



Pope Joan: a novel

By Donna Woolfolk Cross

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Summary

Vividly recreating life during the Dark Ages, while simultaneously painting a portrait of an unforgettable woman, "Pope Joan" explores the extraordinary life of an independent, intelligent and courageous woman who overcomes oppression and ascends to the highest religious power

A Synopsis of Pope Joan

For a thousand years, her existence has been denied. She is the legend that will not die--Pope Joan, a controversial figure of historical record who, disguised as a man, rose to rule Christianity in the 9th century as the first and only woman to sit on the throne of St. Peter. In this riveting novel, Donna Woolfolk Cross paints a sweeping portrait of a heroine whose strength of vision led her to defy the social restrictions of her day.

Brilliant and talented, young Joan rebels against medieval laws forbidding women to learn. When her older brother is brutally killed during a Viking attack, Joan takes up his identity and enters the monastery of Fulda, where she is initiated into the brotherhood in his place. As Brother John Anglicus, Joan distinguishes herself as a great scholar and healer. Eventually she is drawn to Rome, where she becomes enmeshed in a dangerous web of love, passion, and politics. Triumphant over appalling odds, she finally attains the highest throne in Christendom, wielding a power greater than any woman before or since.

But such power always comes at a price... Pope Joan is a sweeping historical drama set against the turbulent events of the 9th century -- the Saracen sack of St. Peter's, the famous fire in the Borgo that destroyed over three-quarters of the Vatican, the Battle of Fontenoy, arguably the bloodiest and most terrible of medieval conflicts. This masterwork of suspense and passion brings the Dark Ages to life in all their brutal splendor and shares the dramatic story of an unforgettable woman who struggles against restrictions her soul cannot accept.

Reviews

From Publishers Weekly

Cross makes an excellent, entertaining case in her work of historical fiction that, in the Dark Ages, a woman sat on the papal throne for two years. Born in Ingelheim in A.D. 814 to a tyrannical English canon and the once-heathen Saxon he made his wife, Joan shows intelligence and persistence from an early age. One of her two older brothers teaches her to read and write. Lavishly plotted, the book brims with fairs, weddings and stupendous banquets, famine, plague and brutal battles. Joan is always central to the vivid action as she wars with the two sides of herself, "mind and heart, faith and doubt, will and desire." Ultimately, though she leads a man's life, Joan dies a woman's death, losing her life in childbirth. In this colorful, richly imagined novel, Cross ably inspires a suspension of disbelief, pulling off the improbable feat of writing a romance starring a pregnant pope.

From Library Journal

Cross's first novel, based on the life of the controversial historical figure Pope Joan, is a fascinating and moving account of a woman's determination to learn despite the opposition of family and society. Born in 9th-century Frankland, Joan demonstrates her brilliance early but must hide her learning from her missionary father, who considers the education of women sacrilegious and dangerous. Tutored first by her older brother and then a Greek scholar, Joan eventually secures a place at the schola in Dorstadt. To protect herself after a Viking raid, Joan dons her dead brother's clothing and assumes a man's identity. Suddenly the intelligence that once brought her ridicule and punishment results in respect and authority. From the monastery in Fulda to Vatican politics in Rome, Joan eventually secures the church's highest office. Cross vividly creates the 9th-century world, fraught with dangers from Vikings and Saracens, bloody warfare between brothers for political power, and palace intrigue for political favors.

From [Booklist](#)

Cross combines legend with historical fact in a novel about Joan of Ingelheim, the female pope. Born in 814 to an English missionary father and a Saxon mother, Joan is frustrated by the limitations imposed on her life because she is a girl. Her brother Matthew teaches her to read and write; after his death, Joan has to use wiles and deceit to pursue her love of learning. Later, Joan runs away from home to follow her brother John to the cathedral school in Dorstadt, where she becomes the sole yet tolerated female student. Joan borrows John's clothing and identity and makes her way to the monastery at Fulda, where she becomes known as John Anglicus. At the monastery, Joan becomes a monk and then a priest, and she develops

great skill as a healer. She eventually makes her way to Rome, where her gifts as a healer enable her to become the confidante of two popes. In the midst of vicious papal politics, Joan becomes pope herself. A vivid and compelling re-creation of the Dark Ages.

