AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by author Gigi Berardi, whose latest novel, *Bianca's Cure*, reimagines the story of Renaissance Italian noblewoman Bianca Capello. So first, could you introduce us to Bianca?

GB: She came from Venice, from a milieu of female alchemists. What's really interesting is there was also a cultural program opening for the Olympics, and one part of that was an exhibit by a German artist on forgotten alchemists, on women alchemists, and some of whom I also allude to in the book. So that was fun to see that interest so close to Florence. She left Venice, she fled Venice with this Florentine, lived in Florence, and she met Francesco di Medici, and all of these are touchstones, with men. She lived with her father, she went with her Piero, but at any rate, she has her own story pretty soon, and she (was) the mistress of Francesco for 15 years or so, and then later his wife, so she would become grand duchess. They had an interest in alchemy, she had her own studio in Palazzo Vecchio, and some say that they died in close temporal and spatial proximity, like maybe at the same time, maybe on the same day. So that becomes a question mark in my book.

AT: One thing that often comes up when we're telling women's history, particularly the further back you go, is that there just isn't a whole lot of documentation, and ironically you could just say the same thing about Shakespeare, but that's a whole other conversation. So was the documentation, was the factual basis that you were able to find – I think you refer to it as the skeleton – so how much of the story that you have created about Bianca is actually backed up by fact, shall we say?

GB: We know she was interested in alchemy, as was Francesco. We know this from observations by others, letters that people have written. We see that she was absent in court. These are mostly from letters that were written at the time. So if we were to write the story of Bianca, it would probably be about a four-page story, maybe two pages. So beyond that, I've had to use tone and mood and imaginative exercises basically to fill in. I did write this book, I wrote 100,000 words from the standpoint of Francesco, and I threw them all away, 100,000 words. And so we know a little bit more about Francesco than we do about Bianca, but it still read like a Wikipedia story. So who wants to read Wikipedia? You can go to Wikipedia. It was not very interesting, it really had no life in it, so I threw it out and wrote the story from the perspective of Bianca, and I think that we actually know more about Francesco from the eyes of Bianca than we did in my first 100,000 words. And so I just wrote this, retaining basically core personalities, maintaining a narrative voice, but looking at a number of moods or tones. So Francesco is ill, she is many, many, many kilometers away from where he is. Is she sad? Is she angry? Is she amazed? Is she panicked? Is she ashamed? And then I wrote paragraphs with these different moods until I found one that really fit with this story, with that chapter, what she must have been, in my mind what I imagine she must have been feeling and doing, finding her motivation in that.

AT: So we know that she was interested in alchemy, but her quest for a cure for malaria, which I believe is what Francesco had, that is your invention.

GB: Exactly. So it's likely that one of the herbs that she was working with was artemisia. It was a popular bitter herb, and malaria was a very serious problem. So I think we have to look also at what we know about physical geography of Italy. We can't write the history, if we write the history from the written record, usually it's pretty dry, if not short, and it doesn't really answer all the questions that we have. And so, for example, if we just look at the geography of Italy, over 80% of Italy is steep, it's mountainous, it's where the Winter Olympics is in the north, it's hilly, and then dotted by relatively flat valleys with a little bit deeper soil, and then coastal plains. So anywhere there's a coastal plain, there's a marsh, and in these areas that we're talking about, anywhere there's a marsh, there's malaria. And in fact, Francesco's beloved mother, Eleonora, and two of his brothers died of malaria, as the story really starts to unfold. And Francesco himself had malaria. We know that because his body has been exhumed several times from the Chapel of the Princes. Bianca's body hasn't been found, and

scientists have been looking for evidence of malaria and also arsenic poisoning, trying to answer this question, was it arsenic or was it malaria that killed Francesco? And it's not clear from the evidence, but we know that he did have malaria. That is clear. He had malaria. And so what does that mean in terms of their relationship? So the other questions I ask in the book have to do with her motivations and how sincere she is. Is she a nice person? Is she a genuine person? Is she really strategy driven? And how does that affect their relationship? She cares about this person at some level, and so she's got to care about his malaria.

AT: Now, this isn't your first book, and my understanding is it's the third in a trilogy about science reimagined. But it sounds like you came at this more from the perspective of this relationship as sort of the starting point, rather than the science of it.

