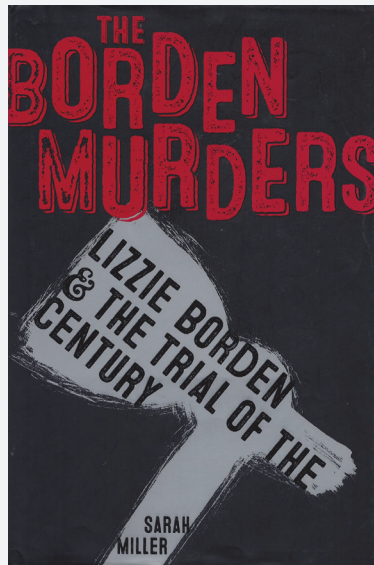


First Opinion: Lizzie Borden Took an Axe—Truth or Myth?

Miller, Sarah. *The Borden Murders: Lizzie Borden and the Trial of the Century*. Schwartz & Wade Books, 2016.

Vickey M. Giles



In *The Borden Murders: Lizzie Borden and the Trial of the Century*, Sarah Miller gathers information from primary sources, books, articles, and online sources in an attempt to gain “that delicate balance between fairness and humanity” that, according to Miller, is the “nearest thing” she can offer to Lizzie Borden in lieu of clearing her name of the murder (256).

The reader is brought into the world of Lizzie Borden with the book jacket photo, then immediately immersed in newspaper stories via the end pages. The “Who’s Who” provides an introduction to the “characters” in this true crime book and acts as a ready reference that is needed as the number of people involved in the account continues to multiply. There is also an inset with pictures of Lizzie and her family, along with floor plans of the house at 92 Second Street where the murders occurred. Text boxes with clarifying information, such as one with definitions of the different types of legal procedures, are located throughout the book.

The chronological account begins with the morning Lizzie finds her father and ends with Lizzie’s death in 1927. Although the book is based on details from the primary sources, Miller weaves her retelling in such a way that the reader is pulled into the account much as the viewer is pulled into the accounts of true crime on television. Direct quotes from the primary sources

(including trial transcripts) interwoven with information obtained from other books help the reader “walk” through the events as they happened.

Lizzie Borden discovers her dead father and the story begins. Her stepmother is discovered dead in her upstairs bedroom, the police are called to the scene, and the hunt begins for the Bordens’ murderer. Suspicion falls on Lizzie, in part because it is known that she does not like her stepmother. Police begin investigating, an inquest is held, and then a preliminary hearing follows. Lizzie is arrested and put on trial. The newspapers add to the sensationalism, at times calling for Lizzie’s conviction and at other times declaring her innocence, not always worrying about whether or not the truth is printed. Gruesome details and theatrics in the courtroom, including the revelation of Andrew Borden’s skull during the trial, only add to the drama. At the end of the trial, the verdict is not guilty. However, Lizzie’s life is never the same again.

As I finished the book and turned to read the epilogue, I longed for the author to give evidence that clearly showed whether Lizzie was innocent or guilty—I didn’t feel I had enough evidence to know which was true. Sarah Miller does not do that, however, and the reader must make that decision.

No matter what the reader decides, Lizzie Borden’s conviction in the press surely followed her to the grave. The children’s sing-song rhyme that outlived Lizzie Borden attests to that: Lizzie Borden took an axe, // Gave her mother forty whacks. // When she saw what she had done, // She gave her father forty-one. (Miller xiii)

This book made some connections to our digital students. The influence of the newspapers and their many inaccuracies during Lizzie Borden’s arrest, trial, and life can be compared to how today’s social media can influence the lives of our students through inaccurate information and pictures that are posted online quickly, many times without thought for how this might affect others.

About the Author

Vickey M. Giles, a former public school teacher and administrator, is an assistant professor at Houston Baptist University in Houston, Texas. She teaches children’s literature and reading courses to preservice teachers and graduate administrative leadership courses. She has a passion for children’s literature and believes reading has the ability to change the lives of students, both at the university level and in the PK–12 school system.