



Pope Joan

Donna Woolfolk Cross

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A world-wide bestseller, major motion picture and upcoming "Director's Cut" TV mini-series exclusively for the U.S!

"*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

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, Donna Woolfolk 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 . . .

In this international bestseller, 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.

Pope Joan Details

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Author : Donna Woolfolk Cross

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From Reader Review Pope Joan for online ebook

Gerilyn says

I was so torn while reading this book. It was decent writing, the characters were strong--but there were a few problems for me. Everyone was a caricature with the exception of Joan. What I really hated, though, was how the author took a great possibility of a story and turned it into flaming feminist rhetoric. Every favorite feminist theme was there, from rape and abuse to abortion. Why can't smart girls sew and cook as well as dumb ones? And why isn't it OK to be dumb, for that matter, if you're a girl? The book showed with John (Joan's brother) that you can still be valiant and dumb. I found the love story completely crazy as well. It put Joan in the worst light; she was willing to sleep with the guy but not commit. Isn't that what our society deplores so much, but with men? I felt it was one of those books which seeks to take history and Oprah-ize it, put modern thoughts and feelings in characters from a real period in history. A dangerous game, if you ask me! I was disappointed because it was engaging and very descriptive. I have to admit that being a woman during the dark ages is always something I have shuddered to think about. I could go on, but you get the idea...remember, this is just my opinion!

Misfit says

Interesting take on the legend, but has some flaws. I think I'm going to be another one in the minority here. I found the idea of a woman disguised as a man seated on the papal throne to be an interesting legend and the author did a decent job with it. I appreciated the research the author took on the period and customs of the times, which is not an easy task as so much is unknown about the dark ages.

The problem I had is the incredible coincidences throughout the book where Joan is just saved in the nick of time in true soap opera fashion (think Days of Our Lives -- no better yet the Perils of Pauline) from disaster upon disaster to chance upon chance of being discovered as a woman, to the near escape from the Viking raid and more ad infinitum. It never stopped until the very end, there were so many times where you just want to roll your eyes and say give me a break!

All in all a light pleasant read, but not one I'm apt to write home to friends and family about nor one I will want to pick up and read again. I'd recommend getting it from the library first, and then buy it if you love it. JMHO.

Chrissie says

NO SPOILERS!!!

In conclusion, having completed this novel, having struggled through to the end, I can say I did not like it. I didn't like it from the start to the end. When I voice this opinion, I am obviously in the minority. I do appreciate that the author concluded with an informative author's note, which supports her belief that Pope Joan did exist, between the acknowledged Pope Leo IV and Pope Benedict III. I found her arguments undeniably convincing. I do not know whether Pope Joan existed or not, but I find the author's points valid. Before I can say Pope Joan didn't exist, I would need to have several questions answered.

However whether Pope Joan existed or not is irrelevant to how I judge this book. I did not like how the story was told. The characters were two-dimensional. There were the good guys and the bad guys. I vehemently disliked the cinematic tone characteristic of the entire novel. It was ridiculously romantic and melodramatic. Rarely do I so dislike a book. I have said enough. Below you will see what has annoyed me as I read through the book. I do not need to repeat these criticisms. It is not the description of the era and the historical events that I am complaining about. I am complaining about how the story was told. I would not choose to read another book by this author, but she doesn't need me since many others adore her writing.

Through page 204: I have read further. One aspect of the book that I think the author handles well is the description of the era - the religious beliefs, historical events, soothsayers, celebration of feast and market gatherings. What I am enjoying is the author's descriptive abilities, her description of the time and place. The struggles between the Saxons, Franks and Norsemen and between pagan and early Christian beliefs are included in the story. This I appreciate, but even here the depiction is rather cinematic. The reader cannot help but grasp the trends of the era.

Through page 148: Maybe my mood is off, but I find Pope Joan disappointing. I find the characters simplistic and feminism emphasized to an extreme. It also feels like a romance novel. And Luke, he is a wolf for heaven's sake. A wolf cub will not behave as he is portrayed in this novel. It is too cute. John(Joan's brother) is too stupid and jealous and bad, while Joan is so smart and forgiving and brave. You can stack the characters in two groups - the good guys or the bad guys.

