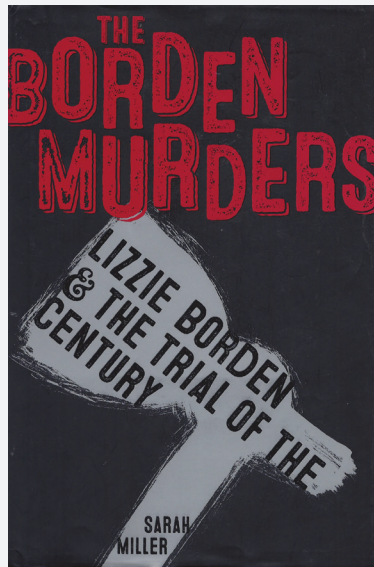


Second Reaction: Did She Do It?

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

Matthew Baker



There is an almost instinctual appeal to high-profile court cases. There is something that draws us in and fascinates us about someone who yesterday seemed like the most normal person in the world, but now seems to be one of the most dreaded monsters on the planet . . . or is she? This doubt is what drew me into Lizzie Borden's trial of the century.

Lizzie Borden's story is one that has become part of our historical knowledge and has seeped its way into pop culture: she is believed to be the first axe murderer in modern memory. However, we take for granted that there was a trial, and though she was acquitted, she was ultimately found guilty and villainized by public opinion and history.

The repeated mantra of "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) is one that brings back memories of the cruelties of school-aged children, making this a great bridge novel for students who are graduating from serial fictions into more literary works.

I gave this novel to Amy, one of my high-level readers in eighth grade, to read. Amy is a member of a group of readers in middle school who are highly interested in science fiction and fantasy novels. She questioned me about why she was reading the book. Some in her group

were interested but “freaked out” by the back cover. *The Borden Murders* was a book outside of Amy’s reading interest; however, she has recently been exploring other genres.

Initially, she said she thought the novel would be interesting because of the book jacket, yet she had no clue who Lizzie Borden was or what she had been accused of doing. However, after reading the first chapter she said she was hooked and ready to read more. What she found extremely interesting and what kept her engaged in the story were the excerpts and pullouts. These additional bits of information add an extra dynamic to the story and allow the reader to see into the time period of the story. They also provide the backstory and cultural knowledge required to understand the events within the book.

Additionally, since Amy was unaware of anything surrounding the Bordens, the secondary readings allowed her to remember that the story is a real event and not a fictionalized narrative. Even so, Amy said it was often difficult to identify with Lizzie Borden, not because she was unreal, but because Amy found it difficult to imagine and empathize with Borden’s situation. “There are things she does I wouldn’t do. Like during the trial she stares down, which could mean she did it. She doesn’t make eye contact, and people might think she did it,” Amy said.

As trials go, we get both sides of the story from the prosecution and the defense. However, in *The Borden Murders*, we also get the community reaction. It’s a lot to take in. Amy felt that the book was often confusing, but in a good way. “It makes me want to keep turning pages and see what is going to happen, if she did it or not, if she will be guilty or not,” she said. “I don’t think she did it, it looks like she did, but I think she didn’t.”

If Amy had any reservations about the book, it was that she does not have anyone in her peer group she can recommend it to because of the complex nature of the story and the vocabulary used. “I don’t think most people my age would take the time to look up the words like I did,” she said. “I would recommend this book to any adult, probably my mom, and upper-level high school kids.”

About the Author

Matthew Baker is an eighth grade reading teacher in Noble, Oklahoma. He is a member of the Oklahoma Writing Project and a PhD student at the University of Oklahoma. Baker is an avid reader and works to instill a love of reading in his students.