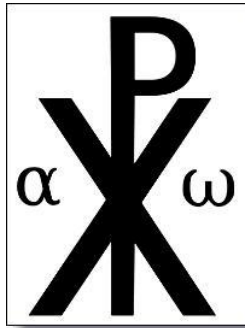


Marcella Nardi

Joshua
and
The Brotherhood of the Ark



The Story of a Man who became the Son of
God

Who was Joshua the son of Joseph the carpenter?

Historical Thriller
Mystery & Suspense

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Detective Novel Series “*Le indagini del detective Lynda Brown*”: **Sarai Solo Mia.**

Legal Thriller Series “*Le indagini dell'avvocato Joe Spark*”: **Morte all'Ombra dello Space Needle; L'architetto dei Labirinti; Il Fascino del Delitto (collection); Panettone con Delitto (collection).**

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Where to find my novels: **Amazon**

Il mio canale YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/c/marcellanardi>

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To Pope Francis
A man who is changing the face of Christianity

Marcella Nardi

AUTHOR'S NOTES

&

Keys to understand this novel

Like many writers of mystery and historical novels, I, too, like to create mysteries which navigate through the gray areas in the lives of famous people while pondering events considered to be still under investigation by archaeologists and scholars of ancient civilizations and religions.

Therefore, some events depicted here are entirely the result of my imagination, while others actually happened, and as mentioned, some are still the subject of much discussion in the academic world.

For this novel, I was inspired by two of the most intriguing theories in the religious field. Scholars still squabble over them, whether they be atheists, agnostics or believers with strong faith.

The mystery contained in these pages transpires in the fog that still obscures so much of ancient history and beyond.

While I used famous characters still living, out of respect for them, I didn't use their true names. However, I used specific references that will allow the reader to recognize them.

One of the things I love, as a writer, is the opportunity to play with the imagination. I ran wild here, and yet I hope, in so doing, I haven't offended anyone.

In describing the events, I use the narrative technique that, in my opinion, best lends itself to narrating often complex situations. The main characters disclose the facts in the first person and, as a consequence, some events are narrated more than once but, each time, in a different way, according to the point of view of the character who is narrating the story at that moment and whose name appears as the title of that chapter.

Therefore, I've provided a list of characters, divided into two parts: *main characters*, who speak in first person, and all others, listed as *minor and/or fictional characters*, regardless of the role in the novel.

The narrated events take place over an extended time frame, encompassing over two millennia. For this reason, I use the flashback

mechanism that is well suited to novels where the story unfolds over a long time.

Related to the names of the characters, I preferred to use the Italian version whenever some of them do not have the English equivalent.

Enjoy the reading!

Marcella Nardi

MAIN CHARACTERS

Joshua/Jesus – Yosef/Joseph – Jesus the Nazarene, in ancient languages was called by various names depending on local usage. In this novel, you'll see Jesus and Joshua, as well as his father's name, which appears as Yosef or Joseph.

Marco Polo – I was born in Venice, so they say. Adventurous son of a merchant, I traveled between Europe and Asia from 1271 to 1295, stopping, for about seventeen years, in Cathay, the land of the famous Genghis Khan and, in my time, of Kublai Khan. Imprisoned due to an adverse turn of fate, thanks to my cellmate, Rustichello da Pisa, I wrote the memories of my travels in a book, “Devisiment dou monde.” In 1300, I married Donata Badoèr who gave me three daughters. My first wife, Angelica, is the result of the author's imagination.

Angelica (fantasy) – I'm Marco Polo's first wife.

Gualtiero (fantasy) – I'm Angelica's uncle, and I live in Genoa. Even before being appointed guardian of my grandchildren, I took care of them and of my sister-in-law. I was obliged to do this all alone since my brother was often away in Constantinople.

