

Dear Father  
I received your letter eight  
date with much thank for you good  
I think myself it is the only way  
to do what you want I am  
inform you that I mean to church  
with in the last two months and  
he went in to see father I don't  
t. Joy and surprise and had a  
him and father promised to con  
ee him soon I have been expecting  
but I hope he will be up in a few  
the long wish for story may be  
Father he is very for him I pray the

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# HANGED!

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**MARY SURRATT  
& THE PLOT TO ASSASSINATE  
ABRAHAM LINCOLN**

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by the author of *The Borden Murders*

👉 SARAH MILLER 👈

**EDUCATORS' GUIDE**

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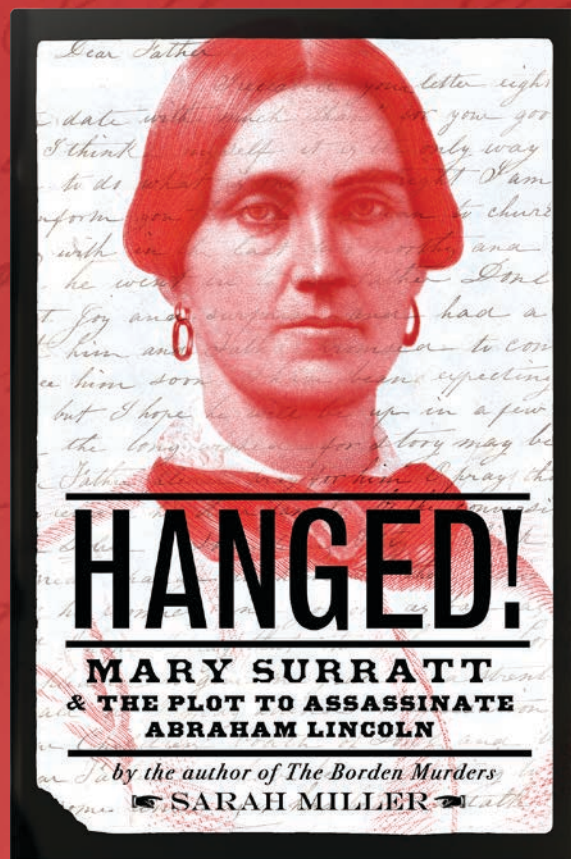


## ABOUT THE BOOK

From the critically acclaimed author of *The Borden Murders* comes the thrilling story of Mary Surratt, who was executed for her alleged involvement in the plot to assassinate Abraham Lincoln.

A dubious distinction belongs to Mary Surratt: on July 7, 1865, she became the first woman to be executed by the United States government, accused of conspiring in the plot to assassinate not only President Abraham Lincoln but also the vice president, the secretary of state, and General Grant.

Mary Surratt was a widow, a Catholic, a businesswoman, a slave owner, a Union resident, and the mother of a Confederate Secret Service courier. As the proprietor of the boardinghouse where John Wilkes Booth and his allies are known to have gathered, Mary Surratt was widely believed, as President Andrew Johnson famously put it, to have “kept the nest that hatched the egg.” But did Mrs. Surratt truly commit treason by aiding and abetting Booth in his plot to murder the president? Or was she the victim of a spectacularly cruel coincidence? This is YA nonfiction at its best—gripping, thought-provoking, and unputdownable.



HC: 978-0-593-18156-0

GLB: 978-0-593-18157-7

EL: 978-0-593-18158-4



Photo credit: Chris Martin

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SARAH MILLER is the author of *Violet and Daisy*, called “meticulously detailed” in a starred review from *The Horn Book*; *The Miracle & Tragedy of the Dionne Quintuplets*, which received four starred reviews; and *The Borden Murders*, a *School Library Journal* Best Book and an ALA-YALSA Quick Pick for Reluctant Readers. In addition to her work for young readers, she is the author of the *USA Today* bestselling *Caroline: Little House, Revisited*, which was named a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Selection, among other accolades. Visit her at [sarahmillerbooks.com](http://sarahmillerbooks.com) or on Facebook at @SMillerBooks.

## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Much like a lawyer trying a case, author Sarah Miller conducts a forensic analysis of the facts and circumstances leading to Mary Surratt's arrest and trial in *Hanged!* Before reading the book, watch "[A Real Lawyer Reacts to \*My Cousin Vinny\*](#)." The twenty-five-minute video recaps the story, but more importantly, it expounds on some of the legal issues in *Hanged!*, such as witness reliability and reasonable doubt.



Art © 1882 by John A. Marshall

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS WITH SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### 1. **Words Matter** [pp. 2, 110]

When the police knocked on Mrs. Surratt's boardinghouse in the middle of the night, two boarders recalled her reaction very differently. One remembers her saying, "Ask them to wait a few minutes, and I will open the door for them." The other insisted she said, "For God's sake, let them come in, I expected the house to be searched." What are the implications of these differing accounts? Relate your answer to the last paragraph on page 110. Why is it important to clarify intentions? What other examples can you identify of Mary Surratt's words or actions being misinterpreted.

