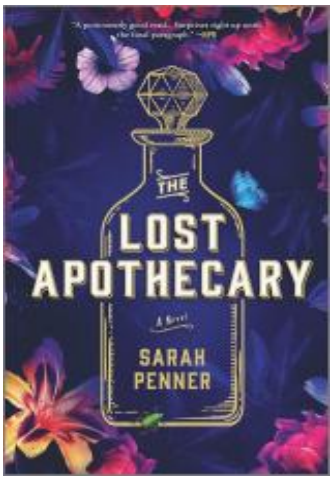
The Lost Apothecary

by Sarah Penner



About the Book

Hidden in the depths of 18th-century London, a secret apothecary shop caters to an unusual kind of clientele. Women across the city whisper of a mysterious figure named Nella who sells well-disguised poisons to use against the oppressive men in their lives. But the apothecary?s fate is jeopardized when her newest patron, a precocious 12-year-old, makes a fatal mistake, sparking a string of consequences that echo through the centuries.

Meanwhile, in present-day London, aspiring historian Caroline Parcewell spends her 10th wedding anniversary alone, running from her own demons. When she stumbles upon a clue to the unsolved apothecary murders that haunted London 200 years ago, her life collides with the apothecary?s in a stunning twist of fate --- and not everyone will survive.

With crackling suspense, unforgettable characters and searing insight, THE LOST APOTHECARY is a subversive and intoxicating debut novel of secrets, vengeance, and the remarkable ways women can save each other despite the barrier of time.

Discussion Guide

Please note: The following discussion questions are FULL of spoilers. Very big spoilers! Read at your own risk.

1. THE LOST APOTHECARY opens with Nella in her shop, preparing to dispense a poison meant to kill a man. Her work is sinister, and much about her character is dark and disturbing. When you first learned that Nella was a murderer, how did you view her? How did your feelings change over the course of the book as more of her past was revealed? Did you believe she would eventually find redemption? In the end, did you see her as a hero, a villain, or something in between? Why?

2. At the beginning of Caroline?s story, she finds the apothecary vial while on a mudlarking tour. Had you heard of

mudlarking prior to reading this book? Do you believe that fate or coincidence led to her discovery? Have you ever stumbled on something that you consider to be fate?

3. Both Nella and Caroline have been betrayed by men in their lives. In what ways did the two women respond similarly to these betrayals? In what ways did they respond differently? Do you feel that one woman was more emotionally resilient than the other?

4. Nella and Eliza form an unlikely friendship early in the story, despite Nella?s resistance to having the young girl in her shop a second time. Why do you think Nella eventually softened her heart toward Eliza? What drew the two characters --- one on the cusp of womanhood, the other toward the end of her life --- toward one another? What kind of impact did Eliza have on Nella?s character?

5. THE LOST APOTHECARY is sprinkled with mention of magick, and several events occur that could be considered either the work of magick or merely good luck. When you learned that Eliza survived after ingesting the Tincture to Reverse Bad Fortune, did you believe it the result of magick, or do you think she was a lucky survivor after jumping into the freezing river?

6. When James feels a cold coming on, Caroline points him to the eucalyptus oil in the hotel bathroom (p. 195), but she doesn?t tell him it?s for topical use only. Later, we learn that he ingested the toxic oil. While reading, did you consider the possibility that Caroline purposely didn?t tell him the oil was for topical use only? Do you think that, even subconsciously, this might have been a form of revenge?

7. James is a nuanced character. At different junctures in the story, he shows remorse and heartbreak, only to later lie again to his wife. What did you think of their relationship? Did you believe he was truly sorry for his infidelity, or were his apologies to Caroline yet another form of manipulation?

8. At the end of the story, when Eliza is an adult with children of her own, she says that Nella still counsels her to ?this very day? (p. 300). Do you interpret this as Nella having lived many more years, or is Eliza referring to Nella?s spirit? Why do you think the author might have left this purposefully vague?

9. While alone in London, Caroline begins to consider how very different her life might have been if she?d not remained in the States with James. As you read about her unfulfilled dreams, did you find yourself thinking about how your life might look today if you?d chosen a different path long ago? What aspirations did you used to have that you might someday like to revisit or pursue?

10. THE LOST APOTHECARY explores the idea of female empowerment and rebelling against a man?s world. In what ways did Nella, Eliza and Caroline empower themselves? Do you consider THE LOST APOTHECARY a feminist book?

11. Which of the three characters --- Nella, Eliza or Caroline --- did you find the most compelling or enjoyable to read? Why?

12. The theme of motherhood is explored throughout THE LOST APOTHECARY. Nella mourns her inability to have children, and while Caroline begins the story wishing she had a baby, this changes by the end of her narrative. What wisdom do you think Nella would impart to Caroline about the pursuit of motherhood, if the two women had the

opportunity to sit down and talk?

13. In the historical note, the author states that ?in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the largest population of accused poisoners consisted of mothers, wives, and female servants.? Did this statistic surprise you? Given that the science of toxicology didn?t yet exist in the late 18th century, do you think it?s possible that a shop like Nella?s might have actually existed? Which of the many potions and poisonous concoctions did you find the most interesting or surprising?

14. THE LOST APOTHECARY is paced purposefully so that the truth about Nella?s fate is slowly revealed over the course of the story. What techniques or literary devices did the author use to ?drip-feed? this information and maintain the book?s suspense?

15. Discuss the meaning of the title, THE LOST APOTHECARY. In your opinion, which character is the real ?lost apothecary??

Author Bio

Sarah Penner is the *New York Times* and internationally bestselling author of THE LOST APOTHECARY, THE LONDON SÉANCE SOCIETY and THE AMALFI CURSE. Her books have been translated into more than 40 languages, and her debut, THE LOST APOTHECARY, has sold over one million copies worldwide.

A graduate of the University of Kansas, Sarah spent 13 years in corporate finance and now writes full-time. In her free time, Sarah enjoys hiking, yoga and cooking. She also sits on the Board of Directors at her local animal shelter, Friends of Strays. Sarah and her husband, Marc, live in Florida.

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