Here is an excerpt about the white wolf cub, Luke. You judge. Isn't this meant for the movies?

She looked at Luke. "Will it work, Luke? Will it be enough to save me?"

He tilted his head inquisitively, as if trying to understand. It was a mannerism that always amused Gerold. Joan hugged the white wolf, burying her face in the thick fur ringing his neck. (page 142)

A movie has been made. Perfect!

Maybe it will improve. I do not give up easily. Oh, I have had bad luck lately. This will be my third "not so hot" book in a row.

Through page 98: I know this is a minor quibble but it is irritating. How can one put a cover on a book that completely missrepresents the person's appearance? In the book Joan has practically white-blonde hair, deep set eyes of a grey-green color and a thick fringe of eyelashes. Look at the cover on my book! How can you put this cover on this book?

It is a fun read, but I feel the primary message is feminist. On every page you are confronted with how horribly and unjustly women are treated. I **know** this is an accurate description of the times, but the message doesn't have to be pounded into our skulls.

So far the characters are rather simplistic. Joan is so curious and intelligent. John, her older brother is **so** unscholarly. Joan's father is such a misguided religious fanatic and her Mom, such a "Mom", loving her child deeply but also rather selfishly. I planned to just read this for fun. Stop being so critical, Chrissie!

Maybe I should read *Mistress of the Vatican: The True Story of Olimpia Maidalchini: The Secret Female Pope* next.

Ana T. says

Pope Joan is a figure I was aware of but knew next to nothing about, her existence is surrounded by mystery and so she seems the ideal figure to write a historical fiction novel about. Author Donna Woolfolk Cross writes an interesting tale about what could have been a young girl's life in that time.

Daughter of a canon who values women little and definitely finds them unworthy of an education her Joan has to struggle from early on to pursue her studies. Luckily she finds a monk willing to help her learn and who eventually will lead to her being accepted at a school. Much brighter and intelligent than her brother, Joan stands out as a student and eventually develops an attachment to Gerolt, the nobleman in whose house she leaves in. But Gerolt leaves and the village is attacked by Norsemen.

To survive Joan disguises herself as her dead brother and becomes John. As a man she is more easily accepted and continues her studies at the Fulda monastery and later travels to Rome where she is known as a dedicated scholar and a celebrated healer. Her fame is such that she is called to attend the Pope and so enters the Vatican's sphere of influence. There she will understand the politics behind the scenes and she will meet Gerolt again.

The story is very easy to read and proceeds at good pace. However I did feel that Joan, as a character, was a bit too perfect to be totally believable. Not only that but some things seem to happen too easily or too coincidentally. I suppose I would have liked to see more of her thought process and she having to work more to get where she ended up. She does have some painful decisions to make regarding her relationship with Gerolt but everything else seemed to fall into place quite easily. I did enjoy learning about the politics behind the throne, the same as in every other kingdom, and was surprised to learn about the power of the people in the election of the Pope.

History is full of possibilities and this was certainly an intriguing story that kept me interested till the end. Thank you so much to the author for sending me the book.

Grade: 4/5

Sammy says

Before I started reading this book I gave a brief summary to some of my friends who saw that I had just bought it and were wondering about it. That got us into a heated discussion about how completely outrageous it is for a woman to dress up as a man. How it's pretty much impossible to get away with it seeing as you'll always end up in some sort of situation where you have to reveal yourself for what you really are.

That discussion ended up shading me slightly when I began to read, thinking, "Really? How is she going to be able to pull it off?" speaking of both the author and Joan herself. But both were able to pull it off quite well and realistically.

Not to be sexist, I don't know how much a guy would really enjoy this book, but I hope he would. I would hope that he would actually pick up and read this book, because if you look past all the religious controversy of a woman being Pope, there is an underlying story of the beginning of feminism and a woman standing up for herself and pursuing her own dreams and desires despite everything that goes against her. I would hope that a man would read this and realize that every woman has this potential and we are truly equal to men.

