

# THE RED PENCIL

## *CINDY VALLAR analyzes the work behind finished manuscripts. In this issue, she profiles MICHELLE CAMERON'S The Fruit of Their Hands.*

In 1996 Twentieth Century Fox released *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes. Although nominated for an Oscar and other awards, the film never worked for me, because it took place not in the past, but in modern times.<sup>1</sup> The setting didn't fit my conception of the story, especially since the star-crossed lovers on whom the play was based actually died in Verona during medieval times. Setting is a crucial element in historical fiction. It aids the reader in visualizing the time and place, which in turn allows the story to blossom into a tale that is both realistic and believable.

Michelle Cameron's *The Fruit of Her Hands* recounts the story of Shira of Ashkenaz, a rabbi's daughter who, unlike most girls of the thirteenth century, sometimes studies the Talmud alongside her father's male students. Although she learns a woman's proper place in society and within the Jewish community, her education and close relationship with her father bring her into contact with two men. One is Nicholas Donin, a student with radical views that eventually lead

to his excommunication; he converts to Catholicism, then as a priest seeks vengeance against Jews by charging them with heresy. The other man is Rabbi Meir ben Baruch, a much-sought-after Talmudic scholar who becomes Shira's husband. Their love grows and together they cope with historic events and Jewish persecution in France, Germany, and England.

One segment of the book takes place in Paris, the location chosen because of an incident in Meir's life. Michelle explains: "[A]s a 26-year-old student, he witnessed the burning of the Talmud and wrote an elegy that clearly conveyed his despair. Jews still include this elegy when they recite laments during the yearly Tisha B'av service, mourning the great tragedies of the Jewish people. So it was always obvious that a major part of my story would need

to take place in Paris."

When asked during an interview what she would ask Rabbi Meir if she could, Michelle responded, "What was it like to stand there in that Paris market square and watch the burning of the



Talmud?”<sup>2</sup> Left only with her imagination, she wrote the scene “with tears pouring down my face.” To recreate that event, first she had to “rebuild” a Paris that no longer exists – the medieval city during 1234 through 1242. Unable to visit France, she found “[b]ooks about artwork from the period . . . particularly helpful. So were online descriptions of tours for medieval Paris, which gave me a sense of what it would be like to walk the streets. One particular website talked about the Paris of Philippe-Auguste<sup>3</sup> . . . including details of the city and everyday life. This gave me a glimmer of insight into such aspects as the markets, the walls, and the construction of streets and houses. While this online source only touches upon many of these matters, it gave me the background I needed to be able to research further.”

The reader’s first introduction to medieval Paris comes from Shira’s perspective. An early draft of this scene follows:

*The city of Paris was much larger and more crowded than anywhere else on earth. At least, that’s what I told my father as the two of us drove through the crenellated stone guard towers at Port de Buci to enter the city on a humid summer’s day in 4994 — or, as the Christians count the years, 1234. We bumped mercilessly down the narrow streets on the small donkey cart packed high with the contents of my dowry. But my father, who had spent much of his youth traveling from city to city as a scholar, just laughed.*

*“It is certain that Paris will be a great city some day, songbird,” he said, slipping naturally into his schoolteacher manner with me, making me sad to think that this would be one of the last times I would be instructed by him. “Think of the immense walled enclosure we just passed through — added by His Majesty Philippe-Auguste — or of his fortress of the Louvre, located just around the bend of the wall over there to our left. The Palais du Ru is directly ahead of us. And beyond our line of sight, the towers of the enormous Notre Dame cathedral rise on*

*an island in the Seine River. Consider also the new center of learning, the University, on the Left Bank. All these grand edifices make it a far more civilized city than when I studied here in my youth, when it was more swamp than civilization, and there were more frogs and toads than people. . . . Paris seems large to you because you’re a little country bird, used to pecking your worms in the quiet shelter of our small country town. Hmmm?”*

*It would not have been right for me to contradict my father, but, looking around at the close-packed, half-timbered stone edifices leaning against one another, crowding over the cobbled streets, I could not imagine how a city could contain more buildings or more people. The smell rising from the streets was nauseating, a mix of dung, fetid sewers, and rotting garbage. As we halted, waiting for several passers-by to sidle past, our donkey shied and brayed, raising its hoofs as if in pain or fear. Looking down, I saw we had stepped into a nest of small rodents, which, apparently indignant and not a bit intimidated by our donkey’s size or girth, retaliated by biting its legs before fleeing to a more secluded spot.*