From Kirkus Reviews

A remarkable woman uses her considerable intellect--and more than a little luck--to rise from humble origins to become the only female Pope, in this breakneck adventure from newcomer Cross. A longstanding tradition has insisted that there was a female Pope in the ninth century. The author's version of that story imagines Joan as the daughter of a village canon. Singled out for tutoring by a wise Greek, she learns quickly.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY <http://www.popejoan.com>

Donna Woolfolk Cross graduated cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, from the University of Pennsylvania in 1969 with a B.A. in English. She moved to London, England, after graduation, and worked as an editorial assistant for a small publishing house on Fleet Street, W.H. Allen and Company. Upon her return to the United States, Cross worked at Young and Rubicam, a Madison Avenue advertising firm, before going on to graduate school at UCLA where she earned a master's degree in Literature and Writing in 1972.



In 1973, Cross moved with her husband to upstate New York where she began teaching writing in a college English Department. Now writing is her fulltime career.

She is the author of two books on language, *Word Abuse: How the Words We Use Use Us* and *Mediaspeak: How Television Makes Up Your Mind*. She is the coauthor of *Speaking of Words* and *Daddy's Little Girl*. The product of seven years of research and writing, *Pope Joan* is her first novel. She is now at work on a new novel set in 17th century France.

Bibliography

Non-fiction

Word Abuse: How the Words We Use Use Us (1979)

Daddy's Little Girl: The Unspoken Bargain Between Fathers and Their Daughters (1983)

(with William Woolfolk)

Mediaspeak: How Television Makes Up Your Mind (1984)

Speaking of Words: A Language Reader (1986) (with James MacKillop)

Novels

Pope Joan (1996)

The Myths and legends of Pope Joan

Pope Joan is a legendary female Pope who supposedly reigned for a few years some time thought to be between 853 - 855 AD. The story first appeared in the writings of 13th-century chroniclers, and subsequently spread through Europe. It was widely believed for centuries, though modern historians and religious scholars[who?] consider it fictitious, perhaps deriving from historicized folklore regarding Roman monuments or from anti-papal satire.



The first mention of the female pope appears in the chronicle of Jean Pierier de Mailly, but the most popular and influential version was that interpolated into Martin of Troppau's *Chronicon Pontificum et Imperatorum* somewhat later in the 13th century. Most versions say that she was a talented and learned woman who disguised herself as a man, often at the behest of a lover. Due to her abilities she rises through the church hierarchy, eventually being chosen as pope. However, while riding on horseback one day, she gives birth to a child, thus revealing her sex. In most versions she dies shortly after, either by being killed by an angry mob, or from natural causes, and her memory is shunned by her successors.

In 1856, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* took on the Pope Joan legend, and concluded that the legend was false. Here's an excerpt from the article there:

The grounds on which this conclusion is arrived at may be briefly stated. In the first place, 200 years elapsed between the era of the supposed pope and the date at which her name is first mentioned by any historian. In the next place there were at Rome, during the time assigned to her Papacy four persons, who each in succession sat on the papal throne, and left behind them many and various writings. Had they ever heard of the story, it is impossible to believe that they should each and all

have passed it over in silence as they have done. In the third place, all the contemporary writers, without a single exception, attest that, immediately on the death of Leo IV., the papal chair was offered and accepted by Benedict III.

At the same time, though the story of Pope Joan is given up by all historians alike as a fable, it is impossible that it should have found believers and upholders for so many centuries had there been nothing in the annals of the church to give a sort of colour to it. Many conjectures have been advanced upon the subject, of which by far the most plausible is that of Biancho-Giovini, who proves clearly enough that the papal chair was often virtually occupied by a woman. Pope John X., elected in 914, owed his elevation entirely to his mistress [Theodora](#), whose beauty, talents, and intrigues had made her mistress of Rome about the beginning of the tenth century. At a late period Theodora's daughter, [Marozia](#), wielded a similar influence over Sergius III., and finally raised her son by that pope to the pontifical throne, with the title of John XI. At a still later period, John XII. was so completely governed by one of his concubines, Raineria by name, that he entrusted to her much of the administration of the holy see. These, and other instances of the same kind that might be adduced, account satisfactorily enough for the origin of the fable of Pope Joan.