His Eminence / Pope since 2013 – I'm Argentinian, born in 1936 from a family of Italian origins. Being the first son of five children, I decided to enter the seminary in 1958. After various events, I received presbyterial ordination in 1969. In 1978, I was appointed Argentine Provincial Superior. Since 2013, I've been the Pope of the Church of Rome, following the abdication of my predecessor.

Pope, deceased September 29th 1978 – Did I die of natural causes or did they kill me?

Thomas Judas Didymus – I was born in Galilee and I was one of the twelve apostles of Jesus. For many years, I lived and preached in the Far East, after establishing myself in Maliankara. Many of the narrated events are pure fantasy.

Niccolò Polo – I'm Marco's father. With my brother Matteo, I built a solid network of businesses traveling in Italy, in Constantinople and in the southern Crimea.

Popes (first, second and third) & Author's Note

In my novel, the three most important Popes of the 20th and 21st century are cited below as first, second and third Pope, referring to the succession of the pontificate. Many of the events narrated are the result of fantasy, while others are based on well-known "rumors."

First Pope – I've already introduced myself. My heart abruptly stopped beating in the late 1970s. Natural death? Murder? History has been pondering this question since that day.

Second Pope – I became famous for my abdication, an event that hadn't happened since 1415.

Third Pope – I'm the current Pope of the Roman Church.

Important note – Around the year 1000, *last names* started to spread throughout Europe. Before, people had not last names. Only rich and noble Romans had sort of last names. Moreover, Latin started to change in every country. In that period in Italy, Latin was slowly becoming evolving into to modern Italian. For this reason, at a certain point in the novel, Didymus becomes Didimo. Also, most of the Italian names I used are as you may find them now in Italy.

MINOR AND / OR FANTASY CHARACTERS

Livio (fantasy) – Marco Polo’s servant and friend, since his childhood.

Andrea Polo – Merchant and father of Matteo and Niccolò. Marco Polo’s grandfather.

Kublai Khan – Mongolian leader, founder of the first Chinese Empire, Cathay, and of the Yuan dynasty. The Venetian Marco Polo lived for about twenty years in Cambaluc, the capital of the empire.

Matteo Polo – Merchant, brother of Niccolò and uncle of Marco Polo.

Melisenda (fantasy) – Housekeeper and guardian of Angelica and Isabella.

Sebastiano e Ludmilla (fantasy) – Parents of Angelica and Isabella.

Galdino (fantasy) – Gardener in Angelica and Isabella’s home.

Giselda (fantasy) – Cook’s daughter.

Isabella (fantasy) – Angelica’s younger sister.

Martin V – Born in Genazzano in 1368. His real name was Ottone Colonna. He was the 206th Pope of the Catholic Church until his death in 1417. The acquisition of the mysterious book is pure fantasy.

Apostles & Prophets – In this novel, only a few prophets and some of the twelve apostles are listed.

Paul of Tarsus – Another prominent figure is Saul, also known as Paul of Tarsus or St. Paul, for the faith and the ‘form of worship’ he established. He was a Christian writer and theologian.

Pope Julius II – Born as **Giuliano della Rovere** (Albisola 1443 / February 1513). He was the 216th Pope from 1503 until his death.

Simeone Moro / Primicerio of San Marco – The Primicerio of the Basilica of San Marco was the Pope’s representative in Venice.

Tommaso (fantasy) – Groom in Angelica’s house, in Genoa.

Costanza Polo – Mother of Niccolò and Matteo Polo.

Andreas & Kanakis (fantasy) - Friends and colleagues of Marco Polo.

GLOSSARY

Egyptian sacred boat. For the ancient Egyptians, the *sacred boat* was a river boat considered a symbol of a ritual vessel, as evidenced by the vast iconographic-literary documentation. It was used as a means of transport for funerary and religious purposes.

Maritime Republics. Italian thalassocrat city-states that, from the Middle Ages enjoyed political autonomy and economic prosperity, thanks to their maritime activities. When those republics were born, and for a long time after, they called themselves *maritime republics*.

