



# The People of the Hansa

*Simon Kitchener*

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As a historical subject, the Hansa has been largely ignored. As a literary subject, it is usually a small 'extra', a player you recognise but need not remember. Most, if asked, would be unable to envision the Hansa. Holbein left us two pictures from the 16th century but little else has survived. It has never found itself the setting of a serious book in English literature. So this book is unique. The Hansa, a medieval association of German merchants, trade from Russia in the east to the Bay of Biscay in the west and this gives us the setting. All the historical events presented are true. The main characters are a fictionalised family of merchants who, like the Hansa, have conflicting desires and principles. Their lives evolve and interconnect over sixty years, during which the plague, war, revolts, voyages, love stories and meetings with contemporary celebrities occur to help throw a light on urban medieval life. The fictional characters are extraordinary and likeable but not unfamiliar. Indeed, the world presented to us is closer to our own than the one inhabited by the knights and peasants living beyond the town walls of Lübeck and London. The characters are portrayed, not as aliens from another time, but as people whose needs—physical, mental and emotional—resemble our own today. The conflict between coercion and consensus is the central theme and is joined by the individual's search for meaning and value in life. This search constitutes the heart of the storyline as the varied characters wrangle with themselves, their families and economic circumstances to overcome life's obstacles and find happiness in being alive. It follows the lives of two unrelated women through trying circumstances who forge an incredible bond that is stronger than family and deeper than romantic love. And it looks closely at Lübeck herself, the Queen of the Hansa, whose progress is charted until she is forced to make a life-changing decision. Finally, there are people who really existed in history, brought to life in a realistic way and shown in a human light to help us understand better what medieval life might have been like. This is a fascinating read on many levels and will leave you wanting to know more about this seminal time.

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