Author Interview (from www.readinggroupguides.com)

A Note from the Author:

For many years, I've been joining the conversation with reading groups by speakerphone.* Some questions come up very frequently. To these FAQs, I provide answers below. [I also include] a list of questions to which even *I* don't know the answer, but which lead to lively and productive book group discussion --- the "best of the best" based on my years of experience chatting with reading groups. [Click here](#) to see these new questions.

Q: Why did you write this novel?

A: Having written four nonfiction books, I wanted to switch to historical fiction --- my favorite form of leisure reading. When I stumbled across Joan's story in a piece of chance reading, I knew I had found my subject. What an extraordinary lost mystery/legend of history, documented even better than King Arthur's! How was it possible that I had never even *heard* of her?

The more I learned about Joan, the more I liked her. To me, she's an inspiring example of female empowerment through learning --- an issue deeply relevant in today's world, where women in many countries are still discouraged, or even prevented, from going to school. I had my own daughter very much in mind as I wrote this novel. I hope that Joan's story inspires young women to pursue their education so they can have full exercise of mind, heart, and spirit.

Q: Are you Catholic?

A: No. Oddly, this turned out to have an unexpected advantage. Were I Catholic, raised in the traditions, rituals, and theology of today's Church, I would have approached ninth-century Christian faith with a lot of very wrong preconceptions. In my novel I have tried to show the many ways in which the worship of a thousand years ago differed from our own. If there's one thing that the study of history teaches us, it is that yesterday's heresies are often today's truths --- and vice versa.

Q: What response has the book had from the Vatican?

A: None. And that's only to be expected. In today's world, controversy sells things. If the Vatican denounced my novel, the very next day it would probably be on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

The best way to bury any story is to ignore it --- as Joan's millennium-old story proves.

Q: Why did you choose that ending for Pope Joan?

A: I didn't. The historical records on Joan are nearly unanimous in saying that she died in childbirth while in papal procession on the Via Sacra. This ending is also supported by the centuries-old tradition of the "shunned street" (described in the author's note).

If Joan had died behind the walls of the papal palace, no one would ever have known that she was a female. For that to become known, her death had to be public.

Q: Why is there such brutality in the novel --- for example, the rape of Gisla during the Viking attack on Dorstadt?

A: The question implies that I intensified the savagery of life in the ninth century in the interest of sensational storytelling. The truth is that I took it easy on readers; life in the ninth century was far more brutal and unjust than anything depicted in my novel. Recent and continuing world events reveal that crimes against humanity are not relegated only to history. Upsetting as reading about such things can be, my feeling is this: if people, past and present, can endure such terrible things, then the least we can do is bear witness. I see no advantage whatsoever to "cleaning up" history. As George Santayana said, "Those who do not study history are condemned to repeat it."

A Conversation with Donna Woolfolk Cross

Q: Most people have never heard of *Pope Joan*. How did you first learn of her

existence?

A: I learned about Joan quite by accident. I was reading a book in French and came across a reference to a pope named "Jeanne." At first I thought this was simply an amusing typographical error--"Jeanne" (Joan) for "Jean" (John). But the reference piqued my curiosity, and the next day I went to the library and checked the Catholic Encyclopedia. Sure enough, there was an entry on Joan--the woman who lived disguised as a man and rose to become Pope of the Church in the ninth century.

Q: Does the Catholic Church officially recognize Joan's papacy?

A: Far from it. The Church position is that Joan's papacy is nothing more than unsubstantiated legend. But there are more than five hundred ancient manuscripts containing accounts of Joan's papacy, including those of such acclaimed authors as Platina, Petrarch, and Boccaccio.

Q: So you're convinced that Joan really existed?

A: Given the obscurity and confusion of the times, it is impossible to determine with certainty whether Joan existed or not. The truth of what happened in a.d. 855 may never be fully known. That is why I chose to write a novel and not a historical study.

Q: How important is it to the reader of your novel to know whether Joan existed or not?