*We crossed the bridge to Ile du Cite at Petit Point, and turned into rue de la Colombe — Dove Street — located near the newly completed cathedral. We would reside here for several nights until the wedding, at the home of one of Papa’s old students. The houses along the street were all new, rebuilt, we were told, after a flood had submerged the neighborhood some ten years back. It was then, my father’s student, Itzik ben Ya’aon, explained, that the street had received its name. Two doves had nested in a windowsill of a house owned by an old mason who was creating sculptures for Notre Dame. The rising waters had caused the house to cave in, and one of the doves was trapped. But the other remained loyal to its mate, bringing it seeds and water in its beak for a weary time until the waters receded and the mason could free the bird and restore his home. To commemorate such a charming tale of devotion, the street was renamed and the mason chiseled stone medallions into delightful dove shapes for each of his neighbors, who mounted them on their*

*exterior walls as part of the rebuilding.*

While this draft provides some clues as to what Paris looked like, the medieval city remains one-dimensional at this point. Michelle admits that “writing description comes hard to me. As a reader, I tend to skip over long sections of description, even while I admire the skill of any author who can make me feel that I’m there. In my own writing, I’m most absorbed by character development and motivation, and in constructing the plot. So, just as when I’m reading, I tend to skimp on description.” Her editor, however, noted this sparse description, so Michelle added significant details to “help round out the picture of what Shira, a newcomer to the city, would observe as she entered the gates. I particularly wanted to give a sense of how much larger the city was in comparison to her small town — and the added details of what the people were doing as she traveled the narrow streets helped to do that.” Another addition to the description concerned Notre Dame, which only received brief mention in the draft.

*The city of Paris was much larger and more crowded than anywhere else on earth. At least, that’s what I told my father as the two of us drove through the Benedictine Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, a fortified church with tall, gray towers built centuries ago. We saw monks directing workmen near the sluggish Seine River, constructing buildings to be used by students of the newly founded University of Paris. We rode through the crenellated stone guard towers at Porte de Buci to enter the city. It was a humid summer’s day in 4994 — or, as the Christians count the years, 1234. I was nineteen years old. We bumped down the narrow streets on the small donkey cart packed high with the contents of my dowry.*

*“Paris will be a great city someday, songbird,” Papa said, slipping naturally into his schoolteacher manner, making me sad this would be one of the last times he would instruct me. “Think of the immense walled*

enclosure we just passed through — added by our king's grandfather, Phillipe Auguste — or of the Louvre, the great fortress just around the bend to our left. Le Palais Royal is directly ahead. Beyond our line of sight, the towers of Notre-Dame rise on an island in the Seine River. When I was last in Paris, the cathedral walls were still being constructed and now the work is nearly complete. With these grand edifices Paris seems more civilized than when I studied here in my youth. Back then it was more swamp than civilization and more frogs and toads lived here than people.

... Paris seems large to you because you're a little country bird, used to pecking your worms in the quiet shelter of our small country town. Hmmm?"

My upbringing would not let me contradict my father, but, looking around at the close-packed, half-timbered stone buildings leaning against one another, crowding over the cobbled streets, I could not imagine a city with more buildings or more people. We passed immense stone churches and monasteries where men and even some women shut themselves up to pray their lives away. I could hear the chanting of Latin prayers drifting from arched windows as we drove by. Out on the bustling streets, people were everywhere — lounging in doorways, arguing at the market stalls, drinking companionably at small tables set out under cloth awnings upwind of the stench. When you caught a whiff, the smell rising from the streets was a nauseating mix of dung, fetid sewers, and rotting garbage. Our cart stopped as our donkey shied, raising its hoofs as if in pain or fear. Looking down, I saw he had stepped into a nest of small rodents. Not intimidated by our donkey's size or girth, they retaliated by biting its legs before fleeing to a more secluded spot.