GB: That is how it unfolded. Originally, I wanted to do a lot more with alchemy, and there is a lot there. Like I mentioned, the 40 women alchemists in this Olympics exhibit. And the reason is because for 20 years, I've been looking at Goethean science. I've taken sabbaticals in Dornach, Switzerland, the Goetheanum that really focuses on Goethean science. I have tried to write in that style. I've tried to look at the world from a really observation-based perspective. And because I have that background, I thought I would be uniquely qualified to dig once again into the Hermetic texts and Jewish mysticism and really unpack some of what was happening with alchemy in medieval times and into the Renaissance. And again, in terms of the record, I actually didn't find much substantive stuff. There were mystical texts and people meditated, men, from what we know. And alchemy was used primarily for industry and manufacturing. So alchemy was used in the production of dyes, of pigments, of solvents, of clay mixtures in porcelain. And because of that, I went in the direction of this woman breaking out from the male mold that I just described and trying to think about the world in a more systematic way, and in terms of experiments. And these ideas about science experiments, sample size are millennia old. So that's what I wanted to play with. Could she really have been one of the first people, much less women, to be looking at disease in a systematic way, which involved something more than the four humors?

AT: I will admit that one of my first questions when I saw that, okay, so this is the premise of the book versus this is what we actually know about her, which is obviously quite scant. And so it makes sense that this works better as a fiction, because like you said, if you tried to write it as nonfiction, you'd have four pages. But one of the fascinating things about this particular choice is that Italy has a rich history of actual women who were incredibly impactful in medicine over the century. So in the 12th century, we had Trota of Salerno, who wrote the really influential medical text, *La Trotula*, which even then some people tried to claim that it was written by a guy. But again, that's a whole other conversation. You can read about it in my book, *Uncredited*. But that was one of the things that really hit me, was this idea that there are plenty of real women that were doing really incredible work in medicine throughout the history of Italy. So I'm curious, do you bring any of that real Italian medical women's history into the story?

GB: Well, that wasn't necessarily what was driving the story or my intention in writing it. And it is as much about Florence as it is about the people. I would say the same thing is true for Salerno. So I don't know Salerno. So then I get into a real thing about representation. And so I don't want to write about what I don't know. And so I know Florence. And people think they know the Renaissance, but they don't know the Renaissance. So there's plenty of dirt and plenty of stuff to uncover with the Renaissance. Salerno was really, really interesting. And in fact, Esther Erman wrote *Rebecca of Salerno*. And she took this fictional character in *Ivanhoe* and she created a Jewish physician. And it was important. And so she studied and worked at the medical school in Salerno. And again, it's not so much, is this woman real? It's like, is this school real? And what did they do? And you're right. I think that story is interesting for the physician, but also for what Salerno did, what it meant, and what an incredible place of accessibility, not just for women, but underrepresented men too.
I do allude to women that are most famous in terms of alchemy and Caterina Sforza and Cortese. And I am

unpacking a little bit of their stories as part of my story in my blogs. So yes, there may be a sequel, but I'm also answering the kinds of questions you're asking on my website, gigiberardi.com. So these two women are particularly famous because we have written treatises from them, which I've gotten hold of, especially for Cortese, they consist of recipes. Also Sforza too. These two women are interesting, not just for their alchemy. Caterina Sforza is the grandmother of Cosimo. And Caterina Sforza was a figure in Milan. She was an alchemist, but she was also a politician. And she famously in a battle, she was also a military strategist and player in a battle when supposedly her children were being held hostage. This is the famous story. She lifted up her skirts and said, “I don't care. I can make more.” So these are very, very colorful women. And in the book, my tribute to that is that Bianca Capello is coming from the Cortese family. And Cortese is an anagram for secreto, is what the word is in Italian, secret. So secrets that the women held. That tradition is important and it's woven in there, especially in the very beginning. What is true is that one in eight women were nuns in Florence at the time that I'm writing. And that comes from a really interesting book called *Daughters of Alchemy*. And what I am coming to understand is that women that could not get ahead, could not do their work, often found that they could in monasteries and nunneries and in convents. So that comes out also in this story.

AT: Well, this is a topic that's come up before in different conversations. So, for example, when I talked with Kiera Lindsey about her book, Wild Love, about the artist Adelaide Ironside, when I talked with Lainie Anderson about her book, The Death of Dora Black, which is a fictionalized account of Kate Cox, who was an early law enforcement officer in South Australia. But in both of these conversations, we got into why fiction is necessary. Or in Kiera's case, I think she actually did her PhD on what she called speculative biography, where she basically said, “here's what I have, and now I'm going to fill in as best I can the details,” because we do not have enough documentation, because women's lives often have not been considered important enough to adequately document. So this idea that when you don't have facts, but you still want to tell the history, there is plenty of reason to fictionalize because you don't have enough fact, shall we say.

Listen to Dr Kiera Lindsey on Adelaide Ironside or read the transcript.
Listen to Dr. Lainie Anderson on Kate Cocks or read the transcript.

