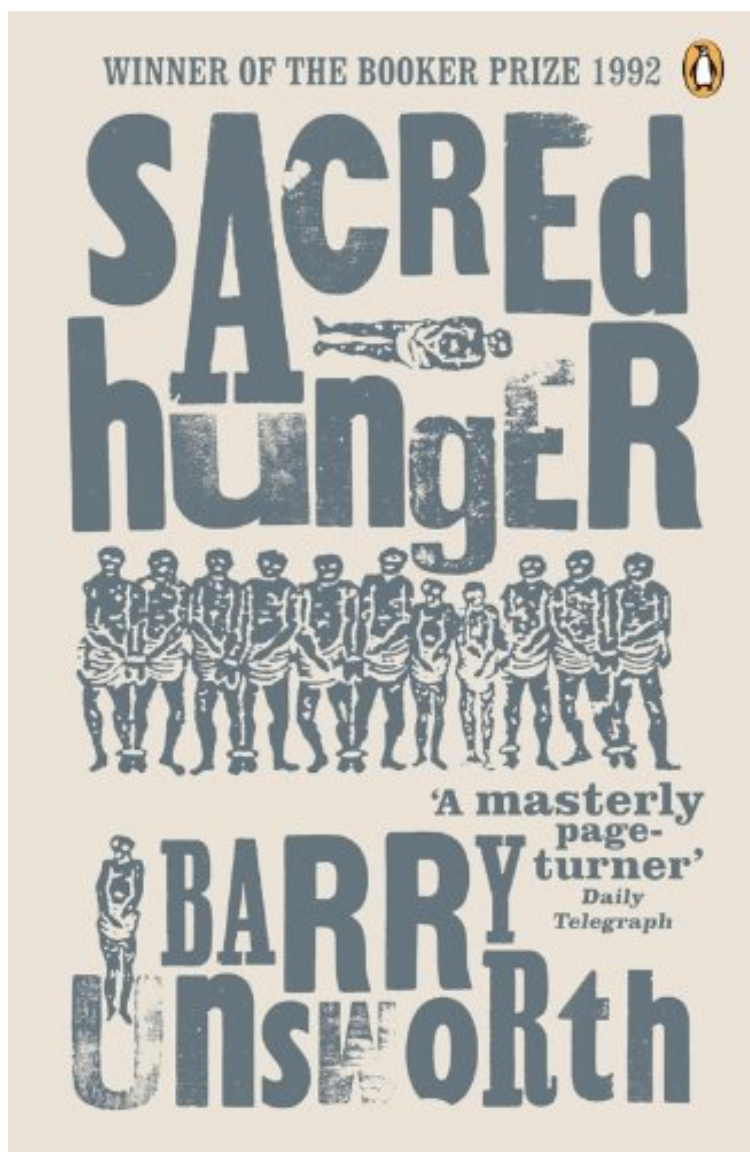


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Sacred Hunger



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurWINNER OF THE 1992 BOOKER PRIZE'Gripping . . . SACRED HUNGER covers a period between 1752 and 1765 . . . it concerns the entangled and conflicted fortunes of two cousins: Erasmus Kemp, the son of a Lancashire merchant, and Matthew Paris, a scholar and surgeon just released from prison for "denying Holy Writ" . . . the Liverpool Merchant is the vessel on which the whole of the novel hinges, and it carries the reader deep into the history of man's iniquitous greed . . . AS REGARDS ITS DRAMATIC BREADTH AND ENERGY, NO RECENT DOMESTIC NOVEL HAS COME WITHIN A MILE OF IT' - Anthony Quinn in the IndependentExtraitThe ship he meant was the Liverpool Merchant, Captain Saul Thurso, and he had never seen her, though she carried the seeds Of all his dreams in her hold. She carried

death for the cotton broker who owned her, or so at least his son believed. For Erasmus Kemp it was always to seem that the ship had killed his father, and the thought poisoned his memories. Grief works its own perversions and betrayals: the shape of what we have lost is as subject to corruption as the mortal body, and Erasmus could never afterwards escape the idea that his father had been scenting his own death that drab afternoon in the timber yard on the banks of the Mersey when, amid colours of mud and saffron, he had lowered himself rather awkwardly down to sniff at the newly cut sections of mast for his ship. Not odours of embalment, nothing sacramental; the reek of his own death. It was an ugly thought, confirmed somehow by other remembered details, thought naturally only Erasmus himself, as host to it, could have found these admissible as evidence: smell of wet sawdust and trodden mud the mud was flecked with sawdust; cold swamp smell of the river only some hundred yards off; another odour too, stink of neglect, not really belonging here, transferred from another day by the same ugly workings of grief. The sections of the mast were pale yellow; they lay in trestles under the rough plank roof the shed was open at the sides. It had been raining heavily and the men had made a causeway of wood blocks down the churned slope of the bank. Erasmus had felt embarrassed at the theatrical way his father had brought his face so close up to snuffie at the raw wood. At twenty-one he was reticent, not given to gestures, moreover just then in a state of inflamed sensitivity, being in the early phase of his undeclared love for Sarah Wolpert. 'Prime quality.' Kemp straightened himself for the pronouncement. 'When this tree was cut it was drinking sweetly. You can smell it in the sap. If you want to test the soundness of the timber, smell the sapwood. Isn't that right, lads?' He had made himself an expert on timber too. It was imported fir from the Baltic. 'Fir for a mast,' Kemp said. 'Fir is one thing breeds better out of England. By God, there are not many.' Those round him laughed. They all knew him. They had seen him about the yards, with his quick movements, darkly flushed face, something careless in his dress without being slovenly, the short unpowdered wig, the long, square-cut outer coat usually hanging open. 'See, my boy,' he said to the aloof Erasmus. 