced like kinfolk in the middle of the hall. A moments private greeting, then they turned and made their way to the dais, the common folk of the castle turning on their benches, leaning across their trestle tables, to watch the visitors progress: welcome matter for observation, analysis, gossip. A very small girl, clad only in a blue smock and pulling a large patient dog along by one ear, had wandered into the center aisle between the tables, and stood barefoot on the rushes, staring openmouthed at the oncoming knights. Sir Jehan nimbly detoured around her; with his metal hand he waved Sir Odinell and his people to the high table on the dais, with the other he pointed to the child and called into the crowd of people at the tables, Edith! Come get this strayed lamb! There was a burst of laughter from the folk who sat near, and a young woman, flushed, wiping her hands on her apron, came quickly from among the diners. My lord, she said apologetically, and scooped up the child. Sir Jehan nodded, not really vexed, and jumped lightly onto the dais. The six men-at-arms joined the outrider on the benches of the castle folk; the three knights followed Sir Odinell onto the dais. Sir Jehan indicated chairs, and the four knights disposed themselves about the main table, while Sir Jehan made brief introductions. Molly he styled as Queen Maeve, and Nemain as Queen Nemain, and both were correct, were they back in Ireland, and at the head of their clan. Molly, biding her time to return to Erin, to revenge, and to the resumption of her status as clan chieftain and queen, traveled in obscurity through England as musician and healer, and used the Christian pet name Molly rather than the pagan Maeve. Sir Odinell had been told somewhat of this, and was not taken aback by the introduction, although he was not sure that he completely understood Mollys status. Now Sir Jehan turned to the pages bench behind him and gave them a significant look before resuming his seat. Two of the older pages had leaped to their feet as the guests arrived, and now they moved quickly along the line of younger boys, assigning this one to bring fresh flagons of bragget and that one to set out more goblets, a third to fetch a platter of oat cakes, and four to wait individually upon the visitor knights. Sir Jehan had recently replaced the Irish wolfhounds he had lost, on the selfsame night that he had lost much of his hand, with two litters sent from Ireland. A wolfhound pup, wheat-colored, black-muzzled, a bit plump but already beginning to show length of leg, got up from the heap of its fellows dozing by the fire. It ambled over and sat down on Sir Jehans foot. A handsome young fellow; he will be huge, said Sir Odinell. He will that, said Sir Jehan. He reached down and thumped its side with his good hand. Rollo, he said absently. The puppy was named after the giant Orkney Norseman who had founded Normandy. Sir Jehan turned back to his guest. I have a male and a female for you, Odinell, one from each litter, that you may breed a tribe of your own. Sir Odinell gave a little seated half bow. My thanks. He smiled politely, but Hob thought to see a shadow about his eyes; Sir Odinells heart seemed so troubled that he was not fully aware of his surroundings. There followed a period of idle chatter, mostly on the part of Sir Jehan: courtesy dictated that he at least give the travelers the opportunity to recover somewhat from the dust and fatigue of the trail. Hob noticed that it was not long, though, before the bronze hand began to tap gently upon the lions head that terminated Sir Jehans chair arm. A short while thereafter the knight rose, excused himself, gathered up Sir Odinell and Molly and her party, and led the way from the hall, leaving Lady Isabeau and Dame Aline to preside at table. *Revue de presse* Rich in historical detail, this suspenseful coming-of-age fantasy grabs the reader with the facts of life in medieval England and the magic spells woven into its landscape. *Publishers Weekly* (starred review) A hauntingly affecting historical novel with a touch of magic. (Kirkus s (starred review)) This darkly atmospheric debut novel is well worth its measured plot-building for its horrific, unexpected ending. (Library Journal (starred review)) Debut novelist Douglas Nicholas goes for the throat with *Something Red*. Rich in history, ankle deep in blood, and packed with brilliant writing and whip-smart plotting. (Jonathan Maberry, New York Times bestselling author of *Assassins Code* and *Flesh Bone*) Not for the faint of heart, this pulse pounding page-turner grabs you from the start and never lets you go. A wickedly

