

# READER'S GUIDE

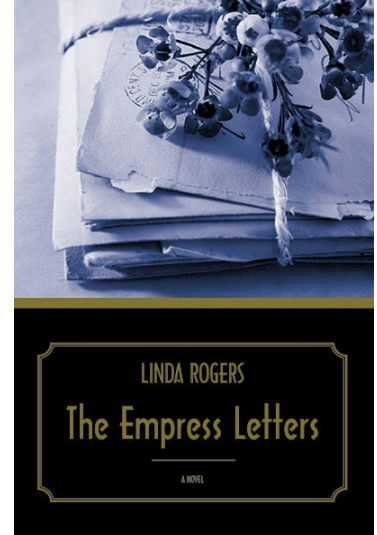
## *The Empress Letters* by Linda Rogers



*Cormorant Books Inc.*

### INTRODUCING *The Empress Letters*

Set in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *The Empress Letters* is about a respectable family caught in the opium triangle between San Francisco, Hong King, and Victoria. At the centre of this tale is Poppy von Stronheim, garden painter and daughter of Nora, who is a fashionable horticulturist by day, a smuggler by night. Poppy is nearing the end of her life and her daughter has gone missing in China. As Poppy journeys toward the Chinese coast aboard the famed *Empress of Asia*, she begins to reconsider her life. In a series of letters to her daughter Precious, she describes her past, a world of miscegenation, murder, passion, and intrigue. Here we experience a side of Colonial Victoria not often seen, growing up during the twilight years of an Imperial Age. *The Empress Letters* is a world of scents and plants, secrets and lies, etiquette and whispers.



### IMPORTANT THEMES

#### *Almost famous*

Numerous historical figures are incorporated into the story alongside the fictional ones. Highlighting the moguls that helped shape the social and artistic landscape of the twenties sets the stage for Poppy's personal journey. Emily Carr's real life struggle to be recognized as an artist lends credibility to Poppy's similar struggles, while Tallulah Bankhead's outrageous antics reflect Poppy's own foray into the sexual unknown. Emily and Tallulah are the forerunners of social movements in which Poppy is implicated, though not integral.

#### *Girl power*

In *The Empress Letters*, from Nora's "lavender marriage," to the effeminate Stanford, through to Poppy and Nora's treatment of the used-and-abused Alec, women are in control of business and society. When Poppy looks for a strong male presence in Olivier ("Olivier covered us with his umbrella and I felt sure he'd protect us."), she discovers she has entered a sham marriage and is at the mercy of Olivier's vindictive mother. Muses Poppy, "Perhaps if I married, I could put my sexual demons to rest." However, on her marriage night she realizes, "Poor Olivier didn't have a clue how to make love to a woman and I was past showing him." Exasperated by her inability to find the patriarchal male she desires, Poppy asks Tallulah, "Did any heterosexual men survive the war?"

#### *A rose by any other name*

Flowers are a recurring theme in the book. As a child, Poppy recalls that "her [mother's] enthusiasm for deadheading the flowers frightened [her]," because, she says, "I knew I was an imperfect flower." Later, Poppy insists on painting flowers in an effort to please her mother, though the flower paintings quickly take on a deeper meaning. Boulie says that Poppy "paints what she loves." When asked what Poppy loves, Poppy answers, "flowers," while "Boulie said, quite clearly, 'Vaginas.'" When Poppy visits England, she is excited about the new artistic styles, declaring, "Most of all, I hoped to express the sexual freedom of flowers."

#### *Ying/yang*

Throughout, various characters toy with androgyny. As a child, Poppy decides her mother might prefer her as a boy. Describes Poppy, "Freed from satin bows and fragile cloth, I swaggered in my shorts and enjoyed my bare chest with nipples pleasantly erect in the wind." When she cuts off her long hair, Poppy looks in the mirror and

declares, “I saw what I wanted, her boy.” In later life, on board the *Empress of Asia*, Poppy decides to “trade roles” with Tony for the evening. Says Poppy, “Since I have a bob, [my hair] isn’t much longer than his. We could be brother and sister, or sister and sister.”

### *The lure of the exotic*

Poppy is simultaneously lured and repelled by the exoticism of Asia. Her obsession with Chou is laced with references to his exotic “otherness.” Says Poppy, “I fixated on Chou’s beautiful fingers and the jade and gold ring he wore on his right hand.” For Poppy, Chou represents the beautiful mysteries of the Orient, as she expresses during a moment of intimacy: “I smelled the Orient on him, as if her were a boat sailing into me with its cargo of spices.” Yet she also fears the unknown of the Orient, particularly apparent when she visits the house of Lady Cowes-Wentworth-Cowes as a child, where the servant, Quon Sam, “told ... lurid stories of Chinese banquets, where monkey-brain soup was presented in the skull of a freshly killed ape.” Describes Poppy, “Lady Cowes-Wentworth-Cowes’ carved Oriental furniture cast long shadows in her dimly lit dining room,” and, “Her long-nosed face — red lips, black charcoaled eyebrows and powdered skin ... was a scary mask in the candlelight.”