(The) Serenissima and (the) Superba. Throughout history, many cities have acquired nicknames. The Venetian title of *Serenissima* (very serene) derives from the way in which Justice was administered: tolerance towards foreigners, open-mindedness towards new cultures and ideologies, and a reasonable balance in the administration of penalties.

For over eight centuries, however, Genoa was known by the appellations of *La Superba* (the Superb) and *La Dominante* (the Dominant). Its cultural wealth in terms of history, art, literature, music and cuisine, allowed it to become, in 2004, the European capital of culture. Francesco Petrarca describes it as “*regal, leaning against an alpine hill, magnificent for men and for walls.*”

Purse in the Medieval age (Scarsella). In the past, men used to carry their money or other items in a leather purse hung around the neck or on belts. The word, “*scarsella*,” is still in use regionally in places such as Veneto, with the present day meaning of pocket.

Boats in Venice (Scaula versus Gondola). As there is no translation in English for the names of boats in the medieval Venice, in the novel, I used the generic noun, *boat*. However, I would like to say something about the real names and their usage. Before the *gondola* took on its current characteristics (around the XV century), the boat most commonly used by the Venetians was the *scaula* or *scola*, the generic name of a flat-bottomed boat, used to transport things or people and moved by oars or sails. The *gondola* was instead a much larger boat than the current one and with different connotations. It was the Doge who generally had a *gondola*, which he used for official events.

Morpheus. Is a god associated with sleep and dreams.

“Ite missa est” & “Deo gratias”. In the Catholic mass, until 1965 the priests said the mass in Latin. These two phrases were used at the very end of the mass.

Switzerland. The establishment of the Old Swiss Confederacy dates to the late medieval period, resulting from a series of military successes against Austria and Burgundy. The Federal Charter of 1291 is considered the founding document of Switzerland. That document stated official agreements between the rural communes of Uri, Schwyz, and Unterwalden.

Schöllenen gorges. A valley where the rural communities of the Uri lived.

“Quo nomine vis vocari?”. After the newly-elected Pope accepts his election, the Cardinal Dean again asks him about his papal name, saying in Latin, “Quo nomine vis vocari?”, which means “By what name you will be called?” After the papal name is chosen, the officials are readmitted to the conclave, and the Master of Pontifical Liturgical Ceremonies writes a document recording the acceptance and the new name of the Pope.

Pope Emeritus. The word “*emeritus*” comes from Latin. It is an adjective that means “retired”, but it is also used to honor the position once held by the retired person.

If I forgot something, do not hesitate to contact me via my website, www.marcellanardi.com

Treasures of wickedness profit nothing;
But righteousness delivered from death.

(Holy Bible, Proverbs 10:2)

For there is nothing covered, that shall not be revealed;

Neither hid, that shall not be known.

Therefore whatsoever ye have spoken in darkness
shall be heard in the light.

And that which ye have spoken in the ear in closets
shall be proclaimed upon the housetops.

(Gospels - Luke 12,2-3)

The pretension to always have the right solution

It is a sign of pride and stupidity.

(Anonymous, Genoese)

I did not even tell the half of what

I did and saw in my travels.

(“The Travels of Marco Polo”)

Ordinary people wait for life to reveal its secrets to them,

But to the few and to the chosen ones,

The mysteries of life are revealed

Before the veil is moved away.

(O. Wilde)

PROLOGUE

Thomas Judas Didymus Apostle of Joshua the Nazarene

The One and the Merciful

Maliankara, India. Third year of reign of the Roman Emperor Vespasian, 72 AD

Sixty-two years have passed since that warm summer night that is engraved in my mind and in my heart.

At that time, and for generations, my family and I lived in Galilee.

That evening, my father had directed my mother and younger brothers to leave us alone in the courtyard around the fire under a beautiful sky full of stars.

