

Book Group
Discussion
Guide
for



Heretics

a love story

Mary Saracino



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Author Info

MARY SARACINO is an award-winning novelist, poet, and memoir writer who lives in Denver, Colorado. She is the author of five books. Her most recent novel, *Heretics: A Love Story* (Pearlson Press 2014), is a tale of a heretic-crazed priest's encounters with twin sister healers in Sardinia in the 1480s. Her novel *The Singing of Swans* (Pearlson Press 2006) was a 2007 Lambda Literary Awards finalist. She is the co-editor (with Mary Beth Moser) of *She Is Everywhere! Volume 3: An Anthology of Writings in Womanist/Feminist Spirituality*, which earned the 2013 Enheduanna Award for Excellence in Women-Centered Literature. Mary's short story "Vicky's Secret" earned the 2007 Glass Woman Prize. Mary is also the author of the novels *No Matter What* (1993) and *Finding Grace* (1999) and the memoir *Voices of the Soft-bellied Warrior* (2001). Her poetry and shorter creative nonfiction and fiction work have been widely published in a variety of literary and cultural journals and anthologies, both online and in print. Mary is a member of the editorial committee for the webzine *Return to Mago* (*Magoism, the Way of S/HE*, magoism.net). As the founder of MOTHEROOT, she leads workshops on the Dark Mother/Divine Female.



Five Fun Facts You Didn't Know About Mary Saracino

1. The first books she read were her father's *Lives of the Saints* biographies.
2. When she was a child she dreamed of being a June Taylor Dancer on the *Jackie Gleason Show*.
3. Both sets of her grandparents emigrated from Italy in the early part of the 20th century.
4. She lives in Colorado, but doesn't ski.
5. She loves playing *Jeopardy!*

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Discussion Questions

1. As the novel opens, Shardana is waking from a prophetic and unsettling dream that she soon discovers was also dreamt by her twin sister, Sarda. What is the author trying to convey through the use of this dream?
2. What is the significance of the main female characters being twin sisters? In what ways are Shardana and Sarda alike? In what ways are they different?
3. Antonio's migraines are triggered by traumatic memories of a time in his childhood when he witnessed the murder of a Jewish family in Spain; yet, as an adult his ambition is to be part of the Inquisitional tribunals. In what ways did his early childhood experiences impact his adult choices?
4. Shardana has suffered a great loss when her daughter Grazia died during childbirth. In what ways does Shardana's ongoing grief affect her ability to trust the budding relationship between her granddaughter Martina and Antonio?
5. In the beginning of the novel, the author switches between chapters about the life in a remote mountain village and life in a large bustling city. In what ways does this
6. Heretics is set in the 1480s in Sardinia during the time of the Spanish Inquisition. One of its main characters is a Catholic priest who is obsessed with eradicating heresy and either killing heretics or making them convert to Christianity. In what ways is this theme of religious intolerance relevant to the 21st century?
7. Nature plays a key role in the lives of the twin sister healers and their families. In what way is nature portrayed as a benefactor in this novel? In what ways is nature portrayed as being at odds with the characters?
8. Some of the characters in the novel believe in a pre-Christian form of religion, while others are Christians and still others practice a hybrid form of paganism and Christianity. What do you think the author was trying to say about these forms of religion coexisting?
9. Jose and Massimo are charged with taking Antonio to Orune. What role do these minor characters play in this story?
10. The people of Orune made community decisions only after having come together to discuss the issues and decide on an appropriate course of action to take. After Antonio

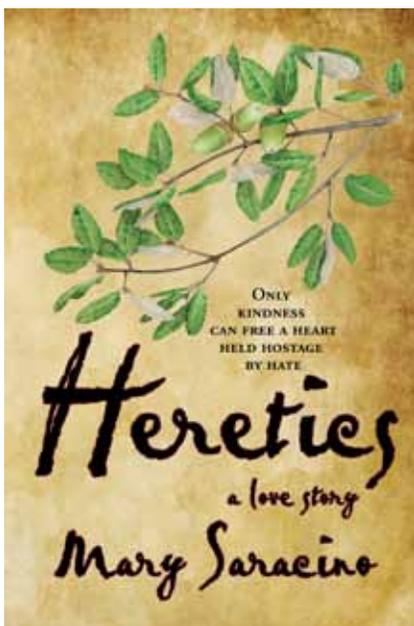
beats Giacobbe for desecrating the church, the community imposes a sentence for both the priest and the boy. Discuss whether you think this communal approach to problem solving is effective and whether you think that justice was meted out in this instance.

