

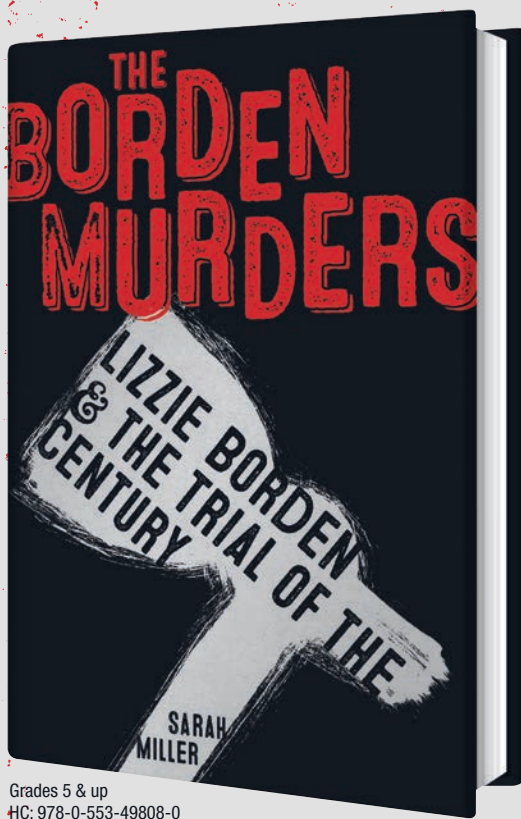
THE BORDEN MURDERS

EDUCATORS' GUIDE

Includes Common
Core State Standards
Correlations

LIZZIE BORDEN
& THE TRIAL OF THE
CENTURY

SARAH
MILLER



Grades 5 & up
HC: 978-0-553-49808-0
GLB: 978-0-553-49809-7
EL: 978-0-553-49810-3

ABOUT THE BOOK

More than 120 years after Andrew and Abby Borden were brutally murdered in their Fall River, Massachusetts, home, the name Lizzie Borden can still send chills up the spine. Accused of killing her father and stepmother with a hatchet, then tried and ultimately acquitted of the heinous acts, Lizzie Borden has become one of the most notorious figures in the history of American crime. But what really happened after the Bordenes were found dead? How did Lizzie become the prime suspect, even though the police could not produce any evidence connecting her to the murders? And how was Lizzie Borden not only fighting for her life in a court of law, but also in the court of public opinion? Author Sarah Miller looks beyond the famous poem that begins “Lizzie Borden took an axe” and presents a straightforward account of events that reads like a crime novel. Readers will experience the fascination, suspense, and intrigue that gripped the nation when Lizzie Borden was center stage at what would become the trial of the century.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Miller is the author of two historical fiction novels, *Miss Spitfire: Reaching Helen Keller*, which was called “an accomplished debut” in a starred review from *Booklist* and was named an ALA-ALSC Notable Children’s Book; and *The Lost Crown*, about the Romanovs, hailed as “fascinating” in a starred review from *Kirkus Reviews* and named an ALA-YALSA Best Book for Young Adults.

PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Discuss the definition of the word *rumor*. Ask students to offer examples of a time when they were or a friend was a victim of a false story. Next, discuss how stories that are told second- and thirdhand have a way of changing as they are repeated. As students prepare to read *The Borden Murders*, play a game of telephone to underscore how information passed from one person to the next can very easily change as it moves down the line. After playing the game a few times, lead a class discussion about how passing rumors can be damaging and hurtful.

LIZZIE BORDEN TOOK AN AXE (pp. xiii–x)

For Discussion: The author writes that the “brutal hatchet murders of Miss Lizbeth’s father and stepmother *captured the nation’s attention*.” What does it mean to capture the attention of an entire nation, and what types of events are powerful enough to do so? What is *sensationalism*, and how does it appear in today’s world? What does it mean to be *shunned*?

Curriculum Connection: The quatrain that begins with the line “Lizzie Borden took an axe” has become a grisly reminder of the murders and the trial that riveted the nation in the early 1890s. Talk about the structure of a quatrain (a short poem composed of two couplets, usually with either an *aa/bb* or *ab/ab* rhyme pattern). Give students time to create quatrains on topics of their choice. (Students will revisit quatrain writing later in this guide.)

MURDER! (pp. 1–20)

For Discussion: What does it mean to come “unhinged”? Do you think it was odd that Lizzie Borden (LB) did not become hysterical upon finding her murdered father? The Fall

River community looked upon their Portuguese neighbors with suspicion simply for being immigrants. Discuss the author's statement: "As far as the middle- and upper-class citizens were concerned, members of the swarthy-skinned Roman Catholic immigrant population were the first to blame for any unsavory goings-on." How does this anti-immigrant sentiment compare to how contemporary American society views and treats immigrants? What is a *motive*? Discuss typical motives for committing crimes (money, revenge, jealousy, hatred). What is a "first impression"? How did the fact that LB changed from a dark dress to a pink one with a red ribbon give a negative first impression to Officer Harrington? How did LB's calm demeanor give birth to his notion that she had committed the murders?