Pope Joan, or at least the character of her in this book, is truly an inspiration to women everywhere. She defied the odds and did everything she could to get what she wanted. And apparently, if you want to bring in a religious aspect to this as well, God wanted this all for her too, or else things would not have worked out the way they did with narrow escapes and fortunate meetings.

I honestly don't have much to criticize with this book. I enjoyed it a lot and reading the author's notes at the end piqued my interest about this supposedly "fictional" character. There is something in this book that will grab you, I guarantee it. Be it the historical facts and events that were traced, be it the slight tale of romance hiding inside the bigger story, maybe it's Joan herself and her pursuit of knowledge, maybe it's the outrageous way women were treated. There will be something in this book for you, I'm sure. Overall, I highly recommend this book.

Silver says

All in all I would say this book was an enjoyable read and there were some things about it which I found to be interesting. I did like the way in which this book explored the lives of women living in this time period and particularly explored the challenges and struggles of those women who did want to break the mold and wanted more for their lives than what was expected of them and what was allowed to them.

But there were some issues I had with the book.

One of my biggest complaints about the book is characterization. I felt the characters really lacked complexity and depth and were not very well developed. Most of the characters throughout the book are pigeonholed as either obvious good guys or obvious bad guys. They are all very black and white and one dimensional. Joan herself presented a rather frustrating character, for one thing it did not seem as if she ever really grew or developed as the story continued but from the start to the end she remained the same never matured or seem to learn from any of her experiences and so she always acted the same she did as a child in spite of her alleged wisdom and intelligence.

The other thing which bothered me was that while it seemed that the author was trying to portray Joan as being divinely chosen for her role as Pope in which throughout the book some miraculously event would always occur just in time to assist and save Joan from impending disector. While there is no denying that Joan was gifted and uncommonly intelligent the author made it seem more as if Joan became Pope through sheer luck and not because of her own accomplishments and abilities. Joan's lack of common sense, lack of ambition made her come off as not truly having been able to achieve her goals in life through her own cleverness and ability but it was always some outside force that intervened and pushed her forward in life, and without these many convenient acts of chance Joan would not have been able to achieve such

accomplishment. In this way the author does detract from remarkable person Joan was supposed to be for in spite of trying to create a portrait of a strong woman it did make her seem almost passive in directing her own fate.

melmarijan says

Quis, quid, quomondo, ubi, quando, cur?

Quis — siapa?

Namanya Joan. Dilahirkan tahun 814 Masehi di Ingelheim (sekarang di wilayah Jerman). Putri satu-satunya seorang kanon (semacam pendeta atau imam) dari Inggris dan istrinya yang orang Saxon. Punya dua kakak laki-laki, Matthew dan John. Dari kecil sudah menampakkan kecerdasan dan keingintahuan yang luar biasa. Joan menderita siksaan fisik dari ayahnya gara-gara hal itu, tapi toh ia tidak mau berhenti belajar.

Quid — apa?

Perjuangan Joan, yang dengan karunia kecerdasan yang dimilikinya, menolak kenyataan yang terjadi pada masa itu bahwa perempuan tidak diperbolehkan untuk membaca dan menulis, apalagi belajar dan menguasai berbagai ilmu sebagaimana kaum laki-laki. Ditengah-tengah busuknya politik Kepausan Katolik Roma, ancaman Kaisar Lothar dari kerajaan Frank, ancaman wabah yang merajalela, dan juga serangan bangsa Viking, Joan menapaki langkah demi langkah menuju tahta tertinggi dalam Katolik Roma – Paus.

Quomondo – bagaimana?