11. At the end of the novel, Antonio's hardened heart is softened by the power of love and the witnessing of the community's refusal to accept his evil actions. What do you think the author was trying to convey in using this method to transform and redeem Antonio's spirit?

Do Plants and Bees Really Talk?

In *Heretics: A Love Story*, twin sister healers Shardana and Sarda are marjarzas, herbalists and midwives in their tiny hamlet. They learned their healing trade from their grandmother, who taught them the secrets of harvesting plants from the forests and hillsides to stock their medicinal pharmacy. In turn, Shardana and Sarda pass that tradition down to their apprentice, Martina, Shardana's granddaughter, who must learn how to listen to the plants in order to come in to her full powers as a healer for her village.

In preparation for writing this novel, Saracino did extensive research on the secret life of plants and bees and how they communicate with humans. Her resources include *The Secret Life of Plants: A Fascinating Account of the Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Relations Between Plants and Man* by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird, *The Shamanic Way of the Bee* by Simon Buxton, and *The Woman in the Shaman's Body: Reclaiming the Feminine in Religion and Medicine* by Barbara Tedlock, Ph.D.



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Red Poppies Among the Ruins

Mary Saracino



*This essay was originally published online at Trivia: Voices of Feminism
(Issue 6, September 2007) <http://www.triviavoices.net/current/saracino.html>
Photos by Mary Saracino*

*U*nder the alchemy of sea and sky, my bones began to listen. The warm wind tickled my ear lobes, kissed my cheek, bidding me to cede to the desire of memory. *You have been here before*, it told me and my bones sighed, recalling the taste of the salty air, the scent of pink roses in full bloom. *Sardegna. Mother*, my heart called out, *I know you were here, I can feel you.*

My cells knew this island of granite and basalt mountains, primeval oak forests, cork trees, olive groves, hillsides teeming with wooly sheep. My spirit recognized its shimmering turquoise waters, its cerulean canopy of morning sky, though my earthly eyes had never before gazed upon Sardegna. I came to the island on a pilgrimage, seeking the lost, buried treasure of my soul's most ancient longing. I came to explore ruins of the Dea Madre, the God Mother, artifacts of the Divine One, the Dark Mother, who sailed with ancient voyagers from oldest Africa 50,000 years before. These journeyers from the Motherland were seekers, too, searching for what I do not know. Perhaps like any traveler, they had grown weary of life in their native lands and sought new sights, new sounds, new smells, new ways of encountering the world. With them they brought their most cherished traditions and customs: reverence for the Divine Mother, the Earth and all its creatures, a capacity for living in peace and a sacred understanding of social equality.

I wandered among the Punic ruins at Tharros, near the cape of San Marco, on Sardegna's western shore,

seeking messages from these and other ancient ones. In the 9th Century BCE, Carthaginians arrived from North Africa to settle on this stretch of rocky land and build a prosperous, vibrant city. They established an outpost around 850 BCE on the lip of this promontory. At the height of its glory, Tharros was one of the most important cities in the Mediterranean serving both as a maritime stronghold and a bustling trade center.

To one side of the promontory, the wild sea is untamed. The ancients named it *mare vivo*, living sea; the other, calmer side, they christened *mare morto*, the dead sea, and chose to moor their ships in its harbor. From this juxtaposition of *vivo* and *morto*, Tharros rose, perched between life and death, teeming with women and men, children and animals, living, breathing, loving, dying.

Rich in culture and commerce, Tharros was highly civilized and developed, complete with streets, residential neighborhoods, artisan shops, iron-work foundries, temples, a sewage system, meeting areas, a shopping district, and two necropoli (grave sites). Among the ruins, one can still envision the city's open sanctuary and its monumental temple (most likely built in honor of Tanit, a Dark Mother female divinity with ancient ties to African Isis).