GB: Right. And another question that follows from that is how do you get at that then? One way to approach this, and I take this from Susan Sutliff Brown, who was one of my mentors when I was rewriting the story from Bianca's perspective, is through characterization and tone exercises. And that's really what I used in the book. So for example, there is a point when Francesco is deathly ill and Bianca's far away. So what happens next? How does she feel? And so, I don't know, is she shocked? Is she horrified? Is she sad? Is she ashamed? Is she annoyed? Is she desperate? And so then I wrote the scene in a number of those tones or moods until I found the one that made sense and was consistent with her character, especially getting to those touchstones, the skeleton of this story that that we do know. Before, I mentioned something about Florence, I'm really concerned about people and I am concerned about people in their places. And I'm concerned about the places. And Florence, according to some has been completely trashed, is Disneyland, you'll hear that word a lot. And the Italians are referring to their own city as such, the Airbnb have completely taken over. There's no place for real Florentines, etc, etc. Venice has finally established a daily tariff. And Florence is a special place for some as the so-called birthplace of the Renaissance. And then allegedly in the 1400s, when the Renaissance was being born, it was coming out of a natural philosophy occult. There's that piece to it too, of philosophy. What I've tried to do in *Bianca's Cure* is to reimagine these places as they are in terms of what people needed from them, what they received from them, what they needed from them. And the message is, if one can get to Florence, that there are ways to travel through and an in Florence where you can tap into a little bit of that magic, a little bit of what it was like, that desperation. If you go up to Pratolino, you see now that almost everything has been destroyed, except for the esoteric parts, the automatons and these sulfurous deep swimming caves and the Colossus. What did it mean to go so far out of Florence, the eight kilometers, nine kilometers to escape malaria? So Florence is not a Disneyland, neither is most other place on the planet. So it also is a story about how we travel in other places.

AT: Coming back to the question of real women, your narrative draws on actual medical history involving the use of, as you mentioned, artemisia, which ironically is the name of a absolutely fantastic Italian artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, who I adore. But we're not here to talk about her. I just can't resist mentioning her if we're talking about something called artemisia. But you draw a through line from Renaissance Italy to the work of Tu Youyou, which she actually won a Nobel for this work in the modern day.

GB: Correct. And since you mentioned Artemisia, then I'll say something too. So yes, her story is incredibly compelling. She's in the next century and in the time of Caravaggio. And there is a wonderful book called *The Passion of Artemisia*. And that is a textbook I use for all my students in anything to do with Italy. So her story is compelling. And then to be able to go to Florence and to see her work in the Uffizi and elsewhere, Pitti Palace is really quite amazing in terms of forgotten women artists. We also use a textbook, *Forgotten Women Artists*. So Artemisia is important.
It is important to remember that Bianca was working with this herb and Bianca's mother was as well, artemisia. However, artemisia is in the aster daisy family and artemisia itself has hundreds and hundreds of genuses. The artemisia that's used in therapeutic, in malarial therapies is Artemisia annua. And we've heard about Artemisia absinthe, from which absinthe comes and mugwort and various kinds of wormwood. In fact, the German word for wormwood is vermouth. Vermouth like the alcohol, which is very bitter. Artemisia has and had been around for thousands of years before any record of it being used in Italy. That's one reason why it's important that Bianca comes from Venice, which is a port city. It's very easy to imagine how artemisia cultivars could have made their way into Italy, into Venice through that port, Artemisia annua. And Tu Youyou, as you mentioned, and in 2015, she was actually the first person man or woman in mainland China to receive the Nobel Prize in a scientific category in medicine and physiology, which is astounding, I would think. And she did that as part of a team, she's quick to add, and I'm actually in contact with her lab.
She did that after decades and decades and decades of research going through traditional Chinese medicine texts. So allegedly she was under special invitation of Mao Zedong and looking at malaria in Southeast Asia and trying to find a reliable cure using artemisia. And so these thousands of years of Chinese text, she poured through. She did not have formal training as a physician. Her training was pharmaceuticals. So she had some training in isolating what would be an active compound from artemisia. Artemisia as a plant in terms of preserving the activity of the artemisine is very fickle. It's very sensitive. It's very delicate plant. So she spent years isolating this compound. She used herself as one of her first patients, much like Bianca did. And she found a reliable way to extract this active ingredient that preserved its therapeutic power. And she famously said, this is a traditional Chinese medicine's gift to the world. And it's used today. It is not advised to use the tea. If you really overheat the tea, if you boil it, if you really distill it in certain ways, normally it's maybe heated in a water bath, and you can kill the active ingredient.

AT: What do you hope that readers will get out of this book, out of your version of Bianca's story, and out of what we do know of her actual story?

GB: We live in a world of grey, not black and white. And that is really true for women characters. Bianca herself was conflicted over motherhood, her role as a wife, as a mistress, as a daughter. And I think that comes out in the book. Yet her motivation for her work is clear. She never falters from that. That women can be motivated and driven and still be accessible. We're complex beings, but basically good at heart and in terms of motivation. Another point is just that Florence is more than Disneyland, that it is really possible to travel and be in places where we can let ourselves be vulnerable and dive into what we don't know. And I think that we can become stronger people for that.

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast. And remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.