### *Voyeurism*

Though Poppy has a rebellious streak, she is only willing to go so far, experiencing instead “the vicarious pleasure [she takes] in seeing others take risks.” Poppy directs this voyeurism at a number of people. Though enchanted by Daphne’s “pillowy mouth and white teeth,” Poppy declares, “I wouldn’t make a habit of Daphne — she was too dangerous.” Poppy’s dominant obsession is Boulie. When Boulie suffers an attack of hysteria, Poppy recalls, “I should have put my arm around her, taken her into my bed and held her all night long, but I didn’t. I simply stared. She was beautiful and sad standing there — mesmerizing.” Though she shares in some of the taboos of Boulie’s wild side, such as when she visits the opium den, Poppy says, “I would not do this with her again — nothing in excess.” Poppy’s approach to rebellion is articulated by the difference she observes between Emily and Nora. While “Miss Carr was disheveled,” Poppy’s mother sells opium and smuggles booze, “yet [was] to all appearances a lady.”

## Q&A WITH LINDA ROGERS

### 1. What was the inspiration for this novel?

I tell stories to my grandchildren. Sophie is the eldest. She is quite an artist. I began telling her about an artistic girl who lived in a big house that was more like a castle. The girl was not me but the house was my great-grandmother’s. As I remembered more details and invented characters, the novel began to write itself. Obviously, I did not include Poppy’s frank descriptions of her sexual adventures. Her assumption was that Precious would be old enough for the conversations they had missed having. The story is Poppy’s attempt to introduce herself to her daughter.

I don’t like to miss an opportunity to educate my grandchildren while we are having fun. Victoria is The Garden City, but many have suffered to support its beauty. I wanted to tell her about Chinese indentured labour, the violation of our First Nations, and the misery of coal miners. There is more to Victoria than beautiful landscapes.

### 2. What kind of research did you do before writing this novel?

I have always been a good talker and my mother was surprised when she read *The Empress Letters*. “Boy, she said, you had your ears and eyes open.” I was born in the remains of the Empire. People still lived this way, although many were in reduced circumstances after two wars and a depression. They had their snobberies, and their bigotries, and I noticed. Many of the grannies I knew had furniture and servants brought from China. Someone actually told me not to put money in my mouth because the Chinaman might have touched it.

Victoria was more English than England, with its strengths and weaknesses exaggerated.

When I started writing, I read everything I could about local history, the opium trade, the prohibition, real characters in the book, China and the condition of indentured labourers. Then, when I had a Canada Council grant, I travelled to London to look at artifacts in the British Museum, and the Victoria, and Albert. I followed Poppy to London, Hawaii and San Francisco.

**3. In the book, you offer some rather frank discussions of female sexuality. Do you think sexual experimentation was common during the 20s?**

This is two questions. "Why?" is implicit in the first observation, and the answer is that women in general have kept quiet about their sexuality in our culture and this has led to dishonesty between mothers and daughters. Poppy feels this acutely because her daughter doesn't even know the truth of their relationship. It is very important to her to set things right, especially because of the restraint between her and Nora, some of which led to tragedy.

Sexual experimentation has always been a part of women's lives, from adolescent crushes to obsession with horses, those powerful sexual engines. Poppy has heard about Emma Goldman's "cures" for neurasthenic women. This is documented. In the twenties, things became freer as the result of the Great War and the decimation of a generation of men. Poppy is not so much sexually adventurous as needing the intimacy she didn't have with her mother. In fact, she tells us about every one of her sexual experiences. How many people can do that?

**4. Why did you decide to incorporate historical figures?**

My mother asked me the same question yesterday. Would the book be as textured without name recognition? I decided to incorporate these characters because they were part of the true story of Victoria. Why not include anecdotal information about people of interest. There is no one mentioned in the book that I have not had first hand information about. I thought it would be interesting to document that.

Dola Dunsmuir was my grandmother's friend and her daughter's godmother. I just finished polishing the tea service Dola gave my grandmother as a wedding present because my mother thought it would be nice to use it at the book launch. The sherry decanter and glasses that Poppy mentions, a gift from the Prince of Wales with his crest engraved in the glass, were given to my grandmother by the Prince. Talullah was Dola's special friend, and a friend of my grandmother's.

Emily Carr gave painting lessons to our aunt, Elspeth Cherniavsky. It was Elspeth who wrote to me, "Miss Carr smelt."

Marc Chagall was a friend and neighbour to the Cherniavskys, musicians who left Russia at the same time. He gave paintings to family members and was loved for himself.

I wanted to make these people part of the story because in fact they were part of our history. The novel is fiction, but they are real, as is the landscape with its upper and lower worlds.



