



Pope Joan: A Novel

By Donna Woolfolk Cross

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"Pope Joan has all the elements one wants in a historical drama – love, sex, violence, duplicity, and long-buried secrets. Cross has written an engaging book." –*Los Angeles Times Book Review*

In this international bestseller, Donna Woolfolk Cross brings the Dark Ages to life in all their brutal splendor and shares the dramatic story of a woman whose strength of vision led her to defy the social restrictions of her day.

For a thousand years her existence has been denied. She is the legend that will not die — Pope Joan, the ninth-century woman who disguised herself as a man and rose to become the only female ever to sit on the throne of St. Peter. Now in this riveting novel, Cross paints a sweeping portrait of an unforgettable heroine who struggles against restrictions her soul cannot accept.

Brilliant and talented, young Joan rebels against medieval social strictures forbidding women to learn. When her brother is brutally killed during a Viking attack, Joan takes up his cloak—and his identity—and enters the monastery of Fulda. 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. Triumphing over appalling odds, she finally attains the highest office in Christendom—wielding a power greater than any woman before or since. But such power always comes at a price . . .

"Brings the savage ninth century vividly to life in all its alien richness. An enthralling, scholarly historical novel."

--Rebecca Fraser, Author of *The Brontës*

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

One of the most controversial women of history is brought to brilliant life in Donna Woolfolk Cross's tale of Pope Joan, a girl whose origins should have kept her in squalid domesticity. Instead, through her intelligence, indomitability and courage, she ascended to the throne of Rome as Pope John Anglicus.

The time is 814, the place is Ingelheim, a Frankland village. It is the harshest winter in living memory when Joan is born to an English father and a Saxon mother. Her father is a canon, filled with holy zeal and capable of unconscionable cruelty. His piety does not extend to his family members, especially the females. His wife, Gudrun, is a young beauty to whom he was attracted beyond his will--and he hates her for showing him his weakness. Gudrun teaches Joan about her gods, and is repeatedly punished for it by the canon. Joan grows to young womanhood with the combined knowledge of the warlike Saxon gods and the teachings of the Church as her heritage. Both realities inform her life forever.

When her brother John, not a scholarly type, is sent away to school, Joan, who was supposed to be the one sent to school, runs away and joins him in Dorstadt, at Villaris, the home of Gerold, who is central to Joan's story. She falls in love with Gerold and their lives intersect repeatedly even through her Papacy. She is looked upon by all who know that she is a woman as a "lusus naturae," a freak of nature. "She was... male in intellect, female in body, she fit in nowhere; it was as if she belonged to a third amorphous sex." Cross makes the case over and over again that the status of women in the Dark Ages was little better than cattle. They were judged inferior in every way, and necessary evils in the bargain.

After John is killed in a Viking attack, Joan sees her opportunity to escape the fate of all her gender. She cuts her hair, dons her dead brother's clothes and goes into the world as a young boy. Gerold is away from Villaris at the time of the attack and comes home to find his home in ruins, his family killed and Joan among the missing. After the attack, Joan goes to a Benedictine monastery, is accepted as a young man of great learning, and eventually makes her way to Rome.

The author is at pains to tell the reader in an Epilogue that she has written the story as fiction because it is impossible to document Joan's accession to the Papacy. The Catholic Church has done everything possible to deny this embarrassment. Whether or not one believes in Joan as Pope, this is a compelling story, filled with all kinds of lore: the brutishness of the Dark Ages, Vatican intrigue, politics and favoritism and most of all, the place of women in the Church and in the world. --Valerie Ryan

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, and her education is furthered by a Greek scholar who instructs her in languages and the classics. Her mother, however, sings her the songs of her pagan gods, creating a dichotomy within her daughter that will last throughout her life. The Greek scholar arranges for the continuation of her education at the palace school of the Lord Bishop of Dorstadt, where she meets the red-haired knight Gerold, who is to become the love of her life. After a savage attack by Norsemen destroys the village, Joan adopts the identity of her older brother, slain in the raid, and makes her way to Fulda, to become the learned scholar and healer Brother John Anglicus. After surviving the plague, Joan goes to Rome, where her wisdom and medical skills gain her entrance into papal circles. 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.

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From School Library Journal

YA-A woman pope? The author's notes document the possibility that there was one for a brief time in the ninth century. The Joan in this novel has all the qualities a woman would need to become pope: superior intelligence, imagination, daring, and the determination that her sex would not keep her illiterate and subservient, as were most women of the period. Joan is an apt pupil at the cathedral school, where she is allowed to study only because her brother cannot master Latin. A Viking raid on her wedding day gives Joan the opportunity to escape an unwanted marriage; she takes her dead brother's clothes, presents herself at a nearby monastery, and becomes Brother John Anglicus. Her skill in healing and her passion for learning attract attention, and she fears discovery. Still disguised as a monk, Joan takes the pilgrim's road to Rome, where her skills as a healer attract the attention of the Pope himself. YAs, especially girls, will follow the adventures of this amazing heroine with fascination, and at the same time will learn much about life in the Middle Ages, and about the history of this tumultuous period just after the death of Charlemagne.

Molly Connally, Kings Park Library, Fairfax County, VA

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Barbara Cook:

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