Curriculum Connection: Have students think and work like detectives. Using LB's own story, which the author states was "assembled from the hundreds of questions she answered over that first week," have students work in pairs to construct a timeline of events that transpired at the Borden house on August 4, 1892.

THE BORDENS (pp. 21–36)

For Discussion: On p. 24, the author writes, "Everyone in Fall River—everyone in the nation—would soon have an opinion about what kind of person Lizzie Borden was." Discuss the difference between fact and opinion, and why it is important to gather facts while investigating a crime. The author explains that many people who knew LB "spoke out only after LB stood accused of committing a double axe murder." She then asks readers to "imagine for a moment how that glaring circumstance might influence the details they chose to share." Discuss what the author is suggesting by this statement. How did words like *ugly*, *peculiar*, *coolness*, and *odd* influence public opinion of LB? How did her "strong will" influence police and public opinion?

Curriculum Connection: Select an article or editorial about a public figure in the news. Choose one that depicts the person in a positive light, and another that is negative. Make copies for each student in the class. Have students highlight words and phrases that influence how the reader views the subject. Next, have students write an opinion

piece about a public figure. Direct students to use language that reflects their personal views of the subject.

INVESTIGATION (pp. 37–72)

For Discussion: Discuss Victorian-era notions of femininity. How do LB's tone and straightforward responses to Officer Fleet's questions run counter to expectations of proper Victorian women? On p. 45, Officer Harrington said, "I don't like that girl" and "Under the circumstances she does not act in a manner to suit me; it is strange, to say the least." How are Harrington's personal feelings toward LB relevant to the investigation? In what manner do you think he expected LB to behave "under the circumstances"? How did the "fevered tone" of the media basically indict LB well before her day in court? How did the media create an inaccurate and unfair public image of LB? Discuss Reverend Jubb's plea to parishioners: "Let us ourselves curb our tongues and preserve a blameless life from undeserved suspicions."

Curriculum Connection: Read aloud the sidebar text "Turn-of-the-Century Forensics" on pp. 47–48. Discuss standard contemporary practices such as fingerprinting and DNA analysis. Using washable ink, give each student the opportunity to make a complete set of fingerprints. After the prints are dry, provide magnifying glasses to each student. Instruct students to carefully examine their fingerprints, noting and highlighting significant markers.

INQUEST (pp. 73–96)

For Discussion: On p. 76, the author notes, "As the carriage set off north up Second Street, the news that Miss Lizzie Borden was headed toward the police station outran the horses." Discuss the public's thirst for news, especially news of a sensational nature. How does the present-day 24-hour news cycle encourage sensational stories? After the murders, LB was taking a powerful opiate drug to calm her nerves. The police questioned her, knowing that the drug could produce confusion and even hallucinations. How could the use of this drug influence her testimony, and why would the police accept it as reliable? What is *hearsay*, and why is it not admissible in a court of law?

Curriculum Connection: Share with students the following four statements: 1. You have the right to remain silent. 2. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. 3. You have the right to an attorney. 4. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be appointed for you. Discuss when and why these statements are used. Give students time to research the 1966 U.S. Supreme Court case *Miranda vs. Arizona*. Lead a class discussion about Miranda Rights and their importance in the American criminal justice system.

ARREST (pp. 97–114)

For Discussion: As LB boarded a carriage to be transported to the train bound for the county jail, a crowd gathered in the street. Imagine and discuss how LB was feeling as she was led off to jail, and how she managed to keep her composure. Although the public and the press were hungry for juicy tidbits of LB's life behind bars, not everyone felt the same. Discuss Sheriff Wright's comment, "I do not believe that the public has a right to know anything of this girl's life within these walls." Questioning whether LB would receive a fair trial, an "incensed" woman wrote, "The rights of a noble woman have been trampled on by you and your blood-hounds who, having run your suspicions to their end, are gloating over their object." Do you think LB's social class prompted this type of verbal defense? Do you think a poor or immigrant woman would have received the same sympathy? Rumors continued to abound around LB. The author writes, concerning LB's relationship with her father, "If a paper as respectable as the *New York Times* printed it, how could it be false?" Discuss what the author means by this statement.

Curriculum Connection: On p. 112, the author writes, "The legend of Lizzie Borden was beginning to take root." What is a legend, and how does an event such as the Borden murders grow into a full-blown legend powerful enough to fascinate to this day? Place students in pairs and review the hallmarks of a legend. (Visit www.creative-writing-ideas-and-activities.com/how-to-write-a-legend.html for an excellent lesson plan on legend writing.) Have students choose a period in American history as the setting for their story. Give pairs time to prewrite, draft, revise, and edit their legends. Set aside time for students to share their stories with the class.

PRELIMINARY HEARING (pp. 115–138)

For Discussion: Why is it important for a prosecutor to present evidence in a preliminary hearing? Reread the first page of this chapter. How does the author use language to build suspense? Discuss the meaning of the word *bias*. How were the newspapers biased against LB? Discuss objectivity in media, and why it is important in a democratic society. On p. 125, the author writes, "What difference does it make how she stated that one plain fact?"

How is the tone or manner of how one speaks often as important as what one says? How was LB a victim of Victorian expectations for female behavior? Do you think that being determined "probably guilty," even without any credible evidence, is enough to make a person stand trial?



