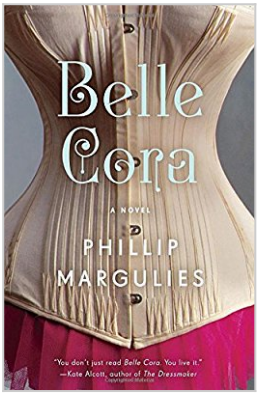

Belle Cora

By Phillip Margulies

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In the home where Arabella Godwin was raised it is forbidden to speak her name, and her picture is turned to the wall. But in the turbulent America of the 1850s, everyone knows her as "Belle Cora," madam of San Francisco's finest bordello. Judges and senators do her bidding; a vicious newspaper editor plots her downfall; a preacher looks at her from across his pulpit and tries to forget that once she was his wife. Merchant's daughter, farm girl, prostitute, mother, madam, murderess, avenger, protector—she has worn all these masks: the only thing that never changes is her tireless pursuit of the one man who can see her for who she really is.

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Editorial Review

Review
“You don’t just read *Belle Cora.* You live it.” —Kate Alcott, author of *The Dressmaker*

“Memorable at every turn and set against the backdrop of a nineteenth century America that was, like the novel’s protagonist, many different things all at once. —Edward Rutherfurd, author of *Paris*

“An enthralling historical drama . . . told with sympathy, feeling, humor, and accuracy. Phillip Margulies is a superb writer.” —Kevin Baker, author of *The Big Crowd*

“As exquisitely seductive as its enigmatic heroine. . . . Will captivate readers from start to finish.” —*BookPage*

“A rollicking novel that tracks an American Moll Flanders on her roller-coaster ride from respectability into quite profitable sin and back again.” —*The San Francisco Chronicle*

“Gripping, sweeping, and tragic, *Belle Cora* is the story of an extraordinary woman making her way through an extraordinary time. . . . A character I won't soon forget. “ —Anton DiSclafani, author of *The Yonahlossee Riding Camp For Girls*

“Not only this year’s best read, but last year’s as well. In a can’t-put-it-down historical epic filled with suspense, romance, keen wit, adventure and scandal.” —*Bookreporter*

“Bighearted. . . . Belle belongs in the ranks of literary heroines strong enough to survive illness, heartbreak, financial ruin, scandal and their own worst impulses, and her quintessentially American story makes her a memorable character.” —*The Columbus Dispatch*

“The past is a foreign country. If, like me, you long to visit nineteenth-century New York and San Francisco, I can't imagine a better time-travel substitute than *Belle Cora*. This is a splendid feast of a novel.” —Kurt Andersen, author of *Heyday*

“Margulies strikes gold. . . . Belle’s remarkable story mirrors that of her young country, on the verge of civil war, and her sharp, engaging voice brings her tale to vivid life.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Hard to put down.” —*The New York Journal of Books*

“A story to lose yourself in, by turns thrilling, witty and poignant. Phillip Margulies has given us a luminous portrayal of an unforgettable woman. You will be utterly seduced.” —Margaret Leroy, author of *The Soldier’s Wife*

“A debut novel of great scope and top-level excitement.” —*The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY)

“Enthralling. . . . Above all else, it tells a great story.” —*Bookriot*

“A story that will captivate historical fiction fans as they follow her exploits during a turbulent era.” —*Library Journal*

“Phillip Margulies has taken the scant known facts about Belle and created a magnificent heroine. . . . Utterly compelling. . . . A memorable and outstanding work on many levels.” —Historical Novel Society

About the Author

PHILLIP MARGULIES is the author and editor of many books on science, politics and history for young adults. He has won two New York Foundation for the Arts fellowships. He lives in New York City with his wife and two children.

There is a story about a girl who took the wrong path, and rues it all her life. She is too trusting. She is too passionate. The result: an error than can’t be corrected, a stain that can’t be washed out. Back on the old homestead where she grew up, no one is permitted to speak her name, and her picture is turned to the wall.

