

Mystery writer has divine inspiration

By Jenny Slafkosky

CONTRIBUTOR

PAMELA Cranston isn't afraid to talk about murder, or about God.

An Episcopal priest and former nun, Cranston is the author of a theological thriller, "The Madonna Murders," that may get under a few collars;

"I'm sure I'll get criticism from both (liberal and conservative) ends," says the Oakland resident. "But I'm very pro-Catholic, reverence is very important to me, and I did not intend to write a book that would undermine that."

Between working for Dublin's Hope Hospice, assisting at St. Cuthbert's Episcopal Church in Oakland and

working at a life-care facility for seniors it hardly seems that Cranston would have the time to tell any stories of her own, but somehow she manages. A self-proclaimed rebel who has "seen the other side of the tracks," she has been a serious writer since college.

"When I was at Stetson College (in Florida) I even re-wrote my own meter per meter version of T.S. Eliot's poem 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.' It was called 'The Love Song of J.C. Bilbo Hempstein.'"

Her first work of fiction, "The Madonna Murders," which should hit bookstores in November, follows Andrea West, a young theology professor in Berkeley, on a quest to recover the stolen Icon of

Kazan and solve the case of her friend Michael's mysterious death. In the process of searching for clues about the case, Andrea faces difficult questions about her faith and her own spiritual quest.

"I didn't want to have a 'fast food' mystery novel, one you consume and then forget what you read," says Cranston. "That's the tension, you've got to write something that feeds you but doesn't bore you."

Cranston notes that Andrea West's spiritual journey through the novel is a distillation of her own spiritual journey. "

"Anglicans and Episcopalians

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EPISCOPAL PRIEST Pamela Cranston is the author of the mystery novel "The Madonna Murders."

Author weaves quest into mystery

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live with paradox," she says. "We cherish the gray areas."

Cranston is quick to note that "The Madonna Murders" will have an appeal that is wider than just a religious crowd. "I think most mystery readers will be attracted to it, as well as anyone with a spiritual sense," she says. "It's a quest novel and that's something most people can relate to."

Set in both San Francisco and Berkeley, "The Madonna Murders" includes site-specific details and a wealth of history about the Bay Area.

She says she learned a lot about the "secret" Bay Area, especially its lesser-known Russian history.

Cranston, who did not grow up with a religious background, was a college student when she met an Episcopal priest with the gift of healing and had an experience that changed her life for good. She joined the Episcopal Church when she was 20 and went to England at 23 to become the first American 1st Order Anglican Franciscan nun.

After her stay in England,

Cranston helped to start the first Anglican CSF house in San Francisco and devoted her time to working for charity.

After several years of working in the Tenderloin, the Mission and elsewhere in the city, she was burned out.

She moved on to alcohol rehabilitation work and also began working at a seniors clinic and took on the role of hospice counseling. She attended the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley and received a Master of Divinity Degree in 1988.

"While I was in seminary my brother was diagnosed with chronic hepatitis," she says. "He died on Christmas Eve in 1995 and I gave him the last rites. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done, but it also inspired me to continue working in hospice. It was a natural evolution from my brother's death."

Now at Hope Hospice in Dublin, Cranston, a published poet and author of a variety of non-fiction works, devotes her time to talking with patients.

"I'm in the best profession in the world," says Cranston. "I get to hear stories about people's lives, their characters and their life

history. I'm the chaplain and, if people are open to me, my job is to support them spiritually and emotionally. I listen, do funerals, pray with people, anoint them or do confessions. I also support the hospice staff."

With the Bay Area's diverse range of backgrounds and belief systems, Cranston must find a way to connect with a variety of people. "I work with everyone from staunch Roman Catholics to Buddhists," she says. "You have to learn to speak their language and find common threads."

At St. Cuthbert's on Sundays, Cranston leads an East-West Contemplative Mass, which combines meditative practice with Holy Communion.

"I feel like I'm just starting," says Cranston. "Every family I sit down with is new, unknown territory and it's the same with every new book and every new sermon."

Cranston will read from "The Madonna Murders" on Nov. 16 at DIESEL, A Book Store, 5433 College Ave., Oakland. (510) 653-9965.

You can e-mail Jenny Slafkosky at: jslafkosky@angnewspapers.com or call (925) 416-4856.