

Barbara Corrado Pope interviewed by Kathleen Stephenson, on KBOO RADIO Between the Covers Program March 7, 2013

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STEPHENSON: Good morning. Welcome to Between the Covers. I'm Kathleen Stephenson, and my guest today in the KBOO studio is Oregon writer Barbara Corrado Pope. She has taught history and women's studies in the United States and abroad. She was the founding director of the Women's Studies program at the University of Oregon.

She is the author of the Bernard Martin mystery series, which includes her previous books, *Cézanne's Quarry* and *The Blood of Lorraine*. Her new book is *The Missing Italian Girl*, and we'll be talking about that today. She is launching her book tonight at 7 p.m. at Powell's Books, Cedar Hills Crossing. Barbara Corrado Pope, welcome back to KBOO.

POPE: Thank you very much.

STEPHENSON: Thanks for coming in. Your mystery writing is described as a second career for you, after your first career as an academic. How did you transition from being a college teacher to a writer of mysteries?

POPE: Well, it was something I'd always wanted to do, to write fiction. I think during the time I was a professor, I was writing short pieces, maybe sending out a short story here and there. As I got towards the end of my career, or decided what the end of my career would be, I began to write the first mystery, *Cézanne's Quarry*. People say "How long did it take?", which is embarrassing. About a decade. But I was very engaged in other things. I was directing a program and teaching at the same time.

STEPHENSON: Did you feel like there were parts of the new role as a mystery writer that were connected to your past as an academic?

POPE: The fact that the novels are set in France has a lot to do with the fact that I was a French historian, that my dissertation was on women in France. I thought, like most people, that my first novel would be the autobiographical novel, in my case about Cleveland, Ohio. One day, I got a letter from a friend in Iowa who was taking a sabbatical, and she was going to learn to play the piano, learn Italian, lose 25 pounds, and write a novel about Provence geology and Cézanne, and something else.

I wrote her back and said, "Hey, write that novel. That's a great idea." I had by that time taught in Provence; I knew a great deal about French history. Nothing about geology, but a lot about art. When it turned out she was not interested in writing that novel, it had hooked me entirely, and I thought, "They say write what you know, and I know a lot about that." So I launched into it. But it did take a long time, since I did have this other job going.

STEPHENSON: Talk a little bit about the women's studies area that you were involved in, because we're here on the day before International Women's Day, and you have your International Women's Day 1991 sweatshirt on. Talk about what that department was when you first got involved.



POPE: When I first got involved, it was not a department, it was not a program; it was a set of courses. They were looking for someone who could teach half-time. I had just moved here with an 18-month-old child and a husband, who had gotten a job in the History Department. Eventually I found out that this job was available. I had by that time worked on French women's history; I had taught women's history at the University of New Mexico. So I was very well-positioned to take the job because there was no women's studies program. There was no way you could have learned about women's studies. We were creating it.

In fact, one of the stories I loved to tell my students was that when I was first teaching women's history, I taught the Stone Age to the present, the first course. It was a year-long course. I would go to the library and I would be looking at books written in the 1920s, and there were very few of them. One was written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton's son, for example. Now, of course, there's so much, you can't read it all.

What we would do as young women all starting this field is we would write what we thought our syllabus would be, we would send it to a place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania called Know, Incorporated. All those little blue ditto sheets. Send in \$2, and then we would get everyone else's syllabi. So we worked at it together. That's how Women's Studies was formed. It was this band of women of all about the same age, all learning together how to do it.

STEPHENSON: And by the time you left the University of Oregon, what was the department like?

POPE: It was a department with four or five people in it. I felt it was my child; I had gotten it through its adolescence and it was grown up, and I could leave and do something else.

STEPHENSON: The main character in your other books was Bernard Martin, and in this book the story revolves around his wife, Clarie, who is a mother, a teacher, and a woman of a sympathetic nature who becomes involved in a mystery. Why did you switch to Clarie as your focus in this book?

POPE: There were two reasons. One reason was that as a women's historian, I thought the women's movement was a natural for me to go to, and the women's movement existed in France at the time. So that was one thing, because all my other books had a very strong theme: art and science and religion in the first book; anti-Semitism and Jewish identity in the second book.