“Thomas, my beloved son, the moment has arrived. You need to know our family’s story and the secret we have been preserving for centuries” and he spoke to me at length.

I lost track of time. I do not know how long I listened to him. Initially I felt respect and then, as he went on, an increasing curiosity.

“Thomas, are you listening to me?” My father finally asked, shaking me for a few moments. I was so absorbed in the story and amazed at the same time about what I had just heard.

That night his words didn’t allow sleep to give me solace. Pieces of his narration consumed my mind until the first light of dawn placed a compassionate hand on my tired body. I slept until late in the day.

Now, after so many years, far from my world and tired after an eventful life in the Far East, the weight of memories, of betrayal and of so many lies weighs heavily on my body and on soul that yearn for eternal rest.

It has been sixty-two years since I learned, on that hot summer

evening, that my family descends from Gershom, one of Moses' sons. However, it wasn't this that amazed me the most. As an Israelite child, I was shaken by the story of my people's long slavery on Egyptian soil, by the story of the worship of the god Aton and by what I learned about the revered figure of our patriarch, Moses. And how could I ever forget the words of my father about our most important prayer! "Dear son, every day we recite our pledge of faith, the '*Creed*'. You know the words well, '*Shemà Israel Adonai Elobenu Adonai Ehad*'. Adonai is actually the god Aton, the One and the Merciful, the Egyptian god so persecuted in his land."

"Father, what are you saying? You are committing a sacrilege!" I was upset and interrupted him, raising my voice. He continued undaunted, "Moses was a follower and had to flee. For political reasons, it was said for centuries, but the real reason was religion and power. With him, he brought the Semitic people, our people and some Egyptian followers. In the long years before arriving here, where we now live, the whole land of Canaan was subjected to the sword."

I felt confused. If Moses had been a follower of the god Aton, why did we continue to worship Abraham as our patriarch and Jaweh as our Lord? Moses had kept everything hidden. For what purpose?

I was young, but I already understood many aspects of life. After all, people would have little interest in the name of the god to worship or in the rites to follow. It was Moses who had saved them after centuries of Egyptian slavery, or at least this was the official doctrine. Only many years later did I understand everything.

And again, in my head, I hear the closing sentences of my father's long speech, "This is our family's story, our true beliefs and what we had to endure to reach the Promised Land. They are shrouded in the secret that Moses and Aaron had their descendants swear to. The people of Israel continue to worship Abraham as the father of our faith. They would never accept the god of his oppressors. To have his people fighting during the conquest of the land of Canaan, Moses

created the Sanhedrin, whose members have always been, in the depths of their hearts, followers of Aton.”

At the end, my father spoke to me of the Ark of the Covenant, of its disappearance, of what it was and what it contained.

The years passed, as fast as lightning. I grew up and among my closest friends there was a certain Joshua, son of Joseph, a carpenter of the lineage of David. From a young age, Joshua showed himself to be different from the others. He loved the weakest, the poor and the defenseless. He loved to surround himself with children and was always quick to comfort others.

How much pain I bear in my heart...

At my advanced age, one should await death with serenity. Instead, I torment myself for having been an instrument of evil. How could I've betrayed Joshua and my people?

‘The sacrifice of one for the greater good’.

This was our justification, mine and that of the other eleven apostles.

This is the sin I'll carry with me until the end of my days.

1 - Marco Polo

A dynasty of rich merchants

Cambaluc-Cathay, first Saturday of January, 1286 - Imperial Palace

Euphoric at the news I just received, I entered my study. I went to Livio and patted him on the shoulder, saying, “I just received wonderful news!”

He jumped up, banging his knees against the desk where he had been concentrating on reading a parchment.

“Oh, Holy Mother! You scared me, Master. I didn’t hear you enter. And anyway, where are we going because of this good news? We’re always traveling somewhere. We hardly have time to unpack our luggage before we start a new adventure. What is it? I’ve known you for too long not to recognize when something is up. Oh please, tell me everything. Now that you’ve aroused my curiosity, you can’t leave.”

