

Barbara Corrado Pope, cheeky feminist historian and Oprah pick



Interview with Barbara Corrado Pope As seen on [Jungle Red Writers](#)

February 2013 www.jungleredwriters.com/2013/02/barbara-corrado-pope-cheeky-feminist.html

HALLIE EPHRON: **Historian** Barbara Corrado Pope came to mystery writing after a truly illustrious career as a (no, it's not a dirty word) **feminist**. Founding Director of Women's and Gender Studies at University of Oregon, her wonderful mysteries are steeped in history and twisted by her own uniquely subversive viewpoint.

Her debut novel, "**Cezanne's Quarry**," asks could Paul Cézanne be a killer, and introduced the world to detective Bernard Martin. Her new novel, "**The Missing Italian Girl**," is set in Paris in 1897, and Bernard's wife Clarie comes into her own as a sleuth.

Barbara, What was going on in Paris in 1897 that inspired you to set this story there?

BARBARA CORRADO POPE: I thought Paris would offer me a topic very much up my alley: the women's movement. I assumed this might be a good way to bring the series (and especially the character of Clarie) to a conclusion. None of this worked out!

The most fascinating characters in the women's movement didn't really achieve notoriety until slightly after this period (e.g., Marguerite Durand walking around with her pet lion!). So I fell back on my other historical passion: social classes. **Then, things fell into place: anarchism, the labor movement, the plight of poor working class girls, middle class women coming into their own by doing something not fully approved by society.**

HALLIE: In all of your books, not so far beneath the surface you are exploring the theme of the role of women within the context of established institutions and expectations. How are you exploring that again -- because the "detective" this time isn't your series sleuth Bernard Martin but his wife Clarie.

BARBARA: A number of readers asked, "What happened to Clarie? in 'The Blood of Lorraine?'" she was grieving the loss of her child and vulnerable to the messages of religious fanaticism. **They wanted the young, fierce Clarie of "Cézanne's Quarry" back. And so did I.**



But she's older now, constrained by the responsibilities of motherhood and profession, so she doesn't decide all at once to be a detective. It takes her ethnic and maternal identity with a charwoman and her compassion for the poor to give her the courage to go against society and her husband, and pursue the search for Maura Laurenzano, the Missing Italian Girl.

Also, I wanted very much to write a "**woman's book**," in part to see if I could do it. In "The Missing Italian Girl," Clarie and Maura, who, unlike Clarie, needs to soften some of her harder edges, form a strong identity.

HALLIE: Tell us about the research you did for this book. I hope it involved a trip to Paris.

BARBARA: Are you kidding me? **All my friends thought me immensely clever to set a book in Paris.** Before

going, of course, I did quite a bit of research around the topics that would be explored in my book: women's and labor history, schooling, and anarchism. But I also knew that the place would inspire me as well.

In contrast to Aix and Nancy (where I researched the previous books), with their historical, relatively unchanged, centers, **Paris is ever-changing and big**. So, I had to choose a neighborhood for my characters to inhabit.

First, I picked a school for Clarie to teach in. I wanted it to be not the poshest girl's school in Paris, but a very good one with a "mixed" (Catholic and Jewish, professional and commercial) population. Once I located the



school, the Lycée Lamartine, we looked for an apartment near it. We found one two blocks up the street! For those who know Paris, it is the street that divides the 9th from the 10th arrondissement, not very picturesque, but, for Parisians, the "real" Paris.

Then I began to treat the neighborhood like a village, learning the buildings, the slope of the streets and its history. Old photos helped immensely in re-imagining the long-gone aspects of place.

HALLIE: Congratulations on getting picked for **Oprah's Book Club** as a "**Compulsively Readable Mystery**." I think I can speak for all the Red when I say we're jealous! Were

you sitting down when you found out the book had been picked?

BARBARA: Thanks! Of course I was excited. Since I was at my computer I was already sitting. So I just gave the computer some special cheers! I especially liked the fact that the reviewer, Nathalie Gorman, emphasized the women's issues that I tried to bring out in the story.

HALLIE: Tell us about what are you working on next?

BARBARA: Hmmmm. Historical.

HALLIE: Why am I not surprised?

BARBARA: I am drawn to two different topics. The story of Galla Placidia, the last Roman Empress, which I will attempt first to put in play form; and, a semi-autobiographical novel set in my hometown Cleveland, Ohio. My friends who cheered me going to Paris, look at me skeptically and say: "**Rome? Cleveland? Is there a choice?**"

There's also the possibility of a fourth Martin book. I might write that women's movement book after all, carrying it right into the First World War.

HALLIE: So, **Reds**, are you comfortable being called a feminist? Do you like to read books that feel as if there's a cheeky (not preachy) broad at the keyboard, not afraid to call it the way she sees it?