The second reason was the character herself, Clarie. She had suffered a tragedy in Book #2; she had lost a baby. There were a number of readers and reviewers who said "We would like to see Clarie come back to that girl she was in the first book." She had lost some of herself. She has, in the third book, become more constrained by the fact she has a responsible job, she has a baby, and she has a husband with a responsible job.

So I wanted her to come back, but when it came to trying to set the book with the women's movement, as I researched more carefully, all the interesting things were happening right after 1897, and I didn't want her to get much older. So it became a book about women with very strong women's issues, but not particularly about feminism. You have anarchism, you have the plight of working class girls, you have the difficulty of middle-class women with responsible, intelligent jobs not being able to do what they want to do.

STEPHENSON: She's what you might call a reluctant participant in this whole issue that she becomes involved in. Can you talk about her as a character, and how the issues all revolve around her eventually?

POPE: Well, when I first started writing the book, I thought that the opening line would be that she could not listen to the plea from this charwoman, Francesca Laurenzano, who was saying her daughters are missing; that she had to answer the plea because it reminded her of her Italian father. There's a part of that that she was

raised by an immigrant father who had very leftist politics and never would not help someone. That was part of it.

But the other part of it is as she becomes involved, at first she's just sympathetic. The girls are lost, then she meets the girls, she realizes they're very exploited. But then she begins to realize, maybe they dumped a body into the basin, which makes her very suspicious. And her husband doesn't want her to become involved.

Then there's an anarchist bombing, or it seems to be an anarchist bombing, and he's very adamantly against it. But at the same time, as she confronts Maura a few times – Maura Laurenzano, the other main character – she sees something in Maura that reminds her of her younger self, and she thinks Maura is someone worth saving, but at the same time, she's saving herself.

STEPHENSON: You mentioned that her husband, Bernard Martin, is against her getting involved, and there is a dynamic of – I guess you'd call it feminism of a sort, in her relationship and how she and he work out, how she will act in the world as a woman and his wife.

POPE: Certainly. One of the things I always used to tell my students is you didn't have to call it feminism to have women searching and getting their own agency. I mean, they were feminists in action as opposed to feminists in names. Certainly that's what she has to come to. She has to come to the point where she can work with other women, even a notorious woman, who's the only historical character in the novel, to save this girl. It's difficult for her, but you see the transition.

I think one of the reasons I like the review that I got in Oprah's website is that they really got it, that this is what the story was about.

STEPHENSON: I wondered when I was reading it, just historically, what it would be like at that time; would there be women trying to manage a family and a job at that time in France? Was that common?

POPE: First of all, lots of women were working. After all, you look at the Laurenzano girls, and they are doing piecework in their apartment forever, and there were lots of women who were doing that, very poor working class women.

STEPHENSON: I know the daughter of a charwoman in Clarie's school, that's how she gets...

POPE: That's right, and the daughters are doing this piecework. They were actually doing the buttons and sewing the ends on shirtwaists, which has a connection with Clarie too, because as a teacher she's wearing a shirtwaist. It also has a connection with International Women's Day because of the Triangle Shirtwaist company in the United States. There's that symbolic connection, and the fact that working class women were working all the time.

The other difference that's hard, I think, sometimes for Americans to get is that the class differences in most societies were more profound in the 19th century in other societies. So there were professional women – a lot of the dentists in France were women. That's something we're seeing now in the United States, but in the 19th century that was true.

There were teachers like Clarie who called themselves professors, even though they were teaching high school. They had gone through very rigorous training. So there were women in that class. Of course, they became the backbone for the feminist movement in France.

STEPHENSON: Yeah, there is the whole issue of class in this book. Was that something that you knew you wanted to deal with when you started writing this?

POPE: When I wrote my first book, *Cézanne's Quarry*, I was worried – here I am, been teaching women's studies for many years, and I'm killing a woman in the first eight pages. Then I thought to myself, "Okay, it's going to be feminist no matter what, because of who you are." So I always knew women's issues would be part of my book. As an historian, you cannot escape social class. It's like the bread of what you eat, every single day, so I certainly deal with social class all the time, and it's the way I think as an historian.

STEPHENSON: This is Kathleen Stephenson for *Between the Covers* on KBOO Radio, and I'm speaking with Oregon writer Barbara Corrado Pope. She is the author of the Bernard Martin mystery series, and we're talking about the latest in that series. It's called *The Missing Italian Girl*. Barbara Corrado Pope is reading tonight – you'll be both talking and reading, signing copies?