'Come over here and see. The pieces are all cut and ready. Here are the two parts of the spindle. D'you mark the taper on them? They'll be coaked together in the middle here, and bolted after. Look at these woundy great fellows, d'you know what they are? See the thickness of them.' His accent was still that of the rural Lancashire he had left as a child but warmer and more precipitate than is common there. He explained to his son how the spindle would be assembled and the massive side-trees jointed round it, how the mast would be thickened athwartships and fore and aft with heels of plank, then further secured by great iron hoops driven on the outside. And the mast was braced stronger in his mind with every word he spoke, every mark of assent from those around him, and his ship made proof against the violence of men and weather, ensuring a speedy passage and a good return on his outlay and only Kemp could know how desperately this was needed. Not knowing, Erasmus was bored and ill at ease he had no natural friendliness towards inferiors as his father had. Remorse for the boredom would come too, in its season, and even for the ignorance, his failure to understand this striving to make the ship indestructible. The signs were there for anyone to see. Kemp was a busy man but he would find occasion several times a week to ride down from his house in the town or his place of business near the Old Pool Dock to spend some time in Dickson's Yard on the river bank, where his ship was being built, poking about, chatting to the shipwrights. Wealth had not dimmed his need to be liked, his desire to appear knowledgeable; and for a man who had come from nothing it was a gratifying thing to command this labour, to see the flanks of his ship swell on the stocks from day to day as by the patient breath of a god. Not that there was much unusual about her. Ships had not changed significantly for a long time now. They were still built of wood, still powered by the action of the wind on sails of flax canvas attached to masts and yards supported by hemp rigging. Columbus, set down on any vessel of the time, would not have found much to puzzle him. All the same, these Liverpool ships had some special features: they were built high in the stem so that the swivel guns mounted on their quarterdecks could be the more easily, the more commodiously as might have been said then a word curiously typical of the age trained down on their waists to quell slave revolt; they had a good width of beam and a good depth of hold and they were thickened at the rails to make death leaps more difficult. Nothing very special then about the Liverpool Merchant. Her purpose was visible from the beginning, almost, of her construction, in the shape of her keel, the gaunt ribs of her hull: a Liverpool snow, two-masted, brig-rigged, destined for the Atlantic trade. But Kemp's natural optimism had been inflamed to superstition by the mounting pressure of his debts, and his hope in the ship was more than commercial. He was a sanguine, handsome man, dark-complexioned, with straight brows and bright, wide-open black eyes and a habit of eager gesture that was something of a joke among his generally more stolid acquaintance a limited joke, because Kemp, at least so far as anyone then knew, was successful in his enterprises and rich,