Gentlemen love this story, so when any girl in a house of mine lacked some version of it I would help her to make one up. I’d take her to a good restaurant at a quiet time of day, order something very expensive, and tell her, “You were an Ohio farm girl, and to help your folks out with the bank loan you went to work in a mill. The mill agent’s son noticed you. He was very handsome. That was your downfall.”

Or I’d begin, “You’re from a fine old Baltimore family. Your father was a good man, except he was a bit reckless: he gambled; he was killed in a duel.”

And so on. There was a time when I had three girls declaring in the face of overwhelming contrary evidence that they were the daughters of clergymen.

Why it was useful to say these things, I can only guess. God knows it wasn’t to evoke pity. We weren’t beggars, and the customers weren’t softhearted. The important thing was that it worked. We knew from experience that these men paid more for the attention of a girl wrapped in the fiction that she had not chosen this life—she was unlucky, meant for something better, but here to enjoy thanks to her misfortune.

Sometimes we lied even though the truth was perfect. The pretty creature would run a fingertip along the rim of her glass and tell me, “I was a farm girl, but in Indiana,” or “There was a boss’s son, and a child, it did die, I did try to kill myself.” I’d inquire, “Do you ever tell them that?” She’d answer, “No.” I’d say, “Of course not: it’s too personal. But since it resembles what they want to hear, tell them something else along those lines. That way everyone’s happy.”

The truth was withheld only because so much else had to be forfeited. My case was like that. I was the country girl. And before that, I was the rich girl.

to begin with the first story, I was born in 1828, into a family of pious Yankee merchants. My grandfather, a silk importer, had come to New York from Massachusetts fifteen years earlier and had prospered. He owned what was for several years the tallest building in New York City. My father was his chief clerk. My mother was an invalid, and we prayed every day that she would live and knew that she would die.

Our home was in Bowling Green, a fashionable New York City neighborhood a little past its prime. Its fine three-story buildings, with their pitched roofs and neat rows of dormer windows and wrought-iron fences, were being refashioned to live second lives as boarding houses, or being torn down entirely and replaced with hotels. I think it is because I was born there that the world has always felt old to me. The United States was young. Newspapers constantly reminded us of that. But in Bowling Green things showed signs of long use. I remember when a flood on the second floor of our house damaged a wall of the sitting room on the

floor below, revealing many old layers of wallpaper, in quaint patterns, and my father told me that they had been pasted to the walls by the people who had been here before us, and deeper layers had been put there by the people who were here still earlier. How remarkable: there had been other families, surrounded by fleurs-de-lis on yellow, before that by pussy-willow twigs on green, and so on, layer on layer, back and back. Digging in the courtyard, I would find children's lost whip tops and penny dolls. Who were these children? Where were they now?

One still saw pigs in the streets, and when I look back now, their freedom to roam the nation's leading commercial city seems like proof that the United States was only half civilized; but I didn't think so, since I was a child, with no basis for comparison. So far as I knew, there had always been pigs on Broadway, along with carriages and omnibuses. It had all been there before me, in the era of fleurs-de-lis, in the era of pussy willow's, forever. And if new houses were rising on new streets to the north, that, too, had been going on for ages, and no one knew how much longer it would be permitted to continue. The world would end soon, according to several upstate New York ministers.

One of my earliest memories is of the time my mother lost me on the docks; she used to make a story of this episode, stuffed with morally fortifying lessons, like all her stories, so that I remember some of it from her point of view. She left my brother Lewis in the care of the hired girl and took me to Pearl Street. It was an ambitious journey: for months, the most she had been able to manage was a trembling descent of the stairs and a brief constitutional in the park across the street, with frequent rests. Now she was feeling better, glad to be out again, strong again—maybe all better, cured by some miracle?—and she walked, testing herself, one step and then another, with a fierce secret joy, gripping my hand, all the way to the docks.