POPE: That's right.

STEPHENSON: That's at 7 p.m. at Powell's Books, Cedar Hills Crossing. There were many things about this period of time that were interesting, references throughout the book. I wanted you to talk a little bit more about when it's set, in 1897, and what made that a distinctive time? There's mentions of the Dreyfus affair and other things. Can you talk a little bit more about that particular time?

POPE: I think the way most people portray that time, they call it the *La Belle Époque*, the beautiful period. They think of the Eiffel Tower, they think of the World's Fair, they think of the glamour, the cancan, all of these things were happening. It's the time of modern advertisement; everywhere you look, there are posters pasted on walls of kiosks and buildings. It's the time of that art, when you think Toulouse-Lautrec. The period was attractive in that way. As I said, I first went to the period thinking I would write about the women's movement, which I knew was there, but as I said, the really fascinating characters hadn't emerged yet.

But I wanted to write about this period in the way that most Parisians experienced it, and the way I chose the place for the novel is first I chose a school for Clarie. I knew she was going to teach in the school. Then I actually lived in that neighborhood for awhile and learned that neighborhood. So it's the more common Paris of that beautiful period, and it's not such a beautiful Paris. That's what I wanted to portray.

STEPHENSON: What are the aspects of it that are not so beautiful?

POPE: Oh, the exploitation of girls. In this book, you see not only the difficult working conditions, but also, almost in the first scene, you get a sense of sexual exploitation. That's what that first killing was about, or the first death was about.

When I took Maura to the Moulin Rouge, which people think of as very glamorous, I showed the underside of it; that there are these rich men taking these – she was by that time a laundress – taking these girls from the laundry, and then they expected something for the champagne and the beer that they bought them. She has to flee, because she doesn't want to be part of that. So you get both the work and the sexual exploitation in the book.

STEPHENSON: Also the connection to the Dreyfus affair that is in the background.

POPE: Right. That's just heating up again, and it's something that is touched on, as is the women's movement, in the very, very last chapter. There's a women's newspaper that was all women, that was starting up just as this book ends, and it's going to take up the Dreyfus affair big time.

But you see, Martin is beginning to meet with other people about it, because he had become very involved in fighting anti-Semitism in Nancy, the town he used to live in. He becomes involved again, and it's actually the fact that he was at meetings about Dreyfus that allowed Clarie to get out of the house and do her thing.

STEPHENSON: That all women's newspaper, one of the characters in the book is a female investigative journalist. She's quite distinctive. Would she have been involved in an all women's newspaper, or is that something –

POPE: Absolutely. In fact, she was a very good friend of the person who became the editor, Marguerite Durand. The character you're speaking about is Severine, and she was notorious.

STEPHENSON: She was a real person.

POPE: She's a real person, she was notorious, and she was perhaps the first woman investigative reporter in the world, and certainly in France. And she did do the things I mentioned, like she went into the mines after an explosion, and she came out very dramatically and wrote about the miners. She wrote about the poor in Paris. She was very connected to the anarchists who had risen up in the Commune.

That's one of the reasons why Martin, the husband, is a little angry at Clarie, because she gets involved with Severine, who is a notorious woman. I talk about Clarie going to her apartment the first time to meet her, to ask to help, and she feels like she's going to an assignation, even though she's going to see another woman, just because she's going to see this notoriously divorced woman. In fact, de Maupassant wrote a novel called *Le Bel Ami*, which means the good friend, sort of like the good guy, which was about her lover and her. She was very well known.

STEPHENSON: Yeah, she has quite a manner. One thing about the book is that there is quite a range of women, not only in class, but in their attitudes towards the world.

POPE: That's right, yeah. That's what I hope to portray, very much. In fact, I have Clarie's best friend Emilie being someone from a more upper-class family and trying to show the difference. For instance, she plays the piano, and Clarie knows about Schumann, but she can't play Schumann, because she was a blacksmith's daughter.

STEPHENSON: And he was Italian, her father was Italian?

POPE: Yes, he was a blacksmith in Arles. Back stories are very important when you write.

STEPHENSON: Maybe we could talk a little bit more about the connection to anarchism, which you've mentioned. The young Italian girl of the title is associated with anarchists; maybe not an anarchist herself, but she has this association. Talk about what was going on with that at the time, and why you wanted to include that.

