

A Reader's Guide

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. Afterward, I 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.

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

*Reading groups interested in setting up a “Chat with the Author” should go to popejoan.com for information or to make a request.

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."

"Best of the Best" Reading Group 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?