



# **Lizzie Borden on Trial: Murder, Ethnicity, and Gender (Landmark Law Cases & American Society)**

*Joseph A. Conforti*

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Most people could probably tell you that Lizzie Borden "took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks," but few could say that, when tried, Lizzie Borden was acquitted, and fewer still, why. In Joseph A. Conforti's engrossing retelling, the case of Lizzie Borden, sensational in itself, also opens a window on a time and place in American history and culture.

Surprising for how much it reveals about a legend so ostensibly familiar, Conforti's account is also fascinating for what it tells us about the world that Lizzie Borden inhabited. As Conforti—himself a native of Fall River, the site of the infamous murders—introduces us to Lizzie and her father and step-mother, he shows us why who they were matters almost as much to the trial's outcome as the actual events of August 4, 1892. Lizzie, for instance, was an unmarried woman of some privilege, a prominent religious woman who fit the profile of what some characterized as a "Protestant nun." She was also part of a class of moneyed women emerging in the late 19th century who had the means but did not marry, choosing instead to pursue good works and at times careers in the helping professions. Many of her contemporaries, we learn, particularly those of her class, found it impossible to believe that a woman of her background could commit such a gruesome murder.

As he relates the details, known and presumed, of the murder and the subsequent trial, Conforti also fills in that background. His vividly written account creates a complete picture of the Fall River of the time, as Yankee families like the Bordens, made wealthy by textile factories, began to feel the economic and cultural pressures of the teeming population of native and foreign-born who worked at the spindles and bobbins. Conforti situates Lizzie's austere household, uneasily balanced between the well-to-do and the poor, within this social and cultural milieu—laying the groundwork for the murder and the trial, as well as the outsize reaction that reverberates to our day. As Peter C. Hoffer remarks in his preface, there are many popular and fictional accounts of this still-controversial case, "but none so readable or so well-balanced as this."

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