“After lunch, I’ll be received by the Emperor to lay out the initial preparations for the trip. We return home, Livio, to Venice! Are you happy?” I asked him.

I closed my eyes and I could see Venice again. I almost seemed to smell the salty aroma of the sea creeping through the roads and its canals. Was I really ready to pack up and leave Cathay forever?

After all these years, Cathay had become my second home. I had traveled far and wide to the boundless territories the Emperor had united under his rule.

And yet, at the same time, I was overjoyed at the idea of going back to Venice. I yearned to see my family, my father, Uncle Matteo and my grandmother who had raised me like a son, and who, it seemed from the last letter, was still alive.

“It will be a long journey. We were only teenagers when we arrived here, do you remember? Everything seemed so exciting and

extraordinary. Now we will trace the same path backwards, but with a few variations.”

“When are we going to leave, Master Marco?” Livio asked me anxiously, his eyes open wide.

“Stay calm, it will take time. We must immediately take stock of what we have so we can best organize our luggage. This news made me hungry. Bring me something to eat, please. I have to prepare a report before going to the Khan.”

When I finished the report, I relaxed on my favorite ottoman, waiting for the court secretary to announce the Emperor’s availability.

A chapter of my life was about to end. Suddenly, a whirlwind of thoughts filled my mind, leading me to retrace, image after image, my existence up to that moment.

I owe everything to my grandfather Andrea, a wise man who gave great prestige to our family, teaching the tricks of the trade to my father and Uncle Matteo. Thanks to them, I inherited the love of travel and the profitable art of commerce.

My father and my uncle had already crossed Asia in 1255, reaching Cambaluc in 1262, one of the residences of Kublai Khan, in Cathay. Four years later, they left for the Italian peninsula with the prestigious mission of ambassadors for the Great Khan in the distant territories of the West. The Emperor, a man of great culture and enlightened mind, had given them a letter to take to the Pope, asking him to send to those lands clerics instructed to evangelize the Mongolian pagan populations.

The stories about Cathay and the legendary Kublai Khan had always touched my heart and excited my childish thoughts. Every time a letter came from my father, I read it and reread it many times.

I still remember that as a teenager, even though I loved my Venice, I felt imprisoned in a world where corruption and power struggles dominated the life of the city.

In recent years, before leaving for Cathay, Venice had been

involved in wars for the conquest of new trade routes or for their consolidation. It was normal for me to consider those distant places as an escape from that world to which I was emotionally attached, but which at the same time seemed to move further and further away from the ideals I valued in my life.

Still, I looked forward to going back.

I had been seventeen when I left.

I was born on September the 15, 1254. My life as a child and young teenager was peaceful until my mother's death when I was less than fourteen.

Now here, in the Cathay, at the other end of the world and after so many years, I can still recall the intense pain of those days long ago.

I awoke from my daydreams to the sound of someone knocking at the door.

"Master, you're awaited by the Emperor. The secretary is waiting for you out here."

"I'm ready. See you later, Livio," and with my mind still alive with memories, I headed for the Khan's private library.

2 - Angelica

My family

Genoa, beginning of March, 1288

“Do not stay on the terrace, Angelica, come back inside. Do not you feel how the wind has come up? Look over there at the clouds, they don’t bode well.” It was Melisenda, our housekeeper who, busy with the cook, had seen me go to the garden after having snatched some fresh baked, honey cookies. Since my mother died, she had taken care of me and my sister with affection and apprehensiveness.

“Please, Melisenda, you know how much I enjoy watching the sunset. The clouds haven’t obscured the sun. And besides, then I have the shawl Uncle Gualtiero brought me from Rome. Don’t worry.” Wrapped in the warm blue woolen shawl, sitting there on my bench, I let my mind wander with the breeze that caressed my memories.