Nearly every person has experienced a situation in which their intentions have been questioned. Why did you do that? Why did you say that? Why did you say that like *that*? Divide students into groups of three or four. Challenge each group to devise a scenario in which an action or dialogue can be interpreted in more than one way. After brainstorming and landing on a situation, have each group write a short script of the scene. Allow each group time to present their skit to the class. At the conclusion of the final skit, gather the class together to unpack thoughts and questions and to give and receive feedback.

### 2. **Setting the Scene** [pp. 5, 21]

Unlike a photograph, written accounts of an event must work harder to help the reader imagine what a scene looked like. For example, after Booth shot Lincoln and jumped from the balcony, the author writes, "A portion of an American flag, caught by his spurs as he jumped, trailed like a banner behind him." How does this example of figurative language help you imagine this dramatic moment? What emotions does it evoke?

Knowing the similarities and differences between metaphor, simile, and analogy can help strengthen your understanding of figurative language. Define these terms and provide examples of each from the text. Choose an example to illustrate. Caption the picture with the selected sentence or phrase.

### 3. **Mob Rules** [pp. 19, 22, 256]

After the assassination of President Lincoln, the nation's anger and grief was palpable. A crowd gathered outside Ford's Theatre and threatened to "hang all the actors."

"No person, not present in the city, could possibly form any true conception of the horror, mixed with apprehension of threatened danger, which prevailed here," the postmaster general said. How might this fraught environment have influenced the decisions that followed?



Discuss the following statement made by Justice Davis only one year after Mary Surratt's execution: "[D]uring the late wicked Rebellion, the temper of the times did not allow that calmness in deliberation and discussion so necessary to a correct conclusion of a purely judicial question." Put this statement into your own words. How is this statement relevant today? Discuss the temper of our times.

Ask students to research and take notes on a national tragedy, such as 9/11 or the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Have students find descriptions of the mood of the country following these events. What words were commonly used to describe how people felt? How did the people demonstrate their emotions? How did the government respond, and how were the accused treated? Explore the concept of "guilt by association." How did the concept apply to Mary Surratt? How was the concept applied in the aftermath of 9/11 or other national tragedies? Allow time for students to present their research to the class.

#### 4. They Made Me Say It!

[pp. 75, 76, 107, 258, 259]

The author provides evidence that the testimony against Mary given by Lloyd, who "had incentive to embellish the facts," and Weichmann, who was "as pliable as a mound of dough," may have been coerced. Look up the meaning of the word *coerced* and reread the pages referenced above. Discuss how coercion is prevalent here.

To make the act of coercion more meaningful to students, delve into a research project examining high-profile court cases of the past twenty to fifty years where, either during or after the trial, it came to light that coercion was used to pressure witnesses or defendants.

[The Innocence Project has a selection of such cases. Go to [innocenceproject.org](http://innocenceproject.org) and search the word *coercion*]. After research concludes, have each student write a two-page essay comparing how coercion was applied in the contemporary case with the treatment of witnesses in the Mary Surratt case.

#### 5. The Trial [pp. 134–135]

The author writes, "Even a layperson could see that this courtroom did not abide by the typical rules of evidence." The following statement appeared in the *New York Herald*: "In the mass of testimony against the conspirators presented to the Washington court our readers may have noticed a great deal which is technically illegal." As far as Surratt's lawyer was concerned, "The whole proceeding reeked of violations of the prisoner's rights, as well as flagrant diversions from courtroom protocol." Discuss the treatment Mary Surratt received during her trial. What courtroom protocols were ignored? Discuss how proper protocol may have resulted in a different verdict for Mary Surratt.

If Mary Surratt were tried today, would she be found guilty? Create a chart comparing the way a military trial is conducted versus a civil trial. Prepare and stage a mock trial in which a twenty-first-century Mary Surratt is on trial for aiding and abetting a group who conspired to assassinate the president. Before assigning roles to each student [Mary Surratt, witnesses, judge, jury of twelve peers, attorneys for the defense and prosecution, bailiff, court reporter], review key elements of the United States judicial system: the concept of innocent until proven guilty and the right to a trial by an impartial jury chosen from a cross-section of the community, a jury of one's peers.

#### 6. The Look of Guilt [pp. 159–160]

What people read, see, or hear on social media or from traditional news sources shapes their opinion and can influence the outcome of a trial. The author writes, "The journalists' notions about Mary's looks . . . betrayed their biases in their daily reports of the evidence." What biases were betrayed by their word choices? Why do you think the reporters chose to use those words?

Ask your class to make a list of the adjectives and phrases used to describe Mary Surratt. Post them around the room. Divide the class in half. Ask one group to protest Mary's innocence and the other to be undecided. Have the groups choose and post

alternate words or phrases reflecting their group's belief to counter the ones posted around the room. Discuss the results.