A: Whether you believe the **Pope Joan** story to be myth or reality really doesn't matter. Her story was the best known of the middle ages, dwarfing even the legend of King Arthur. In fact, there's a lot less evidence for the existence of Arthur than there is for the existence of Joan, yet King Arthur's story is known to every school child. It has much to tell us about medieval society, the role of men and women in that era, the responsibilities of knights, the history of Celtic Britain, and much more. Joan's story is equally rich, and has as much to tell us about medieval life, the role of women in the ninth century, the Church, and so on. Like the story of King Arthur, it should be the heritage of every school child. I wrote this book to restore that lost heritage.

Q: If Joan's papacy is so well documented, why is the subject so controversial?

A: The Church position on Joan is that she was a late invention of Protestant reformers eager to expose papist corruption. Yet Joan's story is first documented hundreds of years before

Martin Luther was born--and most of her chroniclers were Catholics, often highly placed in the church hierarchy. In 1276, after ordering a thorough search of the papal records, Pope John XX changed his title to John XXI in official recognition of Joan's reign as Pope John VIII. Joan's statue stood undisputed alongside those of the other Popes in the Cathedral of Sienna until 1601, when, by command of Pope Clement VIII, it suddenly "metamorphosed" into a bust of Pope Zacharias. Joan's story was included in the official church guidebook to Rome used by pilgrims for more than three hundred years.

Q: But isn't it true there is no record of Joan in any contemporary chronicles?

A: Yes, that's true. But that's scarcely surprising, given the time and energy that the Church has, by its own admission, devoted to expunging her from them. The fact that Joan lived in the ninth century, the darkest of the dark ages, would have made the job obliterating her papacy easy. The ninth century was a time of widespread illiteracy, marked by an extraordinary dearth of record keeping. One need only look to the recent examples of Nicaragua and El Salvador to see how a determined and well-coordinated state effort can make embarrassing evidence "disappear." It is only after the distancing effect of time that the truth, kept alive by unquenchable popular report, gradually begins to emerge.

Q: Are you saying there was a deliberate attempt to conceal Joan's papacy?

A: Certainly the Roman clergymen of the day, appalled by the great deception visited upon them, would have gone to great lengths to bury all written report of the embarrassing episode. Indeed, they would have felt it their duty to do so. Hincmar, Joan's contemporary, frequently suppressed information damaging to the Church in his letters. Even the great theologian Alcuin was not above tampering with the truth; in one of his letters he openly admits destroying a report on Pope Leo III's adultery and simony. The absence of contemporary documentation is not proof that Joan did not exist. After all, there is no contemporary record of Jesus Christ (the first of the Gospels, that of St. Mark, was written more than forty years after Jesus' death), yet he is considered by most people to be a real historical figure.

Q: How would it have been possible for a woman to pass herself off as a man for so long and under such circumstances?

A: Actually, given the extreme modesty and spare hygiene of the times (most people slept in their clothes and rarely, if ever, bathed) as well as the protection provided by body-disguising

clerical robes, it would not have been difficult. There are many examples of women who successfully managed such an imposture. In the twelfth century, St. Hildegund, using the name Joseph, became a brother of Schönau Abbey; Mary Reade lived as a pirate in the early eighteenth century; Loreta Janeta Velasquez fought for the Confederacy at the Battle of Bull Run under the name Harry Buford. Most recently, Teresinha Gomez of Lisbon spent eighteen years pretending to be a man; a highly decorated soldier, she rose to the rank of general in the Portuguese army and was discovered only in 1994, when she was arrested on charges of financial fraud and forced by the police to undergo a physical exam.

Q: As your novel makes clear, there was considerable hazard in such an imposture. What would drive a woman to take such a risk?

A: Life in the ninth century was especially difficult for women. It was a very misogynistic age. Menstrual blood was believed to turn wine sour, make crops barren, take the edge off steel, make iron rust, and infect dog bites with an incurable poison. With few exceptions, women were treated as perpetual minors, with no legal or property rights. By law, they could be beaten by their husbands. Rape was treated as a form of minor theft. The education of women was discouraged, for a learned woman was considered not only unnatural, but dangerous. The size of a woman's brain and her uterus were believed to be inversely proportionate; the more a woman learned, the less likely she would ever bear children. Small wonder, then, if a woman chose to disguise herself as a man in order to escape so restricted an existence. The light of hope kindled by women such as Joan shone only flickeringly in a great darkness, but it was never entirely to go out. Opportunities were available for women strong enough to dream. **Pope Joan** is the story of one of those dreamers.

