

Darkly Bright

Local prof's mystery mines art, gender and geology in Provence

CÉZANNE'S QUARRY, fiction by Barbara Corrado Pope. Pegasus Books, 2008. Hardcover, \$25.

When you live in Oregon, friends think you've hit the jackpot, thanks to our mountains with scenic rivers, fertile valleys, cute university towns and what those from other states might think of as the "beach." But our eight or nine months of rain, clearcut forest, sneaker waves and ocean dead zones, not to mention our meth labs and tax-cut fanatics, make for a more shadowy picture.

Like the darkness within and below our pretty picture, the Provence region of France — an area fabled for visitors and transplants from Vincent Van Gogh to Peter Mayle to Angelina Jolie — serves as a dark backdrop for a new mystery set in the late 19th century. *Cézanne's Quarry* serves up a mix of art, intellectual and feminist history with a grounding in the atmosphere of rural France as the country begins to deal with the implications of modern science. The first novel by Barbara Corrado Pope, founding director of the Women's and Gender Studies program at the UO, *Cézanne's Quarry* combines a traditional mystery plot with an assured, deep knowledge of the place and the time.

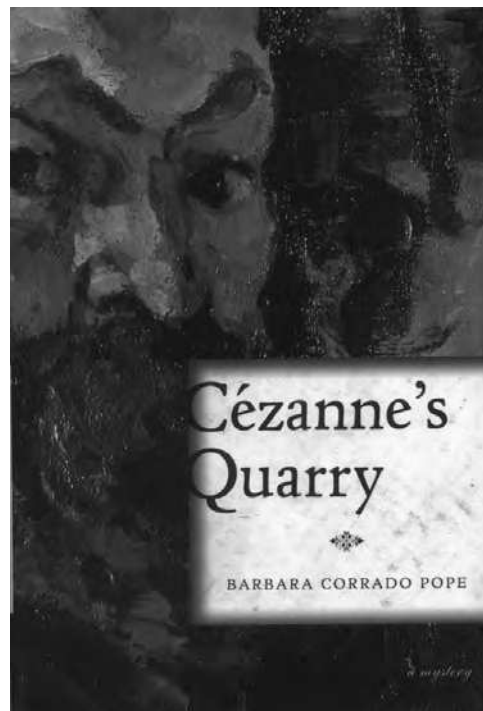
That time serves as the canvas for Pope's true subjects, which range from the status of women (mostly rather dismal, it seems, especially with statistics on the rape of girl children) to the ways those without money could be caught out as they negotiated a climb to the middle or upper classes — not to mention a fascinating glimpse into the French legal system, the kinds of food that a restaurateur from Arles might serve customers in Aix-en-Provence, a clash between different ways of viewing evolution (and God), Paul Cézanne's slog of an artistic and personal life and the not-so-savory history of the powerful DuPont family.

Perhaps that all sounds too heavy for summer reading. But the actual book, a mystery featuring Martin, a young magistrate from the north who was sent to Aix; Solange Vernet, a liberated woman whose murder sparks a series of events; Westbury, an Englishman who believes he can help bring enlightenment to the repressed and religious women of rural France; and Cézanne, the post-Impressionist painter obsessed with Provence's Mont Sainte-Victoire, provides plenty of enjoyment, anxiety, surprise and character development along with immersion in the atmosphere of a hot summer in Aix.

I wanted to hear more from Solange Vernet, mostly because she tried to escape the strictures that, especially in rural areas of France, confined women's lives. But the societal rules didn't affect women only in the provinces: From Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who famously said, "I paint with my prick," to Eduard Manet, who died of syphilis, to Paul Gauguin and his virgin/whore issues surrounding women and class, French male Impressionist and

post-Impressionist painters lived in a world where women were either "angels in the house" or prostitutes — but never equals. Men like Manet would be expected to patronize some of the numerous government-regulated prostitutes or other "working women" because respectable middle-class and upper-class women were often confined to their houses and kept out of the public sphere.

Pope, a historian who has written extensively on women, religion and gender, knows that French women who entered that public sphere in any way — through business ownership, with intellectual ambitions or even as restaurant



servers — were met with withering verbal attacks on their virtue, sexual orientation

and mothering ability, not to mention actual physical and sexual attacks.