I lived in Genoa, but at sunset I often thought of my Venice where I was born and had lived my childhood. I still remember the words of my grandmother, “Venice is like a charming woman, beautiful in every period of the year. In winter, the mist that surrounds her gives her an ethereal look, like the veils of a woman’s headdress. In summer, at sunset, the brilliant reflections of the sun on the sea remind me of a noblewoman’s jewels.”

She couldn’t have found more perfect words. Today, however, Venice is a wealthy, maritime Republic, afflicted by a thousand contradictions. People live alongside wealth and luxury, with violence and corruption are everywhere.

My father, Sir Sebastiano, descendant of an ancient family of Genoese merchants, no longer blessed by the luck of the past, and my mother, lady Ludmilla, belonged to one of the most noble

patrician families in Venice.

Our home on the Lagoon was a luxurious house-warehouse that overlooked the Grand Canal.

On the ground floor there was a pier for the *scuole* (small boats) and a portico with columns facing the entrance to the building. From there, we entered the central courtyard where there was a second door, adorned with inlaid wood. On another side of the house there was a different canal where it was possible to access the commercial area where boats that transported the goods docked. Inside, an entrance hall was the antechamber of the warehouses and an office to accommodate the merchants. A door from there formed a second entrance that led to our home. With my sister Isabella and the cook's daughter, Giselda, we often amused ourselves hiding among the bags and the boxes stowed there.

On the second floor, reached by climbing a wide white marble staircase, there were our private rooms, some formal rooms and a hall for ceremonies that overlooked the portico and provided a magnificent view of the canal.

All the bedrooms faced the rising sun. I always awoke with the rays of the new day caressing my face. My father had also built a small room adjacent to every bedroom to be used for personal hygiene, as in the rich houses of Constantinople. There were a few furnishings, a silver mirror placed above a table, a bench, a container for bodily needs, and a large vat for washing up or bathing. Linen towels were kept in a trunk. A fireplace heated the rooms and water, a real luxury.

What great times! And how happy my family was.

My mother was always kind and smiling. Excellent lady of the house who knew how to administer it in the proper fashion of a good family. She was also loved by servants. She never used an arrogant tone. She achieved everything simply with her innate grace. Unfortunately, the frequent absences of my father dimmed her beautiful green eyes with a melancholy tinge. Their color matched the emerald in the family ring she wore on her finger, an inheritance

from her grandmother.

Isabella, my younger sister, was a bright and very lively girl, just like our mother. A glance of her eyes and a wide smile on her lips always resulted in her being forgiven for anything she did.

I, too, strongly resembled my mother. I had inherited her height and elegant ways. I loved embroidering and reading. I was sometimes accused of having a shortcoming, perhaps inherited from my father, a fault that was there from early childhood, but that intensified as I grew older: I looked people straight in the eye, not as a challenge but only to let the people I faced know that I couldn't be easily manipulated. Attempts to make me change that attitude were useless, even though my mother repeatedly reminded me that it wasn't appropriate for a damsel of my rank.

From my mother, I also inherited my great love for the sea.

Since I was a little girl, I had always loved its strength and the harmony of the rhythmic breaking of the waves on the rocks. I remember once, just once in my life, when our father gave himself a few days of rest and took us to his hometown, Genoa. From my grandparents' house, we watched a thunderstorm that swelled the sea and colored the sky with intense blue and gray. High, white waves crashed against the cliffs of the bay, and the spray reached the window where we were standing, enjoying the extraordinary display. That was the sea that would remain forever in my eyes and in ears, in my head and in my heart.

Since my mother died, Melisenda has taken care of us. She was somewhat fat and always in a good mood. All she had to do was look at us to see what was going on in our little heads, and for us it was enough to check out her gaze to understand what we were allowed to do and what not.

"Come on, Isabella, let's run. The broom is coming!" I had yelled many times. Then, we would run away knowing we had gotten into big mischief.