

The trial of Lizzie Borden: a true story

By: Cara Robertson

About the book: The Trial of Lizzie Borden by Cara Robertson is a highly researched, objective true-crime book that meticulously details the 1892 murders of Andrew and Abby Borden and the subsequent sensational trial, using primary sources like transcripts and newly discovered letters to present the facts without taking a definitive stance on Lizzie's guilt or innocence. Published in 2019, the book is praised for its legal depth (Robertson is a lawyer) and for providing a window into 19th-century America, making it a definitive account for fans of the case.

About the Author: Cara Robertson began researching the Borden case as a Harvard undergraduate in 1990. She holds a PhD from Oxford University and a JD from Stanford Law School. She clerked at the Supreme Court of the United States, served as a legal adviser to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia at The Hague, and has written for various publications. Her scholarship has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Humanities Center, of which she is a Trustee. *The Trial of Lizzie Borden* is her first book.

People:

- Lizzie Borden- Acquitted of the murder of her father and her stepmother
- Andrew Borden- Lizzie's Father
- Abbey Borden-Lizzie's Stepmother
- Emma Borden-Lizzie's Older Sister
- John Morse- Brother of Lizzie's mother (Andrew's first wife) who was visiting
- Bridget Sullivan- Maid who was in the house during the murders
- Hosea M. Knowlton: District Attorney who argued the case for the state.
- William H. Moody: Prosecuting attorney who later became a U.S. Supreme Court
- George D. Robinson: Former Governor of Massachusetts and lead defense counsel.
- Andrew Jennings: The Borden family attorney who managed the initial defense and brought in Robinson.
- Arthur S. Phillips: Joined the defense team to assist Jennings.
- Caleb Blodget, Justin Dewey, and Albert Mason-Three Judges who presided over the case

Discussion Questions:

1. The jury ultimately acquitted Lizzie Borden. Do you think the verdict was justified based on the evidence presented at trial? Why or why not?

2. How did the concept of “reasonable doubt” shape the outcome of the case?
3. What pieces of evidence did you find most compelling—or most questionable?
4. How did Victorian-era expectations of womanhood influence how Lizzie was perceived?
5. What role did class and respectability play in shaping public opinion?
6. How did newspaper coverage affect the case and the community?
7. Were you surprised by how sensationalized the reporting was? How does it compare to modern true crime coverage?
8. Do you think Lizzie was tried more in the press than in the courtroom?
9. How does Robertson portray the Borden family relationships?
10. What possible motives are presented, and which seem most plausible to you?
11. How did inheritance, money, and property factor into the tension within the household?
12. How reliable do you find the testimonies of those closest to Lizzie?
16. What did you think of the prosecution’s strategy? Where did it fall short?
17. How effective was the defense team?
18. What does the trial reveal about the American legal system in the 1890s?
19. Were there moments where you felt the outcome was shaped more by social bias than facts?
20. How does Robertson handle the question of Lizzie’s guilt or innocence?
21. Did your opinion of Lizzie change as you read? Why?
22. How does the book balance empathy and skepticism?
23. What do you think happened after the trial, emotionally and socially, for Lizzie?
24. How does Robertson blend narrative storytelling with historical documentation?
25. Did you find the book more like a courtroom drama, a biography, or investigative journalism?
26. What surprised you most about the research or details included?
27. Do you think Robertson has a theory about Lizzie’s guilt? Does she successfully remain neutral?
28. Why do you think the Lizzie Borden case has endured in American culture?
29. What does this case reveal about crime, morality, and society at the turn of the century?
30. If this trial happened today, how do you think it would unfold differently?

Read Alike:

- *Alias Grace* By: Margaret Atwood
- *Bone deep: untangling the Betsy Faria murder case* By: Charles Bosworth
- *Nothing but the night: Leopold & Loeb and the truth behind the murder that rocked 1920s America* By: Greg King