Q: What's the greatest challenge of writing historical fiction?

A: Striking a balance that allows you to add interesting detail without weighing down the story. I researched this book for many years and ended up with a ton of information. A lot of it was interesting, but it was also a digression and I had to cut it down tremendously. Writers of historical fiction walk a delicate tight-rope. You need enough information to provide a sense of reality, time, and place, but not so much as to bring your narrative to a crashing halt. Writing good historical fiction takes a lot of discipline.

Q: What do you consider the most important element of good historical fiction?

A: Many people think the most important things are plot, theme, and character. But I found point of view even more important. The tone for the scene is determined by the point of the view of the person describing that scene. If you look at the structure of this book, you'll see that the story is told from the point of view of three main characters: Joan, Gerold, and Anastasius. This allowed me to paint a broader canvas than I could have if limited to only one point of view. Narrating a scene through Gerold's eyes helped me to show what it was like to be a knight in the ninth century; Anastasius showed what it was like to be a Roman citizen, familiar with the papal politics of that era; and of course Joan provided her own unique woman's perspective.

Q: What do you think will most surprise readers of this book?

A: The big surprise is that this story has so solid a base of historical record behind it. Despite the book's unexpected success, I still run into people who say, "What do you mean there was a female Pope?" That's what's amazing to me. Here's a story that was universally known for hundreds of years and yet it has been all but extinguished. When people get to the end of the book and read the author's note--where I lay out, in detail, the evidence suggesting Joan was real--they realize this story might actually be fact, not fiction.

Q: Some authors say they find writing very easy. Is writing easy for you?

A: It's hard as hell. I want to hit people who say they've never had writer's block. Of course there are times when it all comes together, but I've also written from despair--thinking it's hopeless and will never come together. The trick is to keep on writing through the despair and trust that things will improve. Someone once said, "A professional writer is an amateur that didn't give up." I don't give up. I believe that writing is ninety-nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration, but for inspiration to hit you have to be at your desk writing, whether or not you're in the mood.

Q: What do you want readers to get out of this book?

A: I want readers--particularly women--to understand one basic truth: to empower yourself in this world you must learn. Joan armed herself with the power of knowledge. This knowledge allowed her to rise to the very highest rank of the most powerful institution of her day. Even today, in countries such as Iran, Afghanistan, Algeria, the first privilege that is taken away from a subservient group such as women is the right to education. The story of Joan speaks to

this situation. Joan represents the empowerment of women, the realization of their full potential, by using all their talents--especially the mind.

Discussion Questions

- 1.** How important is it to this story to believe in its historicity? Are there lessons to be learned from Joan's story whether it's legend or fact? What are they?
- 2.** Francis Bacon, the seventeenth-century philosopher, said, "People believe what they prefer to be true." How does this relate to Joan's story compared to, say, that of King Arthur? What is it about Joan's story that people might not "prefer to be true"?
- 3.** Are reason and faith incompatible? What do you make of Aesculapius's argument that *lack* of faith leads people to fear reason? What about Joan? Does her study of reason in the work of classical authors such as Lucretius diminish her faith?
- 4.** Joan sacrificed much because she loved Gerold. Do you know women who have sacrificed opportunities to exercise mind, heart, and spirit for love of a man? For love of a child? Are such sacrifices justified?
- 5.** What implications does Joan's story have with regard to the role of women in the Catholic Church? Should nuns play a greater --- or different --- role? If so, what should that role be? Should women be priests? What effect would women priests have on the Church and its liturgy? What effect have they had on the Episcopal Church?
- 6.** One reviewer wrote: "Pope Joan... is a reminder that some things never change, only the stage and the players do." Are there any similarities between the way women live in some places of the world today and the way they lived back then?
- 7.** What causes any society to oppress womankind? What are the root causes of misogyny? Are they based in religion or in society? Both? Neither?
- 8.** Why might medieval society have believed so strongly that education hampered a woman's ability to bear children? What purpose might such a belief serve?
- 9.** What similarities or differences do you see between Pope Joan and Saint Joan of Arc? Why was one Joan expunged from history books and the other made a saint?
- 10.** If Joan had agreed to leave with Gerold when he first came to Rome, what would her life have been like? Did she make the right choice or not?
- 11.** What causes Joan's inner conflict between faith and doubt? How do these conflicts affect the decisions she makes? Does she ever resolve these conflicts?