Since it was so long ago, I must explain that she was misbehaving—women of her class were not supposed to go to the waterfront, certainly not on foot—but my mother wished to investigate a dry-goods store known for its quality and reasonable prices. She did it with the pretext of visiting my father at his place of business. (As she explained later, she overreached herself, stepping out of her sphere, and she was punished for it.) We bought hot roasted peanuts from a pushcart. While she was talking to a clerk, I wandered out of the store and crossed the street to watch some children of the poor who lay facedown on the edge of the dock. They were holding a yard of cheap cloth beneath the water. I remember that the reflections of pilings, ropes, and masts wriggled like worms, with the children's faces seemingly contained in the cloth. Abruptly the picture disintegrated; the boys' arms were webbed with the river's slime, the cloth dripped, tiny fish writhed. I turned to speak to my mother; she wasn't there. I didn't know which of those many doors I'd come out of and had no idea how to find it.

To my left were the wooden ships, a bewildering thicket of masts, with vines of ropes and leaves of reefed sail, pigeons sitting on the yardarms, bowsprits drawing undulating lines of shadow on the cobblestones. To my right were three- and four-story buildings, many signs, doors and awnings—horses, wagons, dogs fighting over shreds of offal, men pushing wheelbarrows, heaving casks, spitting in doorways. I ran through all that in elemental terror, shouting "Mama! Mama!" until, with a sudden pressure beneath my arms, a man with brown teeth and rum breath, in a coarse-woven dirty shirt and pants with suspenders picked me up. He held me high, walking, while I kicked at his head. "Who lost a babe? Lost! One babe!" A little later: "What am I bid for this fine babe?"

"That's my child! Thank heavens—oh, thank you, thank you," cried my mother, who moments before had been picturing my body fished lifeless out of the water, and I was handed down to her so quickly it was almost falling. Her grip, much weaker than the rough man's, was tighter than usual for her. I could hear her quick heartbeat and wheezes—she had been running—and I did not feel entirely out of danger yet. I sensed her fear of this man, the kind of man our family considered a good object for home missionary work. When

other prosperous merchants were rewarding themselves with a convivial midday libation or the comforts of home, my grandfather, accompanied by my father or one of his clerks, was busy spreading the word of God, as they believed all serious Christians should do, whatever their regular professions. In combed black hats and immaculate somber suits, they patrolled the waterfront, distributing Bibles—gripping calloused hands, saying, “Take this, sir, and may God bless you,” while peering into the eyes of sailors and dockers unaccountably not reached by the Gospel after eighteen hundred years.

The next part I remember is walking up a flight of wooden stairs to the second floor of my father’s workplace, which was lit partly by gaslight and partly by slanting shafts of sun from the big windows. Junior clerks sat on high stools before inclined desks, scratching out lists and letters, while my father watched from a high platform that afforded him a godlike view of their labors. When he greeted my mother, the more astute clerks removed their short-brimmed high black hats, and the others followed the example. He took me from my mother, kissed me, handed me back. He said that he was happy that she was feeling stronger, what a surprise, and she must never do it again, and then he turned to one of the clerks and told him to stop what he was doing to take us home in a company wagon.

When we were halfway down the steps, my mother apologized to the clerk and said that she must stop to rest. She sat down on the steps. I sat beside her. The clerk stood behind us, thinking God knows what. She coughed: a familiar sound. Whenever I played at being a mama, at a certain point I would interrupt my pretended chore to rest, saying, “Mercy.” I would cough, with a reflective, listening, diagnostic expression, as if the cough contained a message, and put a hand on my chest or side. Then, grinding my teeth and wincing, I’d get up and return to my imaginary work.

Often I would tell my dolls to hurry up and learn to be good, since I would not always be there to teach them.

later in life, whenever i talked about my mother I would begin to sob. There wouldn’t be any buildup—nothing at all—then the tears. Those who knew me as a hard woman would find it distasteful. Who could blame them? How could they understand?