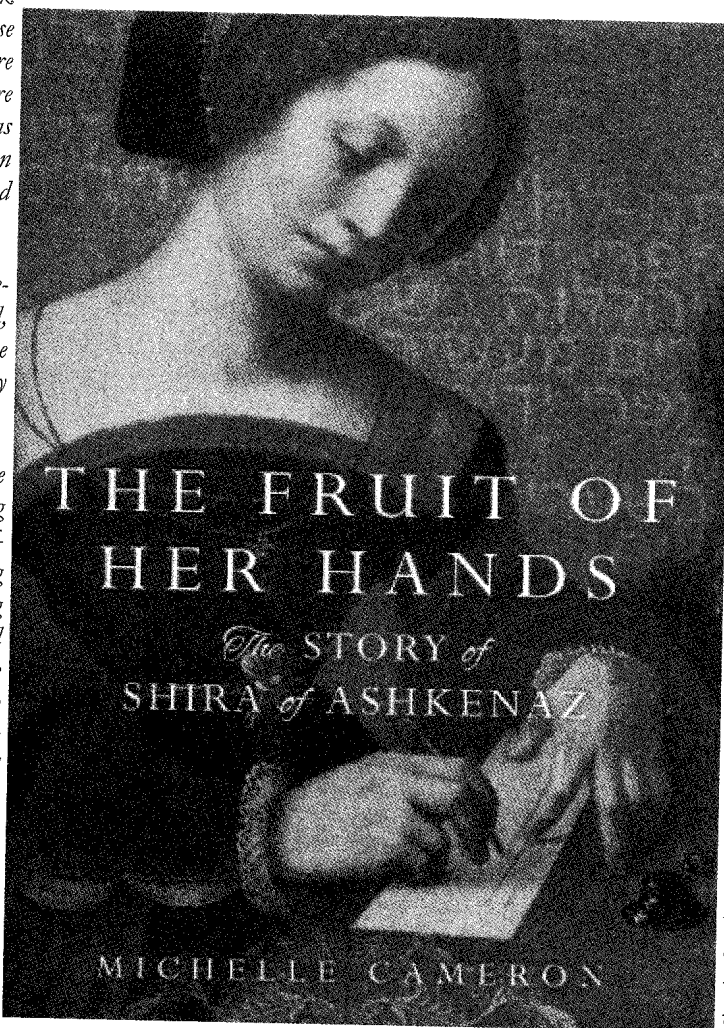
We crossed the bridge to Ile du Cité at Petit Point, and turned into rue de la Colombe

— Dove Street — located near the newly completed cathedral. I caught my breath as the immense walls of the Cathédrale de Notre-Dame rose in front of me. I had never seen a church as large or as beautiful, with its seemingly delicate stonework tracing exquisite patterns on its outside walls. An army of workmen was busy there, some

at the home of one of his former students, Yitzik ben Ya'acov, until the wedding took place. The houses along rue de la Colombe were all new, rebuilt after the neighborhood had been flooded ten years earlier. It was then, Yitzik explained to us on the first evening after our arrival, that the street had received its name. Two doves had nested in a windowsill of a house owned by a mason who worked at Notre-Dame. The rising waters caused the house to cave in, trapping one of the doves. But the second remained loyal to its mate, bringing it seeds and water in its beak until the waters receded and the mason could free the bird and restore his home. The street was renamed to commemorate this charming tale of devotion. The mason chiseled stone medallions into delightful dove shapes for each of his neighbors, who mounted them in the walls of their new homes.

She added more information about the cathedral because her editor "pointed out that all of my readers, Jews and non-Jews alike, would be familiar with Notre-Dame, and that speaking of the church would help them feel that they were, in fact, entering the medieval city of Paris. So much has been written about Notre-Dame's construction that it was easy to find telling details, such as the 'stern-faced Madonna,' which was an image I fell in love with. Who knows what the stonecutter was feeling that [day] as he chipped away at this particular Madonna's face?"

As for the story of the doves, I asked if this was an imaginary tale. Michelle wrote, "I stumbled across this charming story when I was researching the architecture of Paris, hoping to find some photos of medieval buildings. The legend appeared in an article written by Arthur Gillette in an online tourist publication, *Paris*



working on strange stone creatures in a courtyard while a master craftsman chipped away at a marble stone, creating a stern-faced Madonna who would eventually be brought to form one of the figures in the portal of the cloisters. The laborers were busiest around the nave, where they were building a series of small chapels. Still others were working with pieces of colored glass that I would recognize in later years as part of the huge rose stained-glass window.

Papa and I had been invited to be guests

*Tower Eiffel News*, "Where and What Is the Oldest House in Paris."<sup>4</sup> As the author was careful to categorize the tale as a 'legend,' its authenticity is suspect. But I thought it was a perfect story for Shira to hear right before her wedding, with its overtones of love and loyalty."