Di satu titik Joan membuat suatu keputusan besar yang mengubah seluruh hidupnya – ia menyamar sebagai seorang laki-laki, sehingga ia bisa mempelajari banyak hal – sesuatu yang mustahil dilakukan seorang perempuan pada abad kesembilan. Keteguhannya untuk terus menjalani hidup sebagai laki-laki hampir tergoyahkan ketika ia jatuh cinta pada Gerold, seorang count yang menjadi ayah angkatnya di Dorstadt. Namun toh Joan tetap teguh melakukan apa yang menjadi hasratnya sampai nafasnya yang terakhir.

Ubi – Di mana?

Mengawali dengan bersekolah di Dorstadt oleh rujukan dari guru pertamanya, Aesculapius, seorang Yunani. Setelah lolos dari serangan brutal bangsa Viking di Dorstadt, Joan melarikan diri ke pertapaan di Fulda di mana ia menyamar sebagai laki-laki untuk pertama kalinya. Kemudian, setelah menghabiskan bertahun-tahun di Fulda, sebuah wabah demam nyaris membongkar penyamarannya sehingga ia kabur, dan akhirnya pergi ke Roma, menjadi tabib pribadi Paus Sergius, dan pada waktunya—ia sendiri yang diangkat menjadi Paus.

Quando – kapan?

Keseluruhan kisah berlangsung pada tahun 814 hingga 855 Masehi, yang termasuk dalam era Abad Kegelapan. Joan memerintah sebagai Paus pada tahun 853 hingga 855. Setelah Joan meninggal, Katolik Roma dibawah tulisan Anastasius menghapuskannya dari Liber pontificalis, yaitu kronik resmi seluruh Paus yang pernah ada. Empat puluh tahun setelah kematiannya, Uskup Agung Arnaldo menyalin Liber pontificalis dan menambahkan bab mengenai Joan ke dalamnya, sehingga kebenaran tidak sepenuhnya hilang.

Cur – mengapa?

Mengapa Joan sampai memilih meninggalkan identitas keperempuanannya? Karena ia punya impian, dan hasratnya terhadap impian tersebut demikian besarnya sehingga pengorbanan demi pengorbanan yang ia lakukan dirasanya setimpal. Mengapa lalu ia bisa sampai di tahta tertinggi Katolik Roma? Karena Joan mampu. Karena perempuan mampu, karena perempuan bukanlah makhluk yang bodoh dan lemah. Karena perempuan sejajar dengan laki-laki.

Pope Joan adalah sebuah novel yang lengkap. Sejarah, politik, perjuangan perempuan, agama, perang, cinta, pengorbanan, kemunafikan, kebrutalan manusia; semua terkandung di dalamnya. Sang pengarang, Donna Woolfolk Cross, menghimpun kisah ini dengan apik, tokoh-tokohnya terasa nyata dan emosinya dapet. Apalagi dengan alur cepat yang tidak membuat bosan. Walau di beberapa bagian emang sadis sih, terutama pas serangan bangsa Viking itu. Pope Joan versi film (2009) kurang mengesankan walaupun dari segi cast secara fisik sudah pas, setting juga bagus, tapi emosinya kurang terasa.

Salut untuk pengarang yang menyelesaikan penulisan Pope Joan setelah melakukan riset selama tujuh tahun. Salut juga untuk F.X. Dono Sunardi sang penerjemah, karena menerjemahkan karya ini sudah pasti bukan pekerjaan gampang. Puasss banget melahap lebih dari 700 halaman novel ini, karena wawasan bertambah banyak, terutama tentang sejarah, seluk-beluk kepausan di Katolik Roma, dan beberapa kalimat dalam bahasa Latin... Juga bagian Catatan dari Pengarang sungguh-sungguh membantu dalam memahami kisah.

Saran saya bagi penerbit yang hendak menerbitkan novel serupa: akan lebih nyaman kalau ada glossary di bagian belakang buku, terutama sih tentang berbagai istilah dan jabatan keagamaan yang tidak familiar bagi saya sehingga membuat saya jadi cukup bingung. Kalau sebatas catatan kaki, kan, kalau ketemu lagi dengan kata "X", saya sudah lupa catatannya ada di halaman berapa, hehehe.