with a wealth he was not reluctant to display: fine stone house in Red Cross Street among the principal merchants of the town; his own carriage with a liveried groom; a wife expensively turned out, though languid-looking the positive, quick-mannered father and the glowering son together seemed to have drained her. Father and son looked at each other now, standing beside the still-bleeding mast-pieces in the great draughty shed, divided in their sense of the occasion but with the same handsome brows and dark eyes, wide-open, bright, somehow dazed-looking, showing the same capacity for excess. 'A thousand oaks to make this ship of mine,' Kemp said, with satisfaction. 'D'you know how to tell if the heart of an oak is sound? Veins of dried pith in it, that's the danger sign, means the wood is rotten. That's what you look for. Ask these fellows, they know. Pity you can't do the same with people, eh, lads?' He was attractive, even in his condescension; there was something magnetic about him. But not all filings will fly the same way, and the visit to the sailmaker's loft was less successful. Erasmus could never remember how long afterwards this was, or indeed whether it was afterwards at all his memories of those days had no ordered sequence. But he remembered feeling over-exposed here, in the large square loft brimming with light from its long windows, water-light thrown up from the grey river, austere and abundant, falling without distinction on faces and hands, on the dusty planks of the floor, the low benches, the tarred post in the centre with its rope and tackle for hanging the sails. A horizontal bar came out from this, with a square of thin sail-cloth draped over it. There were three men on stools, with canvas spread over their knees, two journeymen and the sailmaker, a pale sparse-haired man. It was to him that Kemp spoke, with that warmth of manner that came naturally to him. 'Well, my friend, and how is the work proceeding?' The two others had risen at the merchant's entrance, clutching the work in their laps; but he gave only a single glance upwards, then resumed his stitching. 'Well enough, as the times are,' he said. Erasmus had noted the failure to rise, the absence of respectful title, the implicit complaint. This was some radical, atheist fellow the yards were full of them. 'See to your sails, you were best,' he said. 'Let those that are fitted for office see to the times.' From Publishers Weekly This vast, vividly realistic historical novel follows the crew of a slave-trading vessel from its Liverpool shipyard through days at anchor bartering human cargo on the Guinea Coast, then on beyond the slaver's disease-ridden and mutinous Middle Passage. With an epic ambition that seems suited to its 18th-century setting, Unsworth (Stone Virgin) takes on a big theme--greed, the animating "sacred hunger" of the title--but at the same time fills his huge canvas with the alternately fascinating and horrifying details of shipboard life, colonial plunder and power struggles, the London clubs of absentee sugar lords, even a pidgin Utopia created by slaves and seamen on unclaimed Florida coast. Deftly utilizing a flood of period detail, Unsworth has written a book whose stately pace, like the scope of its meditations, seems accurately to evoke the age. Tackling here a central perversion of our history--the keeping of slaves in a land where "all men are created equal"--Unsworth illuminates the barbaric cruelty of slavery, as well as the subtler habits of politics and character that it creates. As intricate as it is immense, this masterwork rewards every turn of its 640 pages. (July) one with a continuing fascination for readers and authors alike--Unsworth illuminates its cruel ties and miscarriages, its floggings and murders, as well as the subtler habits of politics and character that it creates. As intricate as it is immense, this masterwork rewards every turn of its 640 pages. Copyright 1992 Reed Business Information, Inc.