## 7. Men Do Not Make War on Women [p. 229 and Epilogue]

The author writes that Mary's alleged involvement in the conspiracy went against all contemporary notions of womanhood. What is meant by "notions of womanhood"? After the verdict, fellow defendant Lewis Powell said, "[Mary] does not deserve to die with us . . . she is a woman, and men do not make war on women." How did Powell's statement reflect society's views of what it meant to be a "lady"? Discuss additional examples from the text that describe gender roles in nineteenth-century America.

Interview a woman of an older generation about how society's expectations of women have changed. Write a short first-person essay based on your interview that begins: *In my day, women were expected to . . .* Use examples to explain how "notions of womanhood" have changed, even in recent history.

## 8. The Luck of John Surratt [p. 255]

After the trial, Mary was dead, but her son lived. How is this an example of irony? The author writes, "John Surratt had spent most of the last two years engaged in a sequence of events worthy of an adventure novel." Discuss his adventures. How was he both lucky and unlucky?

Imagine you are a screenwriter who has just read *Hanged!* You are so enthralled by John Surratt's story that you are inspired to write a screenplay. Consider the events described in the book and John Surratt's role in Lincoln's assassination. Write a twenty-five-word movie pitch [summary of your script] and the opening scene. Alternatively, you can create a storyboard of the opening scene. Pitch your movie to the class.

## 9. Blood on Their Hands [pp. 269–270]

During John Surratt's trial, the author writes, "[T]he nation jolted when his lawyers mentioned the clemency plea for Mary Surratt in court.

No one outside the White House and the War Department had known that five of the nine commissioners had petitioned the president to show mercy to Mary Surratt. A greater jolt yet came when word broke that President Johnson himself claimed to have been unaware of the plea's existence." What is *clemency*? The author continues, "[N]either [the president nor Judge Advocate General Holt] wanted Mary Surratt's blood on their hands." What is meant by this phrase? How did denying that he knew about the clemency plea keep President Johnson from having Mary's blood on his hands?

In Shakespeare's tragedy *Macbeth*, the word *blood*, and its various forms, appears over forty times. Briefly outline the plot for students. In Act II, Scene II, Macbeth is racked with guilt over his murder of King Duncan and cries: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?" Have students read the following article: "[Knocking on Hell Gate: The Porter Scene in 'Macbeth'](#)" and discuss the association of blood and guilt.

## 10. The Villain [pp. 248, 251, 252, 261]

If *Hanged!* pinpoints a villain in the execution of Mary Surratt, it is Louis Weichmann. "To hear Louis Weichmann tell it, no one suffered more than he did in the years following the conspiracy trial. For the rest of his life, he felt persecuted for his role in Mary Surratt's execution."

"I feel that my reputation is everything." No other single phrase encapsulates Louis Weichmann more aptly," the author writes. What is your opinion of Weichmann? Was he unjustly villainized? Why or why not? What is the meaning of the expression *Don't let the facts get in the way of a good story*? How does this expression relate to Weichmann?

Identify a person from current events who shares traits with Weichmann. How does this person control their narrative? Track this person's social media feeds for one week. Note what strategies are employed to present the person in a particular light. How is the depiction of this person's life curated? Create a slide presentation demonstrating your analysis of the person's public narrative.

## 11. Court of Public Opinion

[pp. 210, 211, 264, Epilogue]

"In the years immediately following Mary's execution, the nation's collective horror at her death transformed her into a martyr. The tide of public opinion would shift yet again by the end of the twentieth century, mirroring the sentiments at the time of her trial." What is a martyr? Why did some view her as such? Why did opinions change?

History is often reduced to basic facts, which are, over time, accepted as the whole truth. Read the following statements, which are presented as fact on [womenshistory.org](http://womenshistory.org).

- Mary Surratt also quickly became one of Booth's closest confidants after being introduced to him by her son.
- The two often held private meetings together in her home, the topics of which are still to this day unknown.
- Three days before the assassination, she rode to Surrattsville and told the man running her tavern to have the "shooting irons" ready as people will need them soon.

Revise these statements based on the knowledge gleaned from your reading of *Hanged!*

## 12. With Liberty and Justice for All [p. 257]

In 1866, a Supreme Court ruling issued after Mary Surratt's execution stated, "The Constitution of the United States is a law for rulers and people, equally in war and in peace, and covers with the shield of its protection all classes of men, at all times, and under all circumstances. . . . Trial by jury is a vital principle, underlying the whole administration of criminal justice." What does this mean? Given this sentiment, do you think Mary Surratt's conviction was legal? If she had been given a prison sentence instead of being executed, do you think she would have been given a new trial in light of the Supreme Court's ruling? Explain.

Examine contemporary social media feeds to discover how those accused of a crime or involved in a high-profile legal case are presented to the public, for better or worse. Create a social media campaign with the goal of getting a new trial for Mary Surratt. Allow time for students to present their completed project to the class.

*Guide written by Colleen Carroll, literacy specialist, education consultant, and author of the twelve-volume series How Artists See and four-volume companion How Artists See, Jr. [Abbeville Press]; and Elaine Marranzano, for Carroll Education Services. Elaine is a freelance writer specializing in health and education. Contact Colleen at [about.me/colleencarroll](http://about.me/colleencarroll).*



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