Jadi, apakah Paus Joan pernah ada? Setelah membaca buku ini rasanya saya percaya kalau beliau benar-benar pernah ada. Bagaimanapun, kisahnya menginspirasi para perempuan (dan juga laki-laki) untuk tidak menyerah dan berani berkorban dalam berusaha mencapai impian.

Go for it, no matter what it takes! Empat bintang bagi kisah perempuan hebat yang nyaris terlupakan ini.

Beberapa kutipan favorit:

"Jika ingin dapat bertahan di dunia ini, kau harus bersikap lebih sabar dengan mereka yang ada di atasmu." – hal. 179

"Sungguh aneh apa yang terjadi pada hati manusia. Orang dapat saja terus hidup selama bertahun-tahun, terbiasa kehilangan, serta berdamai dengannya, tetapi kemudian, dalam sekejap saja, rasa sakit itu muncul kembali bersama rasa pedih dan perih seperti luka yang

masih baru.” – hal. 495

“Kita akan tetap berdoa seakan-akan semuanya bergantung kepada Tuhan dan terus bekerja seolah-olah segalanya tergantung pada diri kita sendiri.” – hal. 573

“Terangnya harapan yang dipantikkan oleh para perempuan tersebut hanya serupa kelap-kelip cahaya kecil di samudra kegelapan, tetapi nyalanya tidak pernah sepenuhnya padam. Kesempatan selalu ada dan tersedia bagi kaum perempuan yang cukup kuat untuk bermimpi. Pope Joan adalah kisah dari salah satu pemimpi itu.” – hal. 732.

Catatan: *“Quis, quid, quomodo, ubi, quando, cur?”* tidak lain adalah 5W+1H (*Who, what, when, where, why, how*) yang konsep awalnya dirumuskan oleh filsuf Romawi Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 SM).

@melmarian
<http://surgabukuku.wordpress.com>

Powersamurai says

About the only female pope back in the 9th century. The Catholic Church today treats Pope Joan as legend created by the Protestants, but with over 500 documents to prove she did exist, it is but another bureaucratic cover-up.

A woman from Frankish lands with Saxon and English heritage in the 9th century going out there and doing it for herself. It is a thinking person's book. Lots of Latin in there, of course, because the language used in the church then was Latin. But don't let that stop you from reading it. You don't have to understand the Latin to follow what's going on. Cross uses words that are not commonly used now, e.g. basileus for king, throughout the book to put you in the story--not too much to put you off, but enough to make you stop and think. Great for keeping the grey matter active. Oh, and there is a love story in there, too. There are times that I think that 20th century thinking and attitudes tend to creep into the story but not enough to distract from it.

I picked this up at a book exchange a couple of years back, because I needed to pick one more book. I was in the mood, recently, to read something historical that I could immerse myself in. The story sucked me in from the very beginning--a very good sign. What more can I say, but this book was exactly what the doctor ordered. It is well-researched and well written. There are a few moments that seem contrived, but that's why it's called a _novel_. I still gave it a 5-star rating, though--excellent. An unexpected surprise to relieve my daily stress. Highly recommended.

Leslie says

Whenever you see a legend, you can be sure, if you go to the very bottom of things, that you will find history.

Vallet de Viriville

Joan Anglicus is a frustrated young girl. The brightest and most scholarly of all her siblings, she is often denied the chance to learn because of her sex. The Dark Ages were a time when women's brains were thought to be smaller than a man's and only needed for child bearing. Why teach a girl to read and write? Joan cannot accept this. She runs away with her older brother, and after he is killed in a Viking attack, she disguises herself and assumes his identity at a Benedictine monastery. As Brother John Anglicus, she is sought out for her great healing abilities and religious intellect, until eventually she is elevated to the highest throne in the world at the time, the papacy.