In the 3rd century BCE, the Romans conquered Tharros and subjugated its people, although the city continued to prosper under Roman occupation. Working with the urban design already in place, the Romans adapted existing structures, applying quintessentially Roman touches such as thermal baths—with dressing rooms, saunas and hot and cold water pools, aqueduct pipes to carry water to buildings, and stone roads. The memory of the Divine Female lingered as well, in Roman temples built to honor the goddesses Demeter and her daughter, Core (Persephone).

In the 8th and 9th centuries CE, Saracen raids (reported to have been a near daily occurrence) forced many inhabitants of Tharros to leave, contributing to the town's eventual decline. Malarial epidemics in the marshy sections of the peninsula proved, ultimately, to be disastrous as well. In the 11th century CE, attempts to resettle the city were futile. This once shining gem on the cape of San Marco was to remain a shadowy memory, its past glory forever humbled and overrun by scarlet poppies, yellow broom, and violet wildflowers.

Still, some timeless essence whispered to me as I strolled along Tharros' *cardo maximus* (stone alleys) among the crumbling foundations of this once impressive city, among what used to be its houses, temples, public baths, and shops. It was unmistakable—the life-pulse of the inhabitants who once populated these now-vacant streets, the din and chatter of artisans crafting coral jewelry or fashioning iron tools, industrious traders plying their wares, seafarers bringing goods from places far away. Perhaps, centuries before, my soles touched this earth, the dusty soil lodged between my toes. I may have stopped to loosen my sandal, ease the chafing against my skin, or to greet a neighbor, *Salve*. In my ears lingered the sound of children laughing, men's voices rising from the village center, women singing at the sacred well. *Which home was mine*, I wondered as I walked along among the ruins dotted with red poppies.

The North African Carthaginians were not the first immigrants to the island. As early as 1100 BCE, Canaanites had sailed directly from their near East homeland (from what is modern-day Palestine and Syria) to trade and co-mingle with the Nuraghi, Sardegna's original inhabitants whose culture thrived on the island from 1800- 500 BCE. The peaceful Canaanite seafarers anchored their lives to this new land and, sometimes, put to rest their wandering ways. Along with their ships' cargo they carried the rites of their Mother God Tanit, and her values of justice with compassion.

Some archeological evidence suggests that the Canaanites in these entrepost settlements co-existed in harmony with Nuraghi, blending their ways and customs with that of the early Sardegnans, who had developed their own prosperous culture and society. Indeed, the two peoples shared many common values, not the least of which were social equality, a community-oriented ethos, and belief in a female deity.

Inland, beyond the coastline, among the island's numerous hills and woodlands, rise remnants of nearly 8,000 Nuraghi round, stone buildings. The people crafted these structures from basalt quarried miles from their villages and carried to each site by mule or by human labor. They burdened themselves with one-

thousand-pound rocks to construct their sanctuaries near the spring that beckoned, the spring that would ease their thirst, quench their souls, bless their meals, invigorate and sustain their lives. An egalitarian, matrilineal society, the Nuraghi peoples used these massive rocks, as well, to build round stone huts for meeting rooms, their hollowed centers encircled with basalt benches, resting places for the men and women who gathered to discuss the needs of the villagers, decide on how best to proceed for the good of the many.

The men worked side by side with intention, crafting the Nuraghi by hand and with communal effort to create home, shelter, sacred spaces. Through their matrifocal culture, the women carried the memory of the Mother, that Divine Dea, Giver of Life, Midwife of Death. They instilled Her lineage in the blood of their children, their children's children, the daughters and sons of centuries to come who would carry the light forward.

Back further in time, down the meandering byways of memory, before the impulse to haul rocks and shape environment compelled the building of villages, hillside caves opened their stony mouths to cradle the island's Neolithic people, protecting them from the rains, the fierce winds, the scorching sun. In these times, before written words marked their stories, the wild, untamed soul of humans mirrored nature. All that was necessary was taught by heart, etched upon dank cave walls, recited by tongues familiar with survival, accustomed to the sacred litany of cultural continuation. Many such cave-repositories can be found throughout Sardegna.

