



## Nicole Galland

**Crossed**  
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**Q: You've said that you don't really write about history, but, rather, you write about characters who happen to be trapped somewhere in history. That's an interesting distinction; can you elaborate a bit?**

A: I'm fascinated by how character and setting influence each other, but between the two, I love character more than setting. Lots of people who don't like historical drama love James Goldman's *The Lion in Winter* because even though it's about a medieval dynastic dispute (yawn), it's really about a dysfunctional family who deserve their own HBO reality series. They *happen* to be the royal family of medieval England, but you don't have to care about medieval England to care about them. You don't come away from the play feeling as if you "know" medieval England—but you definitely know *them*. Compare that to Dorothy Dunnett (I'm a huge fan of hers, too), who submerges her readers in a world full of characters who wouldn't work in any other setting. I love her Lymond as long as he stays in the sixteenth century; if I met him at a dinner party next Tuesday, he'd alienate me. So I'm more of a Goldman than a Dunnett—I aim for characters who resonate regardless of their setting. I don't know if I succeed at it, but it's what I aim for. In *Crossed*, my main passion was to tell the story of my characters and their evolution. Primarily, the Fourth Crusade is there to help me tell their story; secondarily, they are there to help me tell the story of the Fourth Crusade.

**Q: Are there any real-life historical characters in *Crossed*?**

A: Except for Gregor and his entourage, all major characters in *Crossed* are bona fide real-life historical figures, and pretty important ones to boot. Dandolo, the Doge of Venice, would easily make the Top 5 list of Eye-Poppingly Impressive Medieval Personages. In depicting the real-life people (all men), I stayed as true as I could to the historical impressions of most of them. The less I respected somebody, the more creative license I gave myself in depicting him.

**Q: Why did you choose the disastrous Fourth Crusade as the setting for this novel?**

A: I'd promised myself that I would write "a crusade novel" only about whatever campaign was set in the era I already knew well. This turned out to be the Fourth Crusade—and when I read a synopsis of it, I almost fell out of my chair, because it reminded me so much of what was happening in Iraq. A western military coalition, supplied and led by the leading capitalist power in the world (in their case, Venice), decides (uninvited) to "liberate" a rich eastern land (in their case, Constantinople) from a tyrant. This coalition's purported intention had been, originally, a crusade against dangerous Islamic extremists farther to the east (in their case, the Holy Land), but they decide it is more important to take down this tyrant first, even though his is a secular government. Why? Well, the highest-ranking member of the coalition (Prince Alexios Angelos) bears a personal grudge against the tyrant—because the tyrant had it out for his father. When the western military coalition attacks, the tyrant—an unscrupulous man whose path to power was a bloody one—turns and flees without a real fight, leaving his land in the hands of these western "liberators." Mission accomplished! There is (briefly) great rejoicing on all sides. However, the "liberating" military gets stuck there as an occupation force with no exit strategy, fighting a growing force of insurrectionists who do not care for the puppet regime the westerners try to set up. As I worked on the story, contemporary circumstances continued to mirror history: the puppet regime faces increasing resistance from the natives, while hostility against the western occupation forces grows so severe the military suffers guerilla attacks from insurgents on a daily basis. And so on.

As well as the parallels to modern events, I was drawn to the Fourth Crusade because it's just a heck of a story. As I'm fond of saying, it's the Crusade Monty Python would have picked, because they'd hardly have to change anything about it to turn it into very dark farce.

**Q: Are there lessons to be learned from the events of the Fourth Crusade that might be applied to a current-day situation?**

A: Oh, yes, but we're not likely to learn them. The biggest one is, of course, that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it. The final disaster, what led to the fall of Constantinople and the destruction of the Byzantine Empire, was not a clash between two religions, but between two long-conflicting sects of one religion: Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, the two principal faces of Christianity.

Originally I thought, well, at least that's one problem that won't come up this time around. So I got a queasy feeling in the pit of my stomach as the Sunni-Shia conflict overshadowed all other problems in Iraq. As of this writing (mid-2007), it seems likely that the future of Iraq hangs on this issue. In 1204 the Catholic soldiers wanted to throw in the towel, convinced it was sinful to attack their fellow Christians, but then the Catholic priests convinced them it was the will of God to destroy the hated Orthodox heretics who had persecuted their Catholic brethren. This incited the Catholics to capture and pillage the city, making their religion dominant. Once again: Mission accomplished! Except that their new world order lasted not quite as long as the USSR did, and then their old enemies came back and reclaimed their territories, in the name of God, before eventually losing the same territory themselves to the Moslems, who also took it in the name of God. The lesson everyone needs to learn is leave God out of it.

**Q: Jamila is a fascinating character; in many ways, a woman ahead of her time. Can you tell us a little bit about how you developed her character?**

A: Developing characters is often a murky process; I don't fully understand it myself. Sometimes—as with Jamila—it's like making gazpacho: I knew what ingredients I wanted to include, so I threw them all together and let them season each other. In her case, there were five basic ingredients. First, I wanted a Jewish character, because that's an underrepresented subculture of the era: Second, I wanted an outsider who could comment intelligently, wittily, and informedly on the crusader zeitgeist. Third, I wanted a chance to display elements of the Arab world that otherwise wouldn't have made it into the story—since, after all, they never even *reach* the Arab world. Fourth, I wanted my narrator to have a worthy love-interest who could match his wit and attitude, and inspire him to evolve out of his own morbid self-absorption. Finally, and most important: I wanted to create a strong female whose strength was independent of her gender. I love all of my female characters, but they are usually so defined by *gender*—even my one heroine who passes as a man is preoccupied with making sure she's not perceived as female or feminine. I wanted to create a strong, capable, admirable, likeable, worldly character—who *happens* to be female. That aspect, more than anything, may be why Jamila is "a woman ahead of her time"—in that era, not many women had the luxury of being valued for their soul first, their sex second.