The story of Pope Joan, a woman who lived disguised as a man and rose to become pope of the Church in the ninth century, is one of the most fascinating in Western history, and one of the least known. Most that have heard of her regard her story as a legend contrived by Protestant reformers, or so the Catholic Church would have you believe, not at all based on facts. But as Viriville said, legend and history are often one in the same.

Even though much is not known of the Dark Ages, Woolfolk Cross has done her homework here. This book is well-researched and well-written. I was completely sucked in and had a hard time putting it down. I found the history fascinating. These troubled times were especially difficult for women - as they still are today in some countries. They had no property rights, no opportunity for education. They could be beaten and raped by their husbands at will. So it seems completely logical that a woman would chose to disguise herself as a man. She certainly wouldn't have been the only woman in history to do so.

So why deny she existed at all? Extreme mortification of course, that a woman could deceive so many. History provides many examples of the deliberate falsification of records to suit the masses. But what of the proof? What of the so-called chair exam, where each candidate was examined to prove his manhood as part of the medieval papal conservation ceremony for almost six centuries? What of the “shunned street” in Rome on which Joan reportedly “John Anglicus gave birth to a child...”

Even with these facts, given the confusion of the ninth century, it is impossible to know for sure if she existed. We may never know if there really was a Pope Joan. True or not, I sure had a good time reading about it though. An excellent book.

Sahar says

Donna Wolfolk cross

Manybooks says

Maybe I should NOT try to claim that I have actually and indeed finished reading Donna Woolfolk Cross' Pope Joan, as I have now tried to peruse this here novel a total of four times and not been able (or even in any way all that willing) to proceed past page 90 or so (always giving up in both despair and often even anger). However, and my sincere apologies to those of you who have actually loved Pope Joan (and there does seem to be quite a large number of fans), if I am unable to get past page 90 four times and counting, I do think that it is definitely the truth of the matter that I personally despise either the content or the author's writing style (or perhaps even a combination of both) to such an extent that I can and will only consider a one star ranking at best (and really, if I could, I would be giving even a lower score than one star to Pope Joan).

And with Pope Joan, MOST and actually, really ALL of my objections have indeed absolutely and utterly been with regard to the manner in which the plot is depicted and its narrational set-up, with the manner in which the story is written (is being told), in other words, my issues with Pope Joan are generally NOT with regard to the themes, the context, the information and details of the story, but with HOW Donna Woolfolk Cross has chosen to present, has chosen to pen her tale (for I personally do in no way either know or even dare make any comments as to whether a female pope perhaps did exist, as to whether there actually might have indeed been a historical, but for obvious reasons officially denied and suppressed by the Catholic Church Pope Joan, and truth be told, I actually did rather enjoy perusing the well researched and informative author's note and think that Donna Woolfolk Cross's assertions that there likely was indeed a bona fide Pope Joan do make quite a bit of common and also intellectual sense).

But my in many ways glowing appreciation of the author's research on the topic of Pope Joan (and how Donna Woolford Cross has organised and penned her supplemental notes) quite and utterly notwithstanding, what has definitely and yes ALWAYS defeated me and majorly annoyed me every time I have tried to unsuccessfully peruse Pope Joan is simply and utterly that the author's writing style and mode of expression are simply and utterly NOT AT ALL for me (and that at least in my opinion, Pope Joan reads like pure and unadulterated cinematic trash, with history, cultural descriptions, with all that would make a historical fiction novel of interest to and for me being drowned out by one-dimensional stock-like characters, and a textual wallowing in sex, violence and mystery). And while this might well make Pope Joan interesting and engaging to and for some readers, for me, it has only made me cringe, grind my teeth and with frustration and exasperation cast Pope Joan aside every time I have attempted a perusal (with the last time grudgingly trying again because certain family members were continuously pontificating about how wonderfully and expressively Donna Woolfolk Cross supposedly writes, and I kind of wanted to at least make a fourth effort, as my family already thinks I am a total and much too academic book nerd and snob).

