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## A Q&A with *Carla Rising* author Topper Sherwood

### Q: So what's your book about?

**Topper Sherwood:** You could say it's about the roots of today's "red vs. blue" political battles. These were actual events that took place 100 years ago, during the Industrial Age.

Carla Rising, the principal character, is someone who is learning to break free. Early on, she is leaving her mother who lives close to the land, but is unduly harsh. From here, Carla suddenly comes nose-to-nose against a more 'modern' industrial culture with all its power structures.

### Q: Was the fighting in the book true to history?

**Topper Sherwood:** I took a lot from descriptions of the 1921 battle at Blair Mountain. Some of the other episodes, however, I borrowed from other labor conflicts around that time — several from Paint Creek, West Virginia, in 1912; from streetcar and rail strikes in Pennsylvania. Some of the Blair fighting was borrowed from accounts of the Civil War in Spain, in the 1930s.

### Q: What do you hope people carry away from the book?

**Topper Sherwood:** First, a great, entertaining story. But *Carla Rising* is also important as history. I wanted to tell how people of that time were compelled to fight the abuses of callous employers, notably big energy companies; about people's refusal to be treated as "expendable" — like interchangeable parts of some machine.

### Q: The 1921 'Battle of Blair Mountain' provides your background story. Why was the real 'Blair Mountain War' never known as a big event in U.S. history?

**Topper Sherwood:** The Blair Mountain battle is an extremely difficult story to tell. For one thing, the historical record is fragmented. Imagine six blind men describing the elephant. Now, imagine that none of these men has much in common with the other five, and three

of them can't or *won't* talk about it. That's what it's like, trying to decipher the Battle of Blair Mountain.

**Q: But why don't many people know about the real battle?**

**Topper Sherwood:** It's a tough story because there were no clear winners. The "good guys," in my view, didn't win much for their union. In fact, the United Mine Workers was about drained of cash, defending them in court. Also, the industrialist "bad guys" didn't hold onto their absolute power for very long. It was sort of a "draw" — and that's a tough ending to give an American story. As a military story, it's also hard to tell because there were no battles at close quarters — except for one, which was kind of an accident — and relatively few casualties.

**Q: This is why you made *Carla Rising* into a romance?**

**Topper Sherwood:** Right. Carla's focus, at least at the outset, is on having a clear role in family and community. She starts out in a very traditional way, as a hard-working daughter and wife....

**Q: That doesn't work out too well.**

**Topper Sherwood:** No, the cards are certainly stacked against her. The male-dominated world that Carla inhabits is one of factory-like production, violence, and fear of the deepening poverty the system brings, despite everyone's hard work. Under these conditions, it's tough for anyone to keep his/her cool, for anyone to talk together, and get along — although people do find ways. The most desperate and reactionary of them turn quickly to violence. Carla and those around her are pushed into it. For them, other options are removed, drawing them into violence.

**Q: Was there someone like Carla in the actual uprising at Blair Mountain?**

**Topper Sherwood:** I've imagined Carla as a younger version of Mary Harris Jones, better known as "Mother Jones." Mother Jones was there, at the start of the armed march in autumn 1921, although I didn't put her in the book because of the role she played at the time. By that time, Jones was telling the miners to put down their guns, even lying to them to try to get them to retreat. This was a very different Mother Jones — or a different situation — from 1912, when she stood before a crowd and waved the bloody shirt of a company policeman they'd killed. Sometime after that, Mother Jones almost died in the custody of West Virginia police. I wonder if the experience of harsh detention might have changed her — as it did other labor leaders of the time.

Carla was also inspired by more contemporary women activists I've seen in the coal fields, and by my reading of women guerillas fighting fascism in Europe.

**Q: You call the book “anti-war,” yet your characters do commit violence.**

**Topper Sherwood:** Yeah, even Carla is driven to it. I had to make people true to history. Despite appeals from their own union leaders, thousands of militant miners called for a war against the company gunmen, some of whom were hired killers. The miners got their war. I don't think it was easy for them, though. Unlike the characters in so many American movies, most people in history do not choose to pick up a gun easily or willingly. ...As *Carla Rising* suggests, I think most normal people end up being caught in the middle, between the militant extremes.

**Q: So it wasn't easy for you to make your characters pick up guns?**

A good editor gave me this advice, which applies to writing fiction as well as good journalism: “Don't judge your characters.”

**Q: Did anything surprise you in learning about this story?**

One thing that struck me about the miners' war, like many other historical conflicts: Although they were clearly separated, the two sides were not necessarily unified or well-defined within themselves. In *Carla Rising*, I tried to capture the fact that the union, the left, was tragically split into at least two factions. By the same token, none of the government authorities — state, federal and local — seemed to be on the same page, either.

**Q: So *Carla Rising* isn't just about coal miners, is it?**

*Carla Rising* is my attempt to illustrate what are really global issues: a winner-take-all economic system and growing class disparities, colored by racial, “cultural” and political issues that are devastatingly artificial. These kinds of conflicts were more vivid in the time before the Depression, but they are becoming more so today, too. And globally.

**Q: Of course, *Carla Rising* is really a good romance too, isn't it?**

**Topper Sherwood:** That's what people tell me.