

# A Conversation with Lynn Cullen, author of THE CREATION OF EVE

**Your main character, Sofonisba Anguissola, is an actual historical figure. How much do we know about her? How factually based is the story you tell about her?**

**THE CREATION OF EVE** follows the known facts of her life very closely, as it does for all the other historical figures in the book. What juicy material I had to work from! Here was the daughter of a lowly count from an Italian farming town who became a successful woman painter in what was strictly a man's world. She was asked to study with Michelangelo—not an artist known for rolling out the welcome mat for students--and then she was invited by Spanish King Felipe (Philip) II, the most powerful ruler in the world, to be a lady-in-waiting to his wife. Incredible! The facts only get more delicious: When Sofonisba joined the Spanish court, the mature Felipe had just learned of a much younger illegitimate brother who was charismatic, handsome, and lovable—everything Felipe was not. On top of that, this charming brother was the same age as Felipe's adorable new teenage queen, and of course the two of them immediately hit it off. Worse, Felipe's own son, the same age as this pair, fell in love with the queen and made no attempt to hide it. The king's young nephew, who was the king's ward in punishment for the boy's father taking up arms against Spain, joined the group of teenagers, stirring the pot. All this comes straight from historical record. Toss in facts like the Queen's mother was Catherine de Medici, known for her reliance on soothsayers and magic, and here is a story begging to be written. After plumbing sources referencing Spanish court records, legal documents, and the characters' correspondence, and then poring over Sofonisba's paintings and drawings, I had all the truth-is-stranger-than-fiction material a novelist could ever desire. I just needed to imagine the connections.

**What was it about Sofonisba's life that made you want to write a book about her?**

I started out thinking I was going to write a book about Felipe (Philip) II. Like most people with a little English history under their belt, I mainly knew his name as the king who had led the Spanish Armada. I had always read what a cruel character he was, fighting England and good Queen Elizabeth I, and that he was the terrible despot behind the Spanish Inquisition. I assumed that he deserved his reputation, which has come to be called "The Black Legend".

Then, while researching for another project, I happened to read that he was very close to his daughter, Isabella Clara Eugenia. I also noted that being a remarkably modest and private man, Felipe wouldn't allow anyone to write his biography. This caught my interest--what if I wrote a story from this beloved daughter's point of view, having her attempt, out of love and pride, to write his biography? Wouldn't it be a heartbreaking surprise if, in her research, it slowly dawned on her what a monster her beloved father was?

The surprise was on me. As I researched Felipe, I found that he was a devoted family man who loved learning, music, art, architecture, and pottering around in the garden. He was so fascinated by nature that he wrote a treatise on the diversity of animals; he would grow to hate

the traditional Spanish pastime of bullfighting. I found that his reputation as a cruel, possibly insane, tyrant was part of a smear campaign waged 400 years ago by the Dutch and English, people who had a vested interest in making him a villain—they stood to enhance their own power by lessening his. It worked. Centuries later the man is still despised, even by many in his own country. While he committed grave moral errors, such as allowing the Spanish Inquisition to continue under his reign, was he any more bloodthirsty than the other rulers of his time? Even now, it seems radical to suggest that he was no worse, and in some respects he might even have been a little better.

I decided I would write about Felipe in a way that would present both the damaging evidence about his life and also aspects of his good side. I wanted the reader to decide whether Felipe was good or bad or something in between.

When looking around for a narrator for this story cooking in my mind, a striking portrait in a biography on Felipe caught my attention. The artist was Sofonisba Anguissola, a lady in waiting to the Spanish Queen. Once I started researching Sofonisba, I realized that she, too, had a story that needed to be told. Then when I saw her painting of her sisters playing chess (with her nurse looking on, amused, in the background), the deal was cinched. I had to know this talented person whose love for her subjects and passion for her work radiated out of her paintings.

**It is difficult to imagine today, at least in Western societies, that women were once regarded entirely as the property of men, whether they were servants or queens. How is this seen in your novel?**

Since even in the modern, relatively enlightened US, the right for a woman to vote wasn't signed into law until 1920, and women are still underrepresented in politics, business, scientific professions, etc., it's not really a stretch to imagine how in Renaissance Italy and Spain 400 years ago, they were strictly considered as chattel. In the world depicted in **THE CREATION OF EVE**, all women, no matter how high born, were entirely subject to the whims of men. From Sofonisba's peasant nurse, to the Queen of Spain, not one of them is free. The Queen may get to wear beautiful clothing and jewels from head to toe, and she never wants for any material comfort, but she's forced into a marriage with a man many years her senior who could throw her off at any moment if she doesn't bear him a son. And Sofonisba, also an educated and relatively privileged woman for that time period, lived in fear that her loss of virginity would be revealed, thus destroying the reputation she had worked so hard to build—and her dear Papa's reputation as well.

**The sixteenth century, when your novel is set, was a time of great political, cultural, and religious upheaval in Europe. What were some of the major events that were taking place?**

The biggest catalyst for change during that time was the Reformation. It was so much more than a religious movement—it was a sea change in political power. Until Luther protested about the rampant corruption in the Catholic Church and suggested that the common man should be able to approach God without the assistance of the priesthood, the Pope and the Church had the final say in all decisions affecting everyone in Europe. The Reformation allowed the common man to rise up to challenge the Pope and the rulers who were representatives of the Roman Catholic Church on earth. It was forward thinking of Elizabeth I of England to embrace Protestantism and thus dodge the uprising sweeping around the world. She chose to persecute

Catholics instead. On the other hand, Felipe stayed loyal to the Church due to his own religious beliefs, a desire to please his father, and his innate inflexibility—one of his character flaws.