At the necropolis of Montessu, in the southwestern region of the island, I spiraled into the Neolithic ages and sensed the echoes of prehistoric voices. Montessu is one of the largest of many ancient necropoli carved out of stone by pre-Nuraghi Sardegnans, dating from 3,500 BCE. This massive site spans two square kilometers and contains more than 40 inter-linked tombs. Peoples of the Ozieri culture settled the area to farm and hunt. To house their dead, they built hypogeums, "cities of the dead." The entryways of these monumental sanctuaries stand two meters high and two meters wide, diametrically facing a natural rock amphitheater. Renowned for their typology, size and the intricate ways they replicate houses, these graveyards of prehistory incorporated windows, doors, and rooms uniting interior and exterior ritual spaces. The people placed foodstuffs inside in tribute to their dead, to feed their souls as they made their way to the world beyond this one.

Domus de janas the locals now call Montessu and other ancient burial places like it, *the tombs of the fairies*. Tiny female creatures are said to inhabit these 'houses,' many of which are adorned with bas-reliefs of petroglyphs, potent symbols that archeologists associate with veneration of the Dea Madre (Mother God): the spiral, the ochre-red pubic "V", the sacred horns, broken lines, concentric circles.

Inside, these *domus de janas*, these stone womb fairy habitats, the air is chilly, yet vibrant with energy. Carved out of rock, these sanctuaries were places where Neolithic women and men lived, places in which they buried their dead, returning to the womb of the Earth those they loved most. Ochre red spirals etched with prehistoric tools tattoo the coarse walls of now-silent tombs to mark the spot, the cave-place where human form returned to spirit. My eyes beheld an embossed female figure, round-bellied, full-breasted, carved into the exterior arc of the doorway, red "V"s pointing, like uterine arrows, toward home. In these rock tomb-wombs, portals to rebirth in the nether-realms beyond seeing, the lamentation of loved ones hovers still, wailing loss, heaving their sorrow into the echoes of time and space.

At Montessu, the dead walk among the living and the Sardegna air is perfumed with rosemary, juniper, and honeysuckle, awakening an urge in me to inhale deeply. I sucked breath from the sky and filled my lungs, exhaling what was false, releasing it into the abyss of forgetfulness. *I want to remember everything*.

How far we humans have strayed from our homeland. How long we have wandered alone in the desert of our amnesia. Have we learned nothing? *Vivo* and *morto*. The circle of life embraces the round mouth of the cave, the red O of the uterus. It births mysteries that can save and sustain us, if we will heed its call to silence. Where there is tyranny, how can there be love? Or peace?

For more than 7000 years humankind has borne the scars of violence. That legacy began around 5,000 BCE when the early Indo-European, nomadic Kurgans emerged from the Russian steppes and launched

incursions throughout northern Europe. Eventually these warrior people broadened their territory, invading the Aegean and Adriatic regions as well. Scholars, including the renowned Marija Gimbutas, tell us the Kurgans rode horse-drawn chariots and worshipped storm gods of vengeance and battle. Peaceful Neolithic peoples, whom the Kurgans encountered along the way, were ill-equipped to combat such aggression. Even during the early Bronze Age the nonviolent Neolithic societies, such as the Nuraghi of Sardegna, fashioned metal and stone into tools and utensils and later into jewelry, cooking vessels, urns, and other life-sustaining implements. Their lands, often rich in silver, zinc, copper and obsidian, provided ample raw materials, which were traded among groups of people over vast distances. The Kurgans traded with these peaceful societies, fashioning the raw materials into swords and spears, turning the metallic fruits of the Earth into weaponry to use against those whose cultures were imbued with the values of social harmony, whose principles embodied the beliefs of the sacred female.

The Kurgan legacy survives to this day. From sports icons to corporate raiders and political strategists we laud and celebrate the principle of conquest. Our history books teach war, not peace. We learn of military campaigns, famous battles, esteemed generals with their prowess of might and destruction. The progress of civilization is measured in lives lost, blood shed, peoples oppressed. The more ancient legacy of peaceful coexistence is silenced. How did it come to be that 7,000 years of violence could wipe away 50,000 years of accord, erase it from our collective memory? Where are the chapters about peaceful resolution of conflict, about cultures co-existing in harmony, or tales of societies like those of the early days of Tharros or of the Nurgahi of Sardegna, peoples whose day-to-day living made no room for slavery, social stratification, or inequality between men and women? History chronicles the exploits of the conquerors, not the subaltern ways of the silenced.

