

On Writing
The Can-Can Girl and the Mysterious Woman in Pink

History Retold
by
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The Can-Can Girl and the Mysterious Woman in Pink is the first in a three-book series of time travel novels. It is also my first venture into altered history. Each of the three novels revolves around a famous work of art, which has something hidden within it. To avoid Ray Bradbury's now famous Butterfly Effect, the main character (always a determined young woman) must travel back in time to alter the painting and in so doing avoid a catastrophic event in the future.

The Can-Can Girl takes place in Paris during the Belle Époque, when the Moulin Rouge and the can-can dance were fresh and notorious. Add to this a burgeoning community of painters, performers, and writers—and you have a rich cultural community. The early 1900's manifested a growing middle class, the bourgeoisie, which could afford to purchase art and attend the wildly popular performances in the Parisian community of Montmartre. Think *Midnight in Paris* and you'll have a clear and delightful view of the Belle Époque.

Painting prostitutes and dancers



But what drove me to Toulouse-Lautrec and his painting, “At the Moulin Rouge: The Dance,” and who was that woman in pink?



I asked the curators at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, “who is the woman in pink, and why is she the focus of the painting?” They suggested: a curious bystander, a member of burgeoning middle class, or perhaps a prostitute dressed in her Sunday afternoon finery. They didn’t know for certain, which left a number of possibilities open to me. My creative mind began to churn. I altered history.

As I studied the painting I began to ask that haunting question authors often put to themselves: *what if* the woman in pink was not there? Then came the revelation—she is critical to the aesthetic and balance of the painting. But, *what if* Toulouse-Lautrec left her out? What might be there instead? Nothing, or someone else? What about a teenager in a bright green skirt—waiting for her can-can lesson? Would that look right? Not quite.

What if Toulouse-Lautrec initially painted the little girl, but changed it months before he died to the woman in pink? Why did he change it, who prompted him to do so, and what would have happened if he hadn’t included the woman in pink? *More what-ifs*. And so, it goes until I’d created a plot with a pressing timeline—in this case, the untimely death of the artist and the need to finish the painting before doing so!

When writing *The Can-Can Girl and the Mysterious Woman in Pink*, I knew that I had to draw my readers into the amoral world of the Moulin Rouge. I needed to “paint with words” the ambiance of the dance hall—depicting not only the dancers, but the rowdy men, curious-but-tipsy women, the smell of unwashed bodies, and the musky odor of oil lamps and cigar smoke.

The Moulin Rouge Today



Here is the scene from my novel, where the protagonist, Adrienne (a.k.a. the woman in pink), first arrives at the Moulin Rouge from 2016.

“People danced all around her, in clusters. Some fell—obviously tipsy. Companions pulled them upright and began dancing again, kicking up heels and stumbling, determined to conquer the new dance.

Valentin the Boneless bowed to the can-can dancer in the orange dress and bright red stockings. The end of her lesson? The young woman moved aside as he motioned to a teenager in a bright green skirt framed by an abundance of white petticoats. The child stood directly in front of Adrienne. A thin chinless woman in black directed the youngster with a gentle shove.

Adrienne recognized the scene—it was the sketch Lautrec had sent to Grandmother—the one **without** the lady in pink. The one identified by the museum’s x-ray. Was Adrienne the woman in pink? Oh, God . . .

Don’t make a scene, Adrienne cautioned herself. Don’t faint.

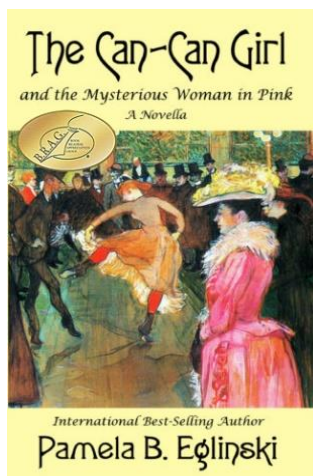
The red-stockinged can-can dancer grabbed Adrienne's arm. *Attention,*" she said. "You mustn't upset Monsieur Toulouse-Lautrec. He's busy sketching." Adrienne turned around. The artist sat at a small table just behind her.

"Oh, my," she said pressing her hand to her throat. "E-Excuse-moi."

Lautrec glanced up, mumbled something about her poor French, and returned to his drawings.

The can-can dancer laughed, took Adrienne's hand and escorted her to a table where the noisy dance hall was a little muted."

The Can-Can Girl and the Mysterious Woman in Pink is available on Amazon as an e-book and paperback. Click on <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B01NBWOLQU> if interested in reading more of this time travel novella set in Paris, 1900. The novella is also a winner of the Indie B.R.A.G award. An award bestowed on select novels written by independent authors.



You may also enjoy these youtube links to the music of Offenbach's Can-Can Music, and life at the Moulin Rouge.

Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of dancers and prostitutes:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QLJxPsVBHHg>

The Bawdy life of the Moulin Rouge:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=exrcnq6Uac4>

Life of a contemporary Moulin Rouge dancer:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y130_d9Ax_s

The Can-Can Girl and the Mysterious Woman in Pink youtube:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzlAYo5-s_U