Shock waves from the Reformation even reached the world of art. Because Protestant mobs were destroying churches and the art in them in protest of the Pope's rule, Catholic church leaders decided to closely examine all art in places of worship for any signs of impropriety. They wanted to remove the excuse the mobs had for smashing art—that it was decadent and unholy, like the rest of the corrupt Church. Michelangelo's work, in its celebration of the naked male body, came in for sharp criticism.

Meanwhile, an influx of gold and silver from the New World caused strife between the countries trying to grab for it, much like the struggles for oil today. Tension heightened between Felipe and Elizabeth I of England when Elizabeth sanctioned piracy of the Spanish fleets in hope of siphoning off some of this wealth. Seeing that Felipe was becoming preoccupied with England, the ruler of the Ottoman Empire, Suleiman the Magnificent, threatened Spain's Mediterranean holdings. At this time, too, the Netherlands tried to make its break with Spanish rule.

### **How did you research this book?**

I have a wall full of books at home that I bought as I educated myself on the Spanish court, Renaissance Italy and art, and the culture and natural attributes of Spain. Next came trips to Spain, planned around places my characters had been. In order to experience how the places smelled, looked, and sounded as my characters would have experienced them, I picked my way around piles of mule manure on the sloping hillside farmyard containing the ruins of the once lovely palace of Valsain. I hiked down overgrown pathways along the milky waters of the Rio Tajo in Aranjuez; recorded the sound of bells in Toledo; wandered among the mellow stone piers in the hushed nave of the cathedral at Segovia. I also thought it important to eat Spanish food and to drink the wine—not all research is painful.

In addition, to understand Sofi's life as an artist, I took a painting class, where I quickly learned I was in way over my head if I thought picking up painting would be a snap. I was fascinated to learn about the many decisions figurative painters must make when composing a picture. Knowing these rules now informs my appreciation of art, and I hope passing on some of these considerations might do the same for my reader. Sadly, though, on a technical level, I never got past correctly shading a pear.

### **How widely known was Michelangelo's homosexuality in his own day? What were the attitudes of the time toward it? Was Michelangelo's sexuality ever used against him?**

His homosexuality was well known in the higher circles of Florence and Rome, and periodically his enemies would go to the authorities, accusing him of what was then thought as the most hideous crime against nature. He was saved only by his friendship with the various Popes, who were willing to look the other way as long as he worked on their personal projects, which often included their own tombs. It wasn't exactly extortion—he was paid handsomely for his work and the popes were happy to contribute to the Michelangelo publicity machine—but he was obliged to spend many years on these projects. But mainly, when it came to his sexuality, Michelangelo's most unrelenting torturer was himself. His poems berating himself are heartbreaking, though in a moment of self-forgiveness he wrote, "If all our emotions displeased heaven, why would God have created the world?"

**Have you always been interested in history?**

From my father, an electrical engineer at the phone company by trade, I learned to love history and traveling on a budget. My dad was the Rick Steves of American camping. Every summer we went on three-week camping trips (hotels were too expensive for our family of seven kids and for the amount of traveling Dad wanted to do) that featured the history and nature of the United States. There was always hiking and swimming, but learning was the main event, at least in my mind. I never did learn to swim well but I can tell you where there are good fossils in Ohio and what Lincoln's boyhood cabin looks like. The rest of the year, trips to the local parks, history museums, and libraries figured into our daily life. I have very fond memories of following Dad on my bike with my sister, going to get our allotment of two books at the local library. It should come as no surprise that I based Sofi's mild-mannered father on my own gentle dad.

**The New World (America) begins to assume great importance in Europe during the time period in which your novel is set, with all sorts of wealth, exotic plants and animals, and new foods, like the tomato, flowing eastward across the Atlantic to Europe. How do we see this in your novel?**

I wanted to show how New World foods that we now take for granted on both sides of the Atlantic, such as the potato, the tomato, chile peppers, and corn were just beginning to be studied during Felipe's reign. Felipe, always greatly interested in nature, commissioned the real-life doctor Francisco Hernández to record and gather specimens in their New World setting. In fact, I considered Francisco Hernández as a love interest for Sofi when I was first writing the book, but I had to look for another candidate when I found out that he was much older than Sofi and married.

The gold flowing across the Atlantic helped replenish Felipe's coffers at a time when he desperately needed money to finance the wars started by his father's claims around the world. But the New World gold had an unforeseen bad effect. With the riches being piped in from abroad came a surge in the demand for imported goods. There was no need to manufacture goods for exchange--now ready cash was on hand to buy foreign products. Spain became dependent on imports; manufacturing languished. So when pirates interrupted the flow of gold, which was already beginning to lessen naturally, Spain found itself without a means to pay for the goods it required. Sixty years after Felipe's reign ended, the Spanish monarchy was so poor they could only afford eggs for dinner. This is not an exaggeration, but a fact. The economy was in a trough so deep it took over 300 years to recover. Now few Americans even know of the great Spanish Empire or Felipe, though his empire rivaled the proportions of ancient Rome--a lesson, perhaps, for our times, of what happens to an economy when a country has too many wars to support and becomes too dependent on imported goods.

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