

THE MISSING ITALIAN GIRL

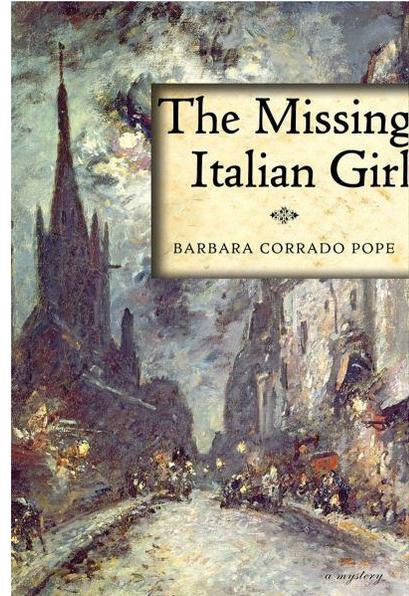
A Mystery in Paris

By Barbara Corrado Pope

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

1. Each of your Martin novels is set in a different city. Why?

The simple answer is because when I begin to think about a novel, theme and some shadowy notion of plot come before place in my imagination. Aix-en-Provence was the natural home of *Cézanne's Quarry*, because Cézanne lived there. The themes of *The Blood of Lorraine* were anti-Semitism and Jewish identity, so I had to locate my characters in a city with a strong and traditional Jewish population. Given my background in women's history, I *thought* the women's movement would be a natural for number three. Paris was its epicenter in France. And, as many of friends said, it was very clever of me to set a novel in Paris and actually have to go there!



2. Yet in reading your novels, the setting and atmosphere seem crucial.

Indeed they are. Once I am in a place, all kinds of possibilities open up—setting the mood, catalyzing the plot, inhabiting the characters. That's why I have to spend some time in each of the places where my novels are set. The Jewish cemetery scene (one of my favorites in *The Blood of Lorraine*) would not have been possible without taking the long walk to and through the graveyard. The Gas Company, which I discovered while living on the rue du Faubourg Poissonnière, became an important plot device in *The Missing Italian Girl*. These are simple, obvious examples. The ways place sets the mood and inhabits the characters emerge in the process of writing.

3. Most modern novels about Belle Epoque include famous events like the World's Fair and the building of the Eiffel Tower. *The Missing Italian Girl* does not. How did you choose which parts of Paris to feature in your novel?

I began with Clarie's school. I choose the Lycée Lamartine which served a mixed bourgeois rather than elite population. Then we were lucky enough to find an apartment on the same street, and I began to treat the neighborhood like a village, getting to know its nooks and crannies until, in some sense, it was mine. This was Clarie's Paris. A neighborhood is the Paris that most Parisians would have known. Of course, Paris has changed immensely in over 100 years, so I also used old photographs and a lot of historical material to take me back to 1897. My big problems arose when I was back in Oregon writing and Maura started moving around in Paris. I scrambled to re-learn all those sites, which had been less fixed in my mind.

4. You said before that you had planned to make the women’s movement the focus of *The Missing Italian Girl*. What changed your mind?

No viable plot emerged. It turned out that the most dramatic actors in the movement emerged after this period. I certainly (being trained as an historian) wanted to be true to the times. The movement is alluded to, as is the upcoming Dreyfus affair. I did succeed, however, in another goal: making this a women’s novel, changing the focus from Bernard Martin as the judge-investigator to his wife Clarie and the “missing Italian girl,” Maura.

5. Why did you decide to make this shift, from male to female protagonist?

First, to make sure I could do it! But also because many readers wanted to see Clarie “recover” from the tragedy of the second novel. In a way, this is the story of her recovery. As in all of my books, social class plays a big role. Here Maura Laurenzano represents the plight of the immigrant working class.

6. Didn’t you find it easier to “identify” with Clarie than with Bernard Martin?

Both have qualities that I identify with. For both, doing the right thing, having a moral compass, is the most important component of their decisions in life. Both were upwardly mobile as well as geographically mobile, often feeling themselves to be “strangers in a strange land.” My brother and I were the first on both sides of our family to go to college, and I became a professor. I know the confluence of feelings that mobility arouses: taking pride in one’s accomplishment while at the same time not feeling that you really fit in. What Clarie brought to the story this time, is her fear that she had lost something in the process of rising to a professorship and marrying. Her recovery involved recapturing her younger, braver self. I think many people share the fear that we’ve lost something of who we once were.

7. What about Maura, the other female protagonist? Did you identify with her?

That was easy and fun! As soon as she emerged in the third re-writing of the opening chapter, I began to channel my rebellious, scared, thoughtless, day-dreaming, vulnerable adolescent self.

8. Why did you decide to make anarchism part of the novel?

Anarchism was a very important movement at this time in France. Contrary to what many people believe today, there are many brands of anarchism. The novel presents a few of these. Non-French readers may be surprised that anarchists (or so-called anarcho-syndicalists) were the catalysts for building a strong labor union movement in France. The anarchist-as-terrorist is seen in the backstory, and the anarchist-as-idealist is represented by the young Russian Pyotr. I even thought of calling the novel *Requiem for an Anarchist*, which struck me as rather poetic (and is what one character calls Maura’s song), but in the end I opted for “truth in advertising” with *The Missing Italian Girl*. I hope for some reader this title will have a double meaning, for Clarie Falchetti Martin’s search for her younger self is also a quest to find her own Missing Italian Girl.

9. Is this the last Martin mystery?

When I started it, I assumed it would be. I resolved many issues between Clarie and Martin. On the other hand I created Maura, who could become a militant feminist and an active witness to the First World War.

Advance Praise for THE MISSING ITALIAN GIRL

“The musings of Clarie about the wrenching inequity between the pampered women she teaches and those she and Bernard search for in back alleys gives us a window into this glamorous yet perilous time.

Engrossing.”

—*Booklist*

“An unlikely sleuth is drawn into another murder mystery in turn-of-the-century France...Pope's third mystery featuring Clarie (The Blood of Lorraine, 2010, etc.) expertly doles out pieces of its complex plot, a picaresque puzzle with satisfying period flavor.”

—*Kirkus*

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