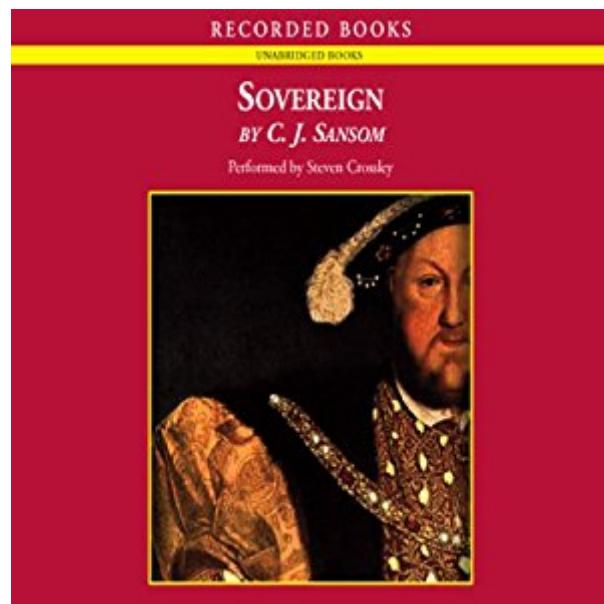


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# Sovereign: A Matthew Shardlake Mystery



## Synopsis

The third Matthew Shardlake Tudor Mystery by C. J. Sansom, the bestselling author of Winter in Madrid and Dominion. C. J. Sansom has garnered a wider audience and increased critical praise with each new novel published. His first book in the Matthew Shardlake series, *Dissolution*, was selected by P. D. James in *The Wall Street Journal* as one of her top five all-time favorite books. Now in *Sovereign*, Shardlake faces the most terrifying threat in the age of Tudor England: imprisonment in the Tower of London. Shardlake and his loyal assistant, Jack Barak, find themselves embroiled in royal intrigue when a plot against King Henry VIII is uncovered in York and a dangerous conspirator they've been charged with transporting to London is connected to the death of a local glazer.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

C. J. Sansom's "Sovereign" is the third mystery in this critically acclaimed series featuring Matthew Shardlake, a thirty-nine year old lawyer, and his assistant, Jack Barak. The author demonstrates his prodigious historical knowledge as he traces Henry VIII's Great Progress to the North in 1541. Along with Catherine Howard, his fifth wife, a large number of soldiers, and members of the nobility, Henry and his retinue made their way from London to York with the goal of bringing the king's discontented northern subjects under control. Archbishop Cranmer sends Matthew Shardlake on the trip to process petitions for the king and to safeguard an important prisoner who is to be interrogated in the Tower of London. Matthew travels with a heavy heart, having recently buried his father, whom he had neglected. With the money that he will earn from this mission, Matthew hopes to pay off his

father's remaining debts. After the Progress finally reaches York, a glazier falls off his ladder and is impaled on fragments of glass. Shardlake quickly realizes that this was no accident. There may be a conspiracy afoot against Henry; papers hidden in the glazier's house would wreak havoc if they were to fall into the wrong hands. Since Matthew caught a glimpse of these papers, he becomes a target and narrowly escapes repeated attempts on his life. Meanwhile, Jack Barak has found love; he is smitten with a pretty young woman, Tamasin Reedbourne, who works in Queen Catherine's household. Matthew and Jack join forces to discover the identity of the killer and to uncover a secret so explosive that it could bring down a mighty monarch. The strength of "Sovereign" lies in the author's exhaustive attention to historical detail; Sansom immerses the reader in the political, religious, and cultural events of Henry VIII's reign. Tudor England was filled with ruthless individuals who committed immoral acts because of their lust for power, a desire for wealth, and religious fanaticism. Scenes of cold-blooded murder, torture, and suicide reflect the violence and desperation of those volatile times. There is a contemporary flavor to the novel's themes; the more things change, the more they stay the same. Matthew Shardlake is as admirable and likeable as ever. He has an abnormally curved back which makes him the butt of cruel jokes, but his deformity has not robbed him of his self-respect. His keen intellect and determination propel him to disregard his personal safety in order to bring a murderer to justice. Shardlake and Jack make a solid team: Matthew has experience, a thorough knowledge of the law, and patience; what Barak lacks in seasoning and judgment he makes up for in loyalty, courage, and strength. Jack looks up to Matthew, who has taught the younger man to venerate learning and behave with integrity. Ironically, the initial strength of the novel ultimately becomes its undoing. The author gets carried away with his verbiage, and the novel soon becomes repetitious and tedious. At nearly six-hundred pages, "Sovereign" would have profited from careful pruning. The large cast of characters is too unwieldy to allow for much shading, and the impact of the mystery is diluted because of the many subplots that compete for the readers' attention. Although "Sovereign" is packed with fascinating information and colorful atmosphere, it would have been far more satisfying had it been more streamlined and better focused.

It seems that everything related to the Tudors and Reformation England is really trendy now, which I'm loving, since it was my major in college. Somehow I managed to miss these mysteries thus far, but I'm definitely ordering the first two right away. Matthew Shardlake is a lawyer in London who is sent to York ostensibly to handle legal petitions when the King visits on his great Progress; but also on a clandestine assignment from the great Archbishop Cranmer himself - to guard over a prisoner's

well-being so he can be safely taken back to London and face the experts in the Tower who will administer his interrogation. Chaos ensues early on when a glazier is murdered and Shardlake overhears a dying man's last words that may have secret meaning. When attempts are made on Shardlake's life, it seems no one can be trusted and everyone is a suspect. I really enjoyed this book. It really helped that I have a fair amount of knowledge of the subject matter - I think that would be important. As much as the dialog tried to give backgrounds and histories, I think I would have been really confused if I didn't know a lot of the history. As it was, it took all my effort just to concentrate on all the many characters. The book is fairly long (though absorbing), so be prepared to dedicate a certain amount of time to this book, and don't start reading it if you have other stuff going on. You're going to want to read this as much as you can until the last of the 650+ pages.

This is the third adventure of the author's invited protagonist, the lawyer, Matthew Shardlake. It's not only the best one so far, but it is also a perfect example of an historical novel. Not only does the period at the beginning of the end of the reign of Henry VIII come alive in crisp detail, but also the daily life of the professional and lower classes is the backdrop. Hollywood prefers to tell stories set in the past only through the eyes of the ruling classes, so we get gorgeous clothing and fairy tale castles that seem to have central heating and air conditioning for the comfort of their beautifully coiffed inhabitants who to a person have flawless skin and excellent health. C.J. Sansom shows us that the lives of all of the classes of society can be measured by who has more or less. A literally decaying while alive Henry VIII suffers from leg ulcers that ooze pus and stink close-up, court ladies wear thick white make-up for formal occasions that today would be called clown-like. Gentlemen reach for their swords and daggers at the drop of an insult or a perceived affront. Religion is politics and politics, in the middle Tudor period, was religion. The best aspect of this novel is that it is seen through the eyes of Sansom's main character, a hunchback lawyer, who has brilliant deductive powers and an almost photographic memory, in the service of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the only fully developed "famous" historical figure in the story. The very poor term, smellovision, might best describe this all too brief sojourn into the year 1541, but I use the term intending it to be a positive comment on Sansom's skill to let us re-live and breathe-through a scented linen cloth, hopefully, the mid sixteenth century.

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