She had fine flaxen hair, which she kept in a severe bun under a plain bonnet. She was small and, in my early memories, pretty, with a graceful figure. (Not later; the progress of the illness made her delicate beauty shrivel.) Her nose was straight and thin; her eyes were long-lashed and bright, her lips bow-shaped; her chin was small. Her complexion was pale, except when she was feverish, at which times the black-and-white hues of her clothing contrasted with a hectic, ruddy, deceptively healthy-looking glow.

Slicing apples, sewing, polishing the candlesticks, or trimming the lamps (four duties she said were permissible for ladies), she would remark, “The Lord may take me early. Then I will be sorry not to be here with you and your brothers, but, on the other hand, I will be very glad to again see my own mother and my grandfather and my aunt”—all dead of consumption—“and of course I expect to meet you in your time. That is why you must do your duty and love God.”

We believed that completely and literally. We would be reunited in heaven. That was our plan, as practical to us as “Let’s meet at sundown in front of the clock tower.”

Growing tired, she would rest, while I went on sewing or polishing. She’d tell me how helpful I was—what would she do without me? She would cough, intending it to be a small, cautious throat-clearing cough. The cough would have bigger ideas and go on and on, while she ran to a pail, and she would spit and study her sputum. Was it white or yellow or green? Or red—the most feared color.

In retrospect—now that “consumption” is “tuberculosis” and the diligent Dr. Koch has traced it to a microscopic bacillus—it is clear that insufficient efforts were made to save my mother’s life. Even based on the knowledge then available to physicians, everything possible was not done. It never was when the sufferer was a woman. Male consumptives made survival their life’s work. They went on long sea voyages. They traveled to better climes. They changed careers, shunned brain work, and sought to restore their health with vigorous labor out of doors. These measures were considered impractical for women. How could they change careers, when motherhood was their true occupation, without which their lives were empty? How could a sick woman contend with the thousand inconveniences of travel, or bear to be separated from dear friends and relations? Women were too good to do the selfish things that might have preserved them, so they weren’t told to. Only seldom did doctors even advise a consumptive woman to refrain from childbearing, although they knew that each pregnancy would shorten her life.

My mother believed ardently in what was then considered to be the modern view of woman’s nature—it was a relatively new idea, that women were finer than men—and if any doctor had suggested that she ought to leave her family or avoid childbirth she would have found another doctor. She had five of us: Robert, Edward, Frank, me, and, last of all, Lewis. She was found to be in the second stage of consumption soon after Edward, and each subsequent birth resulted in a permanent worsening of her condition.

Within these limits, it was her duty to improve. On Dr. Boyle’s advice, she ate bland foods: wheat breads, apples, boiled rice, boiled beef. She took opium to relieve the pain and to reduce the severity of her coughs. She took calomel to relieve the constipation caused by the opium. When she was well enough, she walked or went riding. She relieved her swellings with blisters and poultices, which she became expert at preparing for anyone who wanted them, and she bled herself with leeches, the descendants of a little family of them imported from Europe, which she bred and raised at home. The leeches mated and bore their young in pond water that she kept in a porcelain tub in her bedroom. Her blood was their only food.

She belonged to a sewing circle consisting of pious Congregationalist women with consumption, whom she had come to know at church or through the recommendation of her doctors. She went to their houses; they came to ours. Before I was seven, I attended the funerals of three of these ladies. They had sat facing each other, plying their needles, trading medical details they had learned as dutiful invalids. One by one they were put in boxes, stored in the ground, and replaced by others in earlier phases of the process.

All of these doomed women had children whom they were anxious to infuse with a full course of moral instruction in the little time that might remain. Every incident was an occasion for a lesson about piety, work, or self-effacement. Never take the best chair when someone older is present, or speak of hating things or people, or say you do not love what is given to you. Never leave chairs out of place.

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