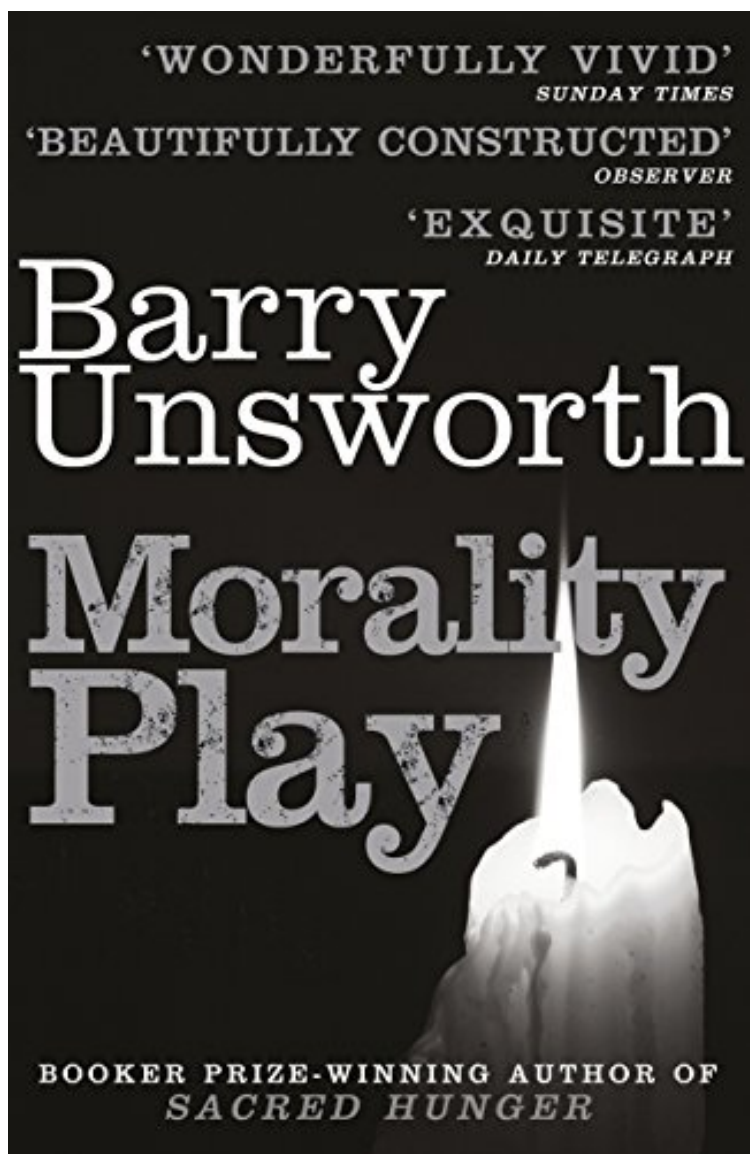


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Morality Play



Par Barry Unsworth
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIt is the late fourteenth century, a dangerous time beset by war and plague. Nicholas Barber, a young and wayward cleric, stumbles across a group of travelling players and compounds his sins by joining them. Yet the town where they perform reveals another drama: a young woman is to be hanged for the murder of a twelve-year-old boy. What better way to increase their takings than to make a new play, to enact the murder of Thomas Wells? But as the actors rehearse, they discover that the truth about the boy's death has yet to be revealed...ExtraitOne It was a death that began it all and another death that led us on. The first was of the man called Brendan and I saw the moment of it. I saw them gather round and crouch over him in the bitter cold, then start back to give the soul passage. It was as if they played his death for me and