The first time I read this section, I hadn't taken much notice of how much emphasis Michelle placed on the Christian elements of Paris, perhaps because I was unaware of the events that would happen there. When I compared the early draft to the published version of the scene, however, I became aware of these components. Michelle told me, "I wish I could say something deep, like it's a metaphor for Shira and Meir's impending encounter with the Christian clergy and nobles of Paris. But truth be told, it's because most references to Paris in the 1200s center around Christian life, and this includes the most vivid descriptions I could find. During this time period, the Jews lived side by side with their Gentile neighbors – they would not be separated behind ghetto walls for at least two centuries. So Shira would have walked through the streets of a largely Christian Paris, witnessing such sights on a regular basis."

Her research and the rewriting accomplished what the early draft lacked. Paris was no longer one-dimensional. These changes brought the city to life, and Michelle made certain that in recreating this Paris, she remained true to history.

I didn't become aware of *The Fruit of Her Hands* until I read an e-mail on the HNS list. It intrigued me enough to visit Michelle's website to learn more.<sup>5</sup> Then I borrowed the book from my library. I became captivated by Shira's story, but never realized she was a fictional character until I read the Author's Note at the end of

the story. I asked Michelle how she went about portraying Shira so convincingly.

*The medieval historical record, with a few notable exceptions, is silent on the subject of women. Despite Meir's copious writings – I have a two-volume work that collected all the fragments of his letters – he said virtually nothing about his family. Clearly he had a wife – every Jewish man of that era had the duty to marry and have children – and he wrote about his daughters and their husbands at one point, when speaking of his flight from Rothenberg.*

*But this was a period when women weren't even listed in family trees. In fact, when writing about women in his letters, Meir often followed the convention of calling the woman "Rachel" or "Leah" – using those names as a kind of anonymous stand-in for everywoman.*

*So if I was going to write from the perspective of Rabbi Meir's wife, I had to create the character. Frankly, this gave me a lot more freedom than if I had to adhere to historical accounts about her. I did carefully consider whose daughter she would be (her father, Sir Morel, was a real-life character, as are all of the rabbis in the book), particularly because of the imagined love triangle between Shira, Meir, and Nicholas Domin. Domin would name four rabbis to defend the Talmud before the royal court, and Sir Morel was one of them. Since much of what Domin did was prompted by his need for revenge, it would make sense that he would have once been a student of Sir Morel's.*

*Shira's personality and her pronounced love for learning were somewhat of a conceit. As I delved into Meir's philosophy toward women, there were many aspects that seemed particularly medieval. This was especially true regarding his approach toward women and worship. I felt I needed a strong-willed woman to debate these points with him. But I also did not want Shira to become a proto-feminist – it was important that she remain true to her age. So while Shira would argue with her husband, she won very few of*

*these disputes. She had to make her peace with a secondary role in life, with her major responsibilities being her husband and family. I think this struggle makes her a more realistic character.*

Like many writers, Michelle works full-time as a creative director and account manager for a digital agency. She rises every morning at 4:30 to write, and has recently finished "a novel about the Babylonian exile of the Judean people." For those in the United States, she maintains a list of her upcoming appearances at her website. She loves to meet readers and fellow HNS members.

<sup>1</sup> *Romeo and Juliet* is based on a historical event that took place in 1303, and Shakespeare's play was performed for the first time around 1595.

<sup>2</sup> Johanna Ginsberg's "If Rabbi Meir's wife had a voice" appeared in the February 24, 2010 issue of the *New Jersey Jewish News*.

<sup>3</sup> Readers can visit this website at <http://www.philippe-auguste.com/uk/>.

<sup>4</sup> The article can be found at <http://www.paris-eiffel-tower-news.com/paris-stories/paris-story-oldest-house.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle's website can be found at <http://www.michelle-cameron.com>.

*A special note to authors: If you have a published or soon-to-be-published historical novel you'd like to see spotlighted in "The Red Pencil," please contact me at [cindy@cindyvallar.com](mailto:cindy@cindyvallar.com) and I'll send you the particulars. Keep in mind you must have an early draft of your manuscript available.*

*Cindy Vallar is a freelance editor, an associate editor for Solander, and the author of The Scottish Thistle ([www.cindyvallar.com/scottishthistle.html](http://www.cindyvallar.com/scottishthistle.html)). A retired librarian, she also writes about pirates, presents workshops, and reviews books.*