

A Conversation with Barbara Corrado Pope

Author of *Cézanne's Quarry*

1. Why did you decide to write a mystery about Cézanne?

Years ago a friend discussed the idea of writing or co-authoring a novel about “Cézanne, Provence and geology.” I was hooked. I had taught in Provence, studied French cultural history for decades, loved Cézanne’s art, and always wanted to write a novel. When she went on to other projects, I could not let it drop. Moreover, during my research for *Cézanne’s Quarry*, I discovered two nagging questions in books about the artist:

- Why did he paint lurid, violent pictures in his youth?
- And who was the mysterious woman he fell in love with in the spring of 1885?

After that, the project of giving a fictional answer to these questions became irresistible.

2. How did you moved from the concept “Cézanne, Provence and geology” to a completed novel?

The first step was plotting: Determining the identity of the murderer and why s/he committed the crime. But the most important aspect of moving from concept to novel is creating the characters. Cézanne, his mistress Hortense Ficquet and Zola hewed pretty close to their historical descriptions. The main protagonist, Bernard Martin; the police inspector, Albert Franc; the victim, Solange Vernet; the other suspect, the geologist Charles Westerbury; Martin’s love interest, Clarie Falchetti, and his anarchist friend, Jean-Jacques Merckx all had to be fleshed out. My favorite character to write was the ambiguous Mr. Westerbury. I had a lot of fun putting his pretensions, charms and weaknesses on the page.

3. You say you love Cézanne’s art, but you do not seem to love Cézanne.

I believe I give a fairly accurate account of what Cézanne would have been like when he was 46. At times he behaved like a man in delayed adolescence. Consider the circumstances: He had not yet been “discovered” as an artist. He had an unrequited obsession for a mystery woman. He also had a mistress with whom he had a 13-year-old son. He did not dare tell his skinflint father about his son, because he was still economically dependent on the old man. And, if that were not enough, he occasionally had to borrow money from his boyhood friend, Emile Zola, who had become France’s most famous writer. The two of them had always planned to “conquer France together” through their art. And they had presumed that Cézanne, the older and stronger, would take the lead. The greatest tragedy of Cézanne’s life would be the ending of this friendship within a year after the time of *Cézanne’s Quarry*. The reasons are hinted at in the book.

4. Do you consider yourself an expert on art?

No, an *amateur* as the French would say: a lover of art, and one who has read a great deal about it and goes to museums as often as I can on my travels.

5. You’ve taught women’s studies and history for many years. Is this reflected in the book?

Yes, I hope through the female characters, who defy the constraints of their sex, and the questions that others in the novel raise about their lives. Solange Vernet is a self-made woman, not only in the economic sense, but also in her intellectual and spiritual life—and in her social aspirations. The other heroine, Clarie Falchetti, is about to be trained by the state to teach in a public girls’ high school. This was revolutionary in 1885, when very few professions were open to women and when husbands were legally “the head of the household,” controlling all property, including their wives’ wages.

6. Did your training as an historian help or hurt as you turned to fiction?

Helped, definitely. I had an understanding of the legal system, the way that both men and women were brought up to fulfill their “proper” roles, the historical clash between religion and science, and something more indefinable, my characters’ way of expressing themselves. The challenge was weaving this knowledge into a story that should be an entertaining seamless whole, not a history lesson!

7. How does your book compare with other novels which deal with women and art, for example, *The Girl with the Pearl Earring*?

I believe that the first goal of Tracy Chevalier’s book, and certainly mine, is to entertain. Readers of both books will also learn something about art and the lives of artists as well as the lives of women. The major difference is that mine is a murder mystery.

8. One of the cultural conflicts you set up in your book, which may have relevance today, is the conflict between science and religion. But why choose an amateur geologist as the main proponent of the scientific point of view?

Two reasons: Cezanne had a keen interest in geology, and hoped through his art to express the living history of the geological subjects—the quarry, the mountain—that he painted. Second, although we have come to believe that the controversy about evolution started with Darwin, it actually began with geological theories about the age of the earth and the meaning of fossils. Darwin learned from the geologists, like Charles Lyell, who preceded him. Geology challenged literal Biblical interpretations of the earth’s history. It was also very popular, especially in England, where many amateur geologists wandered about with their baskets and hammers.

9. Did being a professor prepare you for life as a novelist?

No! Sometimes I feel like Dorothy in Oz. Nothing prepared me to become the kind of self-employed entrepreneur that many writers have to be these days. First you must find an agent; then wait, fingers-crossed, for a publisher; and, if you are lucky enough to find one, come up with a “marketing plan.”

As a professor, my first concern was teaching, which is very social. I was also deeply embedded in a large institution. The solitary acts of research and writing were a *part* of what I did. Now I must train myself to sit at my computer in my home all by myself for longer and longer periods as I embark on this second career. Being in a writers’ group does help to mitigate the sense of isolation. So do volunteer work and belonging to three reading groups.

10. What’s next for you Barbara?

Bernard Martin and Clarie Falchetti move to Nancy in northern France. It is several years later and the first Dreyfus trial is taking place. The accusation that Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish army officer, was a spy split the country apart and reverberated throughout the western world. In fact it was the experience of witnessing the explosion of anti-Semitism in France that incited Theodor Herzl, an Austrian Jewish reporter, to found the Zionist movement. He believed that if Jews could not be emancipated in France, the home of liberty, equality and fraternity, they had no home in Europe and must make one in Israel.

Once again concept preceded plot, characterization, even place. Nancy was one of the few cities in France with a large Jewish population. As for the origins of the theme, I assume it came from my other life. I devoted a great deal of time as a teacher of women’s studies to dealing with the issues of sexism and racism. Anti-Semitism was the most virulent and insidious form of ethnic hatred in nineteenth-century Europe.

The Blood of Lorraine will be published by Pegasus Books in the U.S. and Germany in 2010.