this was a strange thing, as they did not know I watched, and I did not then know what they were. Strange too that I should have been led to them, whether by angels or demons, at a time when my folly had brought me to such great need. I will not hide my sins, or what is the worth of absolution? That very day hunger had brought me to adultery and through adultery I had lost my cloak. I am only a poor scholar, open-breeched to the winds of heaven as people say, with nothing but Latin to recommend me, but I am young and well favored though short of stature and women have looked at me sometimes. Such a thing had befallen not much before I saw Brendan die, though in this case, as I have said, it was not lust but hunger drove me, a lesser sin, I was hoping she would give me to eat, but she was too hasty and hot. Then by ill luck the husband returned before expected and I had to escape through the cowshed and left my good cloak behind in that bitter December weather. I was in fear of pursuit and broken bones, though it is forbidden to strike a man in Holy Orders, and so I was walking at the edge of the woodland and not on the open road. If I had kept to the road I would have passed by without seeing them. There was a clearing, a place where a track led from the road into the wood. They had brought their cart here and I came upon them as they were taking the man down. I watched from among the trees without making it known. I was afraid to come forward. I thought they were robbers. They wore pieces of clothing that were strange and ill-assorted and seemed not to belong to them. These are dangerous times and a cleric is forbidden to bear weapons, all I had was a short stick. (Sticks, clubs, and cudgels, being without point or cutting edge, naturally do not come under the ban.) From my place in hiding I saw them bring him down from the cart, the gaunt, half-grown hound that was with them jumping up eagerly as if in play and showing his pale tongue. I glimpsed the man's face with the shine of death on it. They laid him down there in the open. They had brought him there to be close to his death, I understood this also at the same moment. For who would wish to see a companion gasp his last on a jolting cart? We desire to keep the dying and the newly dead close before our eyes so as to give them full meed of pity. Our Lord was brought down to be pitied, on the Cross He was too far away. They crouched around him in a circle, huddling close as if he were a fire to give warmth to them on this winter day, six persons-four men, a boy, and a woman. They were dressed in cast-off scraps and pieces against all regulation of clothing for the people, one in a green hat with a plume to it such as the rich wear though he was poorly enough clad otherwise, another wore a white smock to the knees with his threadbare hose showing below, another-the boy-a lumpy shawl of what seemed horsehair. The oaks beyond them had some russet still, last year's foliage dry on the stalk, and there was a gleam of light on it and on the coarse pelt of the boy's shawl. The man was dying unshriven, there might have been time to hold out the Cross to him, but I was afraid to approach. *Mea maxima culpa*. I could not see him now but I could hear across the space that separated us the struggle of his breath and I could see the mist of breath from the mouths of those above him. This was like incense, a fume of devotion. Then the sound ceased and I saw them shift back to make space for Death, a thing very wise to do, Death being less provoked when at large than when confined. It was like that scene in the *Morality Play* when the besieged soul flies free at last. It was then I saw that one of the men had a badge of livery, the emblem of a patron sewn to his cap. It was then too that the dog found me out. This was a half-starved beast with every rib visible but it showed neither fawning nor cringing, merely an ignorant goodwill. It had attempted more than once to break into the circle around the dead man and being repulsed had then gone snuffling at the edges of the clearing and so finally came upon me crouched behind my tree and fell to yapping, more it seemed in welcome than threat, and this brought one of the men, he of the green hat, a hulking, ragged fellow with black hair tied behind and eyes black as damson, who drew a knife at the sight of me, and when I saw this I got to my feet with all haste and made the lopenhanded priestly gesture of gratitude for blessing-this so he should see at once what I was. "Come forth and show your face," he said. At this I came forward promptly enough. "I was walking through the trees," I said. "I came upon you by accident. I was unwilling to interrupt at such a moment." They had started up from the dead man, whose eyes were wide open and blue as a thrush's egg. He was bald and round-headed, with a blubbery face like a mask of lard and his mouth was crooked and hung open a little at the lower end. The cur took advantage of the diversion to lick at his face and this licking pulled the mouth more open. The boy kicked the dog and it yelped and went and pissed against a tree. "A priest," the boy said. It was not a shawl that he wore over his shoulders, but some sort of garment with trailing leg pieces. I saw now that he was weepinghis face was wet with tears. "You might have gone back or taken another way," the one with the badge in his cap said. "You chose to spy." The emblem was a white stork above crossed halberds. I knew this man for the leader because of the badge, also because he spoke for them all. He was some years older than I, of middling height, slender of body but wiry and quick. He alone had no borrowed clothes about him.

He wore a jerkin of sheepskin with a short tunic below it much frayed at the neck. The muscles in his calves and thighs showed prominently through the thin stuff of his hose. "You came too late even to do your office," he said with contempt. "Brendan died with his sins upon him while you were skulking there." His face was a narrow oval, white now with grief or cold. The eyes were beautiful, gray-green in color, set below slanting brows. Later I was to wonder why I saw no danger in this zealot's face of his, but my divining soul was lost in the fear of the moment. I am not brave and I had come upon them at the moment of a death. I was a stranger, in some manner I could be blamed. It is enough in these terrible times to put a man at risk of injury or worse. There is a passion of violence in the people, where several are gathered the spirit of murder is never far. "I meant no harm," I said. "I am only a poor priest." *Revue de presse* A bravura performance . . .

A thought-provoking comedy on the eternal sameness of disaster and the recurrent uses we put it to in art. *The New York Times Book* Brilliantly imagined. . . . A dramatic meditation on the relationship between life and play. *San Francisco Chronicle* A historical novelist of rare talent. . . . A spare and disquieting tale. *The Boston Globe* A book of subtlety, compassion, and skill. . . . Confirms Barry Unsworth's position as a master craftsman of contemporary British fiction. *Los Angeles Times* A learned, witty, satisfying entertainment. *The*

New York Times Works brilliantly. . . . A dark and suspenseful murder mystery; and a provocative meditation on the birth of a new art form. *Chicago Tribune* An absorbing mix of historical fiction and whodunit, the novel abounds in vivid, seamlessly integrated details of fourteenth-century life. *The Wall Street Journal* An entertaining, thought-provoking work of remarkable scope and detail. *Houston Chronicle* A gem. . . . *Morality Play* resonates with meaning for our own time. *Newsday*