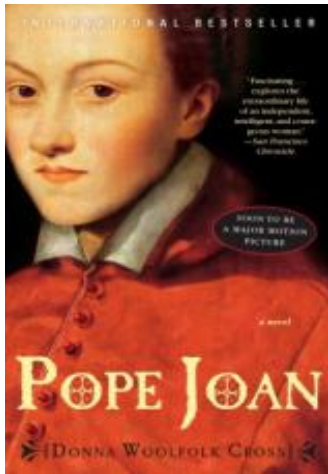


Pope Joan

by Donna Woolfolk Cross



About the Book

For a thousand years men have denied her existence--Pope Joan, the woman who disguised herself as a man and rose to rule Christianity for two years. Now this compelling novel animates the legend with a portrait of an unforgettable woman who struggles against restrictions her soul cannot accept.

When her older brother dies in a Viking attack, the brilliant young Joan assumes his identity and enters a Benedictine monastery where, as Brother John Anglicus, she distinguishes herself as a scholar and healer. Eventually drawn to Rome, she soon becomes enmeshed in a dangerous mix of powerful passion and explosive politics that threatens her life even as it elevates her to the highest throne in the Western world.

Discussion Guide

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?

Author Bio

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 to Syracuse, New York, with her husband and began teaching in the English department at an upstate New York college. She is the author of two books on language, **Word Abuse** and **Mediaspeak**, and coauthor of **Speaking of Words**. The product of seven years of research and writing, **Pope Joan** is her first novel. Cross is at work on a new novel set in 17th century France.

Critical Praise

"A page-turner!"

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