Questions from LitLovers.com

1. Donna Woolfolk Cross wrote the story of *Pope Joan* as a work of fiction. Do you think there really was a Pope Joan?
2. How important is it that Pope Joan actually existed? Are there lessons to be learned from this story whether it's true or not? What do you think those lessons are?
3. One reviewer said, "After finishing Donna Cross' novelization of Joan's life, one may want her to be a real person, only because it is so gratifying to read about those rare heroes whose strength of vision enables them to ignore the almost overpowering messages of their own historical periods." In contrast, a professor of history said, "I think we shouldn't even think about [Pope Joan] at all. It's bunk." Referring to Joan's pregnancy, the professor also said, "The whole point of the story is 'If you let a woman in as pope, she'll goof up.' The story was invented for the purpose of saying, 'Women can't be trusted.'" Which interpretation do you agree with? Why?
4. Many priests and nuns, in recent years, have urged the Vatican to ease restrictions on how far women may advance in the Church hierarchy. Women, they say, should be allowed to be ordained as priests. What are the implications of Pope Joan's story with regard to the limitations placed on women by the Church?
5. One reviewer wrote, "*Pope Joan*—is a reminder that some things never change, only the stage and the players do." Although the position of women in society has changed dramatically since the middle ages, do you feel there are similarities between the way women live in various societies today and the way they lived in society then?
6. According to the author, Joan's story was universally known and accepted until the seventeenth century. Why do you think that changed?
7. Why do you think medieval society considered it unnatural and a sin for women to educate themselves or be educated?
8. Why might medieval society have believed so strongly that education hampered a woman's ability to bear children? What purpose might that belief have served?
9. One reviewer wrote, "Joan's ascendancy might not have been unusual in political spheres—many females in ancient and medieval times attained absolute or shared power. Joan earned disapproval because her intelligence and competence challenged prevailing male opinion that women lacked the ability for scholarly or clerical pursuits." Were there other females of ancient or medieval times who challenged this prevailing opinion? Do their stories give you insight into Joan's?

10. What other strong female characters have you encountered in books? What are the similarities and differences between those characters and Joan?
11. Did Joan make the right choice at that moment when she decided to disguise herself as her dead brother following the Viking attack? What would her life have been like had she chosen differently?
12. What do we learn about medieval medicine, and the logic of the learned medieval mind, in *Pope Joan*?
13. What happens to Joan when she tries to improve the lives of women and the poor? Why do you think Church and civic leaders were so resistant to such improvements?
14. Discuss the inner conflicts Joan faces—between the pagan beliefs taught by her mother and the Christian beliefs she learns from religious instructors; between her mind and her heart; between faith and doubt. How do these conflicts affect the decisions she makes? Does she ever truly resolve those inner conflicts?
15. Do you think Joan's secret would ever have been discovered had she not miscarried during the Papal procession or had she not become pregnant?
16. According to one reviewer, "Joan has the kind of vices—stubbornness and outspokenness, for example—that turn out to be virtues." Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?

For Further Reading (from Novelist online)

Anita Diamant *The Red Tent*

Margaret Drabble *The Red Queen*

Marie Jakober, *The Black Chalice* (2002)

Julia Alvarez, *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994)

Graham Greene, *The Power and the Glory* (1940)

Louise Erdrich, *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001)

Kate Horsley, *Confessions of a Pagan Nun* (2001)

(From Library Thing readalikes for Pope Joan)

The Physician by Noah Gordon

The Many Lives & Secret Sorrows of Josephine B. by Sandra Gulland

Year of Wonders: A Novel of the Plague by Geraldine Brooks

The Birth of Venus by Sarah Dunant

The Borgia Bride by Jeanne Kalogridis

.The Other Boleyn Girl by Philippa Gregory

The Pillars of The Earth by Ken Follett

Pope Joan Lawrence Durrell

The Legend of Pope Joan Joan Stanford