PRELIMINARY HEARING (continued)

Curriculum Connection: Reread “Trial by Newspaper” on pp. 123–125. Conduct a mock trial. Assign the following roles: Lizzie Borden, her lawyer, the district attorney, the judge, a jury, and journalists. As the trial begins, instruct the journalists to take notes. After one round of questioning, ask the “journalists” to share their notes. Compare the similarities and differences between the notes. Assign new roles and begin a new round of questioning. Continue until all students have had an opportunity to be a journalist. End by discussing the difficulties students experienced with note taking and how these same issues affected the journalists who covered the Borden trial.

THE WAITING TIME (pp. 139–158)

For Discussion: What is media spin? How did both supporters and detractors of LB *spin* her story? Discuss examples of spin in today’s media climate. What is tabloid journalism? Discuss the author’s statement on p. 153: “Once again, suspicion began to find a foothold in the popular mind, and the newspapers were happy to oblige with their own fanciful concoctions.” Where do such “fanciful concoctions” exist in contemporary media? Why do you think the public is so fascinated by the tabloids, even knowing that much of what is printed in them is untrue?

Curriculum Connection: Some of the Victorian-era language that appears in the text is as colorful as it is confusing. Words such as *flap-doodle*, *gush*, and *idiotic drivels* might be translated to mean “a lot of hot air” or “baloney” in today’s lexicon. Prepare a list of words and phrases that were common in everyday language during the Victorian era and share the list with students. Instruct students to write a short story flavored with Victorian language.

THE TRIAL OF THE CENTURY (pp. 159–226)

For Discussion: Is it possible to determine guilt or innocence based on outward appearance? How did those who believed LB to be guilty rely on her appearance to defend their position? Why did LB’s fainting in the courtroom change some people’s perceptions of her? In the United States, those accused of a crime are presumed innocent

and must be proven guilty. Discuss how, in many ways, LB was presumed guilty. Discuss the rights of the accused, and why Chief Justice Mason allowed part of LB’s initial testimony to be excluded from evidence. How was the LB trial a form of entertainment? Discuss contemporary murder trials (O. J. Simpson, the Menendez Brothers, Casey Anthony) and similarities to the Borden trial. Do you think being a woman helped LB in the end? Why?

Curriculum Connection: Study the newspaper cartoon “Juggling with a Woman’s Life,” found after the conclusion of this chapter. Give students time to construct meaning based on the visual information. Instruct students to create a newspaper cartoon based on their own understanding of the Borden trial.

AFTERMATH (pp. 227–246)

For Discussion: Why do you think the Fall River Police Department decided to stop investigating the Borden murders after LB’s acquittal? Discuss the meaning of Emma Borden’s statement, “Some persons have stated that for years they considered Lizzie’s actions queer. But what if she did act queerly? Don’t we all do something peculiar at some time or other?” Emma Borden also said, “A jury declared Lizzie to be innocent, but an unkind world unrelentingly persecuted her.” Why do you think the people of Fall River never truly stopped “persecuting” LB? How does society continue to persecute LB to the present day?

Curriculum Connection: Have students rewrite the famous “Lizzie Borden took an axe” quatrain, focusing on and including factual information learned in their reading of the text.

EPILOGUE (pp. 247–252)

For Discussion: Discuss LB’s statement: “When I know how easy it is to be accused, it ill benefits me to accuse in my turn, since I don’t know.” How can her statement be restated in simpler language? The author describes LB as “an enigma—a symbol of either tortured innocence or insensible evil.” Do you agree? Why?

Curriculum Connection: Instruct students to write a letter to LB, explaining how they feel about her treatment before, during, and after the trial.



LIZZIE BORDEN TOOK AN AXE,
GAVE HER MOTHER FORTY WHACKS.
WHEN SHE SAW WHAT SHE HAD DONE,
SHE GAVE HER FATHER FORTY-ONE.

★ “Miller carefully walks readers through the cast of characters, the mores and customs of the time, legal procedures, varying newspaper accounts, and the enormous amount of gossip that all became part of the landscape surrounding this crime. . . . Sure to be a hit with true crime fans everywhere.”

—*School Library Journal*, Starred

“Miller relies on newspaper accounts and court transcripts to create lively scenes filled with authentic dialogue, making for a suspenseful crime story.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“[A] well-researched resource, which invites students to think critically about an infamous story.”

—*Booklist*



COMMON CORE CORRELATIONS:

The following Common Core standards can be correlated to many of the discussion questions and curriculum connections in this guide.

Key Ideas and Details:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.3: Explain the relationships or interactions between two or more individuals, events, ideas, or concepts in a historical, scientific, or technical text based on specific information in the text.

Craft and Structure:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.6: Analyze multiple accounts of the same event or topic, noting important similarities and differences in the point of view they represent.

Text Types and Purposes:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.1: Write opinion pieces on topics or texts, supporting a point of view with reasons and information.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3: Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, descriptive details, and clear event sequences.

Integration of Knowledge and Ideas:

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.7: Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.8: Distinguish among fact, opinion, and reasoned judgment in a text.