Doug Bradshaw says

Going back into history in a good novel is almost always enjoyable. We cringe as we see how brutal life was with disease, no freedom, exacting religious leaders, hard for the poor to find food, the rich overindulged and sickening. Women are treated like slaves and their lives are there to serve their husbands. In this book, a very intelligent and likable girl attempts to find her way out of this life only to be kicked back by conservative religious leaders every step of the way. There is no place for an intelligent girl. She is merely a freak of

nature. So, she becomes a boy and then a man and moves quickly up the ladder in the Catholic Church. She is a healer, a brilliant debater, loves the people and through a series of quickly described events, is elected Pope.

The story is sometimes told well, but all too often, there are quick and easy solutions to problems that seem too easy and not well thought out. Once she became Pope, I was hoping she would be like Joseph and go back and find her family, her old enemies and her old friends and have a little fun with them. I was also hoping that she would somehow end up slipping out of the role of pope and find a life with her long time boyfriend and admirer. Why not let us have a good ending if the details of her life are really fiction? It would have been a much slicker and satisfying book.

So, we are left with a lugubrious ending to an interesting life and a book that didn't really satisfy me other than to be sick about the terrible life so many people lived in the past although realizing that there is a chance that one female made it to the top of the Catholic church. I hope it really happened.

Carole P. Roman says

Stunning story about the first alleged female Pope. Donna Woolfolk Cross takes a thousand year old legend and writes a compelling back story that left me with many questions. Pope Joan begins her life as a precocious English child with a thirst for knowledge who eventually fools everyone to become Pope. Steeped in history, Cross explains how this happened with a fascinating tale of ambition and adventure. A great read, she describes many common practices that the leaders of the church follow today, perhaps because of the impostor. If you like church history, read this. If you like woman's history, read this. If you like legends, read this. In other words, if you enjoy a well written tale of something that might have happened to influence the world as we know it today- this is the book for you.

Sirpa Grierson says

Extraordinary historical fiction piece set in the Dark Ages, about a brilliant and prodigious intellect, Joan, who hungers for an education in an age where women were thought of as chattel and reading and writing were reserved for priests and noblemen. Knowledge is power, or as her tutor tells her, "some ideas are dangerous." Having mastered Greek, Latin, classical scholarly debate, scriptural knowledge and knowledge of medicine and healing, Joan breaks the mold of women being "incapable of reasoning." (82) The book is an argument for the existence of a female pope as we follow Joan's journey to the highest office of Christendom after the death of Leo III. In a time where education is taken for granted and few students desire to work to the limits of their abilities, this book challenges a reader to reevaluate the gift of learning. Fascinating book about ideas and a little known historical era.

Marina Finlayson says

This was a novelisation of the life of the probably-real female pope, Pope Joan. So few records remain that historians cannot agree on whether she actually existed, and the "facts" of her life are few, so the author had

lots of scope for invention. Her use, more than once, of amazing coincidences to get Joan out of trouble bothered me, but I couldn't fault the historical side of the novel. She obviously did a lot of research, and has recreated the look and feel of an often-overlooked part of history, which made for a fascinating read.

And, reading this book, you know why they called it "the Dark Ages". Her vivid descriptions of the life people led back then, and the terrible attitudes and superstitions of society, made me very glad I didn't live in those times. Everyone suffered, even the wealthy, but the poor lived short lives of deprivation and hardship. To be a poor woman was the worst of the worst, with men firmly convinced that women's brains weren't able to be educated--that even to try was a sin and an abomination--and that women were no more than a useful chattel.

Joan, in desperation to escape this limited life, seizes her opportunity to impersonate her dead brother, and takes his place as a monk at a monastery, where her clever mind delights in learning. Thus her gender-bending life begins, a life that takes her all the way to the Church's highest office, with no one any the wiser that "John Anglicus" is really a woman.

I particularly enjoyed seeing the mindset of the people of those times. Though their attitudes were enough to make a modern woman grind her teeth, it was interesting to get a feel for how people saw the world in those times. These characters aren't just modern people parading through the book in ninth century costumes. They truly are from another world. I'm glad that world is gone, but it was interesting to read about.