But does the author construct a space in which Cézanne reacted this way to the murdered woman, who kept an unmarried lover, had some mysterious source of money and provided space for intellectual salons where women were invited to learn about religion and science? Or was it Solange's lover, jealous of Cézanne, who killed her? And where in Aix are her missing gloves?

Though the identity of the murderer may be apparent to experienced mystery readers, Pope uses her complex characters to provide more than enough twists and turns, through a police procedural framework, to flesh out motives and create a sense of ferment layered beneath the placid surface of a late summer in the late 19th century in southern France. **EW**

Barbara Corrado Pope reads from *Cézanne's Quarry* at 3 pm Saturday, July 12, in the UO's Knight Library Browsing Room.

BOOKS BY MOLLY TEMPLETON

The Discomfort Zone

Beth Lisick gives gurus a go for a year

HELPING ME HELP MYSELF: One Skeptic, Ten Self-Help Gurus, and a Year on the Brink of the Comfort Zone by Beth Lisick. William Morrow, 2008. Hardcover, \$24.95

Within about 20 pages of *Helping Me Help Myself*, the latest book from California funny lady/writer/performer Beth Lisick, I was a goner. It wasn't so much the book's thesis — a year spent in the company of self-help gurus and their books, one per month — as it was Lisick herself, a flawed, recognizable, funny, snarky, totally relatable thirtysomething whose observant tone and frequent cringe reflex sounded awfully familiar. She sometimes enjoys hating things, and she's not sure she ought to enjoy working as a giant banana as much as she does. When a friend takes her to a fancy store opening, she relies on attitude to get herself in the door and takes advantage of the free fancy champagne. Her story about a Chuck Palahniuk reading is nearly as funny as the reading itself seems to have been. I want to buy her a beer.

The feeling of wanting to buy Lisick a beer only builds with each chapter of *Helping Me Help Myself*, which begins with a quick introduction and explanation. Why self-help? Because she has problems. Ordinary, everyday, familiar problems: The house is a disaster. The kid doesn't want to stay in his room. The bank account is low. Exercise? A thing of the past. And so on. There's a self-help program for all of these things, and one by one, Lisick tries them out. She suffers through *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*, which allows a bit more of her partially silenced cynic to creep to the fore ("Just to keep me on my toes, I am going to refrain from using the term 'blatantly misogynistic' while referring to this book."), and finds herself enjoying Richard Simmons' boundless enthusiasm on his "Cruise to Lose." She calls up Oprah's organization maven and discovers that the scariest self-help thing of all is taking pictures of every room in one's house and sending them to a stranger. She notices overlapping themes from one guru to another, and — naturally — winds up with a copy of *The Secret* (it doesn't fit into the year, though, so we'll have to wait for Lisick's take on that one).

But mostly what she does is explore what happens when you decide that everything needs fixing. The best parts of *Helping Me Help Myself* are often the parts that fall between trips to self-help conferences — the moments in a life that really doesn't seem like it needs all that much work. Gradually, subtly, between moments of hilarity and irrepressible sarcasm, Lisick paints overlapping pictures of her life: In one, she's broke, doesn't see her husband enough, works odd jobs instead of writing and worries about what's growing in her child's closet. In the other, she's got a circle of loving, creative friends, a superbly understanding relationship, a sweet child, a sharp sense of humor and, obviously, a book deal. One day, it might look like a life that needs some help, but the next, it might look fine. Better than fine, even — though every so often a nugget of advice from one guru or another turns out to be helpful.

In the end, Lisick doesn't have any tidy conclusions about what it all means, or what it's all worth. This is one of those journey-is-more-important-than-the-destination stories, though I'd bet it would make Lisick cringe to read that. It's a story of fitting one ordinary, strange, messy, fantastic life into a foreign framework and seeing what happens. It takes a certain kind of writer to see the world sharply enough to make a book like this work, and Lisick is a fantastic chronicler of foibles and awkwardness (both her own and others') — and of the small moments that have greater effect than any seminar-giving guru every could. I just hope she finds another reason to chronicle more years in her life, though for her sake I also hope it's a less expensive one. **EW**

Beth Lisick speaks as part of the Summer Reading program (the appropriate theme of which is "Metamorphosis") at 6:30 pm Wednesday, July 17, at the Downtown Library. Free.