In Rome, en route from Sardegna to my life in America, I walked the city streets in June 2004, mere days after a visit from George W. Bush. Everywhere, hanging from windows on buildings large and small, from wrought-iron apartment balconies, the facades of public office buildings, the stone arches of church entryways, I encountered rainbow-colored banners waving in the smoggy breeze. In white letters, against a prism field of hope (bright rows of violet, blue, green, yellow, orange and red) blazed the word *Pace*. Peace. A clarion call for sanity in an insane, out-of-control world. A prayer for harmony, for humanity, for grace.

The *Pace* flags mirrored the hearts and minds of people seeking to create a different resolution, establish a new pathway, disinherit humanity's 7,000-year-old Kurgan legacy. On city walls throughout Rome, red and black graffiti screamed its resounding outrage. Unambiguous, stark images leapt from stone walls and the sooty sides of buildings; war, and warmongers, were not welcome.

Stop Global War; Bushladen; Bush Go Home; Bush Terrorista, No War for Oil; No Justice No Peace; No Bush, No War.

I stood on street corners, reading these spray-painted messages, my heart pounding with urgency. *The memory lives*, I heard myself say.

In Sardegna, I had waded through a field of knee-high grasses to reach ancient tombs and gaze upon graffiti of another kind: ochre-red carvings, symbols etched into the rock thousands of years before. The spears of thistles pierced my socks, lingered like acupuncture needles, touching the essential points of Qi, conjuring vitality, coaxing life back to essential balance. Eco-activists tell us the Earth is out of balance. But the human spirit is awry as well. We cannot begin to save Mother Earth, and all her rich bio-diversity, until we save our own souls.

Among the ruins at Tharros and the cave-tombs of Montessu, I began to remember a time as real and as tangible as breath. There was an age, before this violent one, in which the peoples of the Earth fashioned metal into useful tools and jewelry, not weaponry. There was an age before this one when men and women lived in harmony with one another and with animals and plants. On that island in the Mediterranean, I beheld a four-thousand-year-old olive tree embracing the sky and burrowing its thick roots into the deep belly of the Mother and I remembered that there was a time before dogma reigned when Spirit was not

separate from Body, when eyes shone with certainty and ears rang with sustaining lore. Rippling streams coursed through the parched land, giving sustenance to all. The waters of the turquoise sea lapped the shoreline, caressing beaches under the push and pull of the moon tide. Stones spoke to the wind, the sea and to every willing listener.

In Sardegna, beneath layers of sediment, eons of submission, the stony lips of ruins loosened, howling their stories among the tasseled grasses. Slowly, steadily, memories erupted with insistent defiance. Once we humans could read the stars and portend the future. Once we could witness the seasons, accept our place within the larger, all encompassing circle, and reflect the Divine back to our receptive faces.

Under the Sardegna sun, on a cloudless day, I sat among the ruins and listened to the songs of the stones, the stories of the poppies, those blood-red tongues of memory. I know in my bones that this is so: there is hope for the human race. The ruins ask us to embrace the mystery, seek a different way, remember a time when peace was possible. The poppies mark our path home.

Notes

I wrote “Red Poppies Among the Ruins” in 2004 a few weeks after I had returned from a two-week Dark Mother Study tour of Sardegna, led by Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum. Our group had traveled throughout the island visiting sites sacred to the Dea Madre (Mother God). We immersed ourselves in Sardegnan culture and learned more about the ways in which that island is imbued with Her memory. I was to discover that God the Mother resides not only in the island’s rocks, rivers and trees but also in the hearts and consciousness of its people. For the final few days of the tour, our travel group stayed in Rome. We arrived in that city a few days after George W. Bush had come and gone. The war in Iraq had been going on for a little more than a year by then, and from the multitude of rainbow-colored peace banners and spray-painted graffiti we saw throughout Rome, it was clear that the US involvement in Iraq did not enjoy popular support. The juxtaposition of the visceral connection I had felt to the Dea Madre on Sardegna and the anti-war sentiment I encountered in Rome reaffirmed my belief that the Dark Mother’s values of justice with compassion, equality and transformation are alive and well on the planet—even if the world’s political leaders fail to heed the clarion call for peace.





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