clever and evocative combination of history, horror, mystery, and magic. Booklist I love the writing, the vividness and poetic feel, maybe the sheer 'Irishness' of it. Beautifully observed moments abound in this: a waterfall, a snow-filled forest, a mountainscape. The sense of place is overwhelming; every stone, every flower pops out at you. Cecelia Holland, New York Times bestselling author of *The King's Witch* I loved *Something Red*. Douglas Nicholas conjures up the distant thirteenth century with prose as magical as that practiced by his sorceress-queen. This is a stunning debut novel of lyrical power and suspenseful drama. The hair-raising finale will keep you reading far into the night. Carol Goodman, national bestselling author of *The Lake of Dead Languages* Aply conjuring the beauties and drawbacks of the past, and with an engaging and unusual cast-list, *Something Red* is a thoroughbred novel of nightmare terror, ruled by a force of sheer evil that seems, and may well prove, unstoppable. Tanith Lee, award-winning author of *The Silver Metal Lover* Douglas Nicholas can artfully narrate a story. I was engaged from beginning to end . . . *Something Red* is sure to be a best seller. Agenda Magazine The most stunning debut novel I have ever read. The language is beautiful and descriptive; the novel is an incredible sensory experience for the reader. (Examiner.com) Relax. Master storyteller Douglas Nicholas is about to transport you to far-away places, show you far-off times; but hold on tight: while the cresting rhythm of his cadenced prose mounts, your throbbing pulse that same blood clock his characters tell time by will pound unstoppably, as identical horror howls fatally outside, smiles beguilingly within, and your skin senses stone sweat behind the castle's painted plaster walls, beneath midwinter-deep drifts of snow. When I say *Something Red* is a sensation, I mean precisely that: this book's sensational! Ronald Christ, author of *Bonevardi: Constructing Magic* As a reader I was so enthralled with the tale, it was like leaving reality and stepping into a wondrous and mysterious time with so much magic in it . . . You will not be disappointed. Great Minds Think Aloud This is a beautifully written work, with evocative prose which captures the essence of traveling in winter in Middle Ages England. Snarky Writer "Written with great skill, this atmospheric, yet gritty, story will remain with you, and it is a wonderful addition to the long line of stories devoted to the magic of fairy tales. Book Hog *Something Red* absolutely blew me away. This is one of the best debuts I've read in years and the story itself still haunts my dreams. It was all the best elements of Irish folklore, historical fiction, and a very frightening mystery at its cores. Chaotic Compendiums Douglas Nicholas can artfully narrate a story. I was engaged from beginning to end. Agenda Magazine The poetic nature of the language, the increasing of the novels atmospheric spook and the members of the traveling family made *Something Red* a winner. (MindingSpot) Douglas Nicholas has written a gut-wrenching, harrowing novel in *Something Red*; however, he's also written a touching, realistic story about what made a family, love, and life during a 13th century English winter . . . Nicholas storytelling painted this novel with historic realism that made it pop right off the page. . . If you like a non-stop thrilling roller coaster ride, hop on board with *Something Red*! (Popcorn Reads) Nicholas's beautiful prose, his detailed portrayal of life in medieval England, interesting characters, and underlying supernatural themes make this book a real gem. (BookBrowse) Nicholas handles characterization, setting and atmosphere deftly and expertly . . . *Something Red* is an excellent debut from a gifted author. (Shelf Awareness) Memorable . . . Legendary. (Pate Books) I was captivated by the writing and the story. The story includes so much of what one envisions what it must have been like to live at this time, castles, knights, monks, and pilgrims. (Fiction Addict) Nicholas utilizes an economy of description that pulls and teases the reader into the world, and allows the reader to dance along on the text. It is a delightful thing to find a tale that can create that surge of adrenaline, that thump of your pulse in your temples, and Nicholas delivers. (Kansas City Public Library Blog) Stunning . . . five out of five stars. (Lone Bear Images Prose) Stunning . . . Douglas Nicholas . . . is a writer of great promise. Not only can he spin a great yarn, but his prose is gorgeous. (Prose) With its smoky campfires, greased cart-axles and bees-waxed bowstrings, *Something Red* grounds us in the high middle ages so credibly that we are willing to believe in whatever monsters Douglas Nicholas asks us to. (Christopher Buehlman, author of *Between Two Fires*) Like the best of literature, it's all action. (Woodstock Times) Part mystery, part history, all spooky Read this with a well-oiled sword at hand. (Christopher Buehlman, author of *Between Two Fires*) "An almost Dickensian level of detail transports readers to medieval England in poet Nicholas's gorgeously written novel." (Library Journal) "Marvelously descriptive...like a more profound Harry Potter for adults." (Kirkus) *The Wicked* is the rare sequel that surpasses its predecessor. (Geek Library) "Superb storytelling." (SFGate.com)