POPE: One of the reasons to include it is it was a very, very important social movement in France at the time. The other is that it's so different from what we think about as anarchism. There were the terrorists. There was a very famous bombing that's mentioned in the book, which was the first time that ordinary people were targeted, which is why it was so shocking, and why people were so wary of anarchists.

But on the other hand, you have a Peter, who is a very idealistic anarchist, a Russian who comes to France to learn about the poor and learn about revolution, as he said. His comrades, who are studying to be doctors,

they're young Russian women studying to be doctors to go back and serve the peasants – that was one kind of anarchism. By this time, terrorist anarchism had been pretty much vanquished by the government, because they rooted them all out.

But the most important movement in anarchists at the time was the foundation of the Labor Movement, which we don't always think of as anarchists' doing. We think of it as more socialists or just a union movement. The anarchists were the foundation of the Labor Movement at the time, so that's why Martin is involved in trying to protect his people, because as soon as a bomb goes off, the police suspect anyone who calls themselves an anarchist. So it was just much more wide ranging than we even think of it. It was about 1900 that the socialists became the dominant cause for the Labor Movement, but before that it was the anarchists.

STEPHENSON: I am speaking with Barbara Corrado Pope, who is the author of most recently, the book we're talking about right now, *The Missing Italian Girl*. We're getting towards the end of the interview, Barbara. What do you want people to most know about your work and anything that we've been talking about that you think is most important?

POPE: You have several reasons to be inspired to write or to think you can write, you can produce something. I remember I was in a bookstore with a friend who loves reading mysteries, as I do, and she said to me, "I love reading mysteries where I learn something else, that has to have a sort of depth to it." That's the kind of books I think I've written. I think one can be entertained, and there's mystery, there's some tension, certainly there's danger in all of the books. But also there's always very strong themes in these books, and that's important to me. I think it's probably all my years of being a teacher. You can't stop.

STEPHENSON: Have you found yourself as part of a historical mystery community? Because I know there's so many divisions in the mystery world. Is that something that's your niche?

POPE: I think it's my niche now, as a writer, but in terms of community, living in Eugene, Oregon, there are not a lot of other historical mystery writers around. So I am deeply into my writers' group, which is six women, and we always praise each other. It's a wonderful writers' group. I don't think I could've written the last two books as quickly as I did without them. It's great to have someone who's there, ready to read your work, and ready to try to improve it. So that's been very important to me.

STEPHENSON: How long did this book take for you?

POPE: This book probably took about – it's always hard to say, because these books came out so quickly that you're publicizing one or editing one while you're thinking of the other. I would say about two years, this one. The first one took over ten years; the second one took four years. It's not that I've gotten faster; it's that I've been more involved in the process and I understand it better.

STEPHENSON: Are you working on another one right now?

POPE: No, actually, I'm sort of lying fallow, and I'm taking a playwriting course at the theater in Eugene. Just to see if I could try a new genre.

STEPHENSON: Well, I want to thank you very much for coming into KBOO and talking about this.

POPE: It was my pleasure. Thank you.

STEPHENSON: Again, I want to let people know that my guest has been Barbara Corrado Pope. This is Kathleen Stephenson for *Between the Covers*, and Barbara will be speaking tonight about her new book, *The*

Missing Italian Girl. That's tonight at 7 p.m. at Powell's Books, Cedar Hills Crossing. Are we going out with some more Edith Piaf?

POPE: And Happy International Women's Day tomorrow.

STEPHENSON: Yes, it starts tonight on KBOO. Let me say that as we're leaving. It starts tonight with a Women's History in Portland panel. That's at 7 p.m. tonight. International Women's Day coverage on KBOO.

The Missing Italian Girl: A Mystery in Paris

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Barbara Corrado Pope has taught history and women's studies in places as diverse as Hungary, Tuscany, the University of New Mexico, and Harvard Divinity School. Her longest stint was at the University of Oregon, where she was the founding director of women's studies. She is the author of *Cézanne's Quarry* and *The Blood of Lorraine*, also featuring Bernard Martin and lives in Eugene, Oregon.

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To learn more about Barbara Corrado Pope, her work and schedule of events please visit www.BarbaraCPope.com

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