**ABOUT LINDA**

Linda Rogers is the author of several books of poetry, young adult fiction, and two novels; these include *Friday Water* and *Say My Name*. She has also edited anthologies of essays on the work of several major Canadian poets, including Bill Bissett, P.K. Page, and Al Purdy. Her national and international award-winning work has been translated into Spanish, Hebrew, German, French, Gaelic, Hindi and Farsi. Linda lives in Victoria, B.C., where she is a full-time writer and grandmother.

**5. The narrative voice Poppy uses to discuss the present is more mature than the one she uses to discuss the past. Have Poppy's experiences and physical ailments made her old before her time?**

Poppy is old and young at the same time because illness and tragedy have forced her life into three short decades. She has wisdom and the detachment of the invalid. On the other hand, she is very naïve, because she has been infantilized. The most important decisions in her life are very under-informed; her marriage to Olivier, for example, and the sexual naiveté that allowed her to believe that her baby could only belong to Alec. Of course, she knows how difficult it would have been for Precious to grow up multi-racial in Victoria, and she did sleep with Alec in order to make a family with him, the family they both needed, and to create his immortality as he went off to war.

Her world is limited by her circumstances, which makes her more self-absorbed and concerned with her appearance and relationships than she might otherwise have been because she is essentially a nice person.

**6. Could you discuss Poppy's personality? She is in some ways a revolutionary, yet will only go so far, often falling back on voyeurism.**

Of course she is a voyeur. Poppy's personality has been formed by emotional deprivation, grief, and her illness. Even if she were well, I don't think she would be a risk taker like Boulie or Daphne, who lives on the wild side, but she has been trained to be cautious, and she always weighs the risks. Poppy couldn't run, or swim, or ride a bike or a horse. Those are serious constraints on a child. As her illness progresses, especially after the second bout with rheumatic fever, she is physically unable to do many simple things like climbing a flight of stairs.

The ways in which she is a revolutionary come from her powerful observational skills. She comes to see the hypocrisy in her world and she is not afraid to articulate her outrage. I think, had she been well, she may have been bolder politically, but I don't think she would have been careless like her friends.

**7. In this book, the female characters tend to dominate the men. Why?**

Poppy is raised in a woman's world, with her mother and mostly female servants. She chooses to be with men who are somewhat androgynous. I am not sure that these men are dominated, but they do not adhere to the old-fashioned notions of appropriate male and female behaviour. Poppy and her friends have evolved beyond stereotypical behaviour. I think they represent a more egalitarian order.

In all my writing, whether it be poetry, prose, or songs, I have only one agenda and that is to demonstrate how important it is to the health of families, communities, and the world that children are raised in love. That is a mother's job, and, when mothers fail, civilization falls. This is Poppy's most mature awareness. Because she felt the absence of love in her own childhood, she is struggling to articulate her feelings for her own child who has been denied her most essential human right. That is where she finds the energy to write these letters.

**8. Poppy describes her attraction to Chou in terms of his exoticism. Is her relationship with him love or infatuation?**

Poppy's attraction to Chou is complicated. For one thing, he has always shown her kindness. For another, there is an intuited connection with Boulie. The erotic association overlaps. He may represent competition with her mother, who is closely associated with him. As an invalid, Poppy's exposure to people is limited, so who else would she fall in love with?

Her relationship with Chou may have begun as infatuation, a crush, but it ends in mutual love, as we see later on. But that is the next book, which also develops their musical connection, his primal bond with their daughter, Precious.

Her description of Chou as exotic is accurate. He is beautiful, and she is attracted to the beautiful. She is not drawn to Chou because he is Chinese, because she is rebelling against a racist society, but because of his grace.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. *The Empress Letters* presents a society in upheaval. What role does WWI play in this upheaval?
2. Could Poppy have done anything more to help Boulie or Daphne? Could she have done anything to save them?
3. Discuss Poppy's relationship with Alec. Does she simply use him to complete a fantasy? Does it matter?
4. As a child and a young adult, Poppy is oblivious to her family's unfair treatment of Chinese workers. Should she bear any blame for the situation?
5. Is Poppy heterosexual? Can her sexuality be labelled?
6. The book presents a society obsessed with "the exotic east." Is this obsession exploitative? Are there any parallels with Emily Carr's obsession with Native Canadian art?
7. Where is Poppy by the end of the novel? Does she have hope for the future or is she living on borrowed time?
8. Discuss Poppy's androgyny. Are her experiments with androgyny sexually motivated, or does she adopt male personas as a way to usurp male power — as a way to feel in control?
9. Does the incorporation of historical figures add anything to the novel?
10. Poppy is often reluctant, both in rebellion and in admitting certain truths. Is Poppy a coward?

## SPOILER QUESTION

11. Why does it take Poppy so long to realize that Chou is Precious' father?