



a novel

Flanging Mary

*"You'll be wondering until the
last page if history is being rewritten."*

—SUSAN MEISSNER, author of *Secrets of a Charmed Life*

SUSAN HIGGINBOTHAM

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Even though Mary's role in the conspiracy puts Nora in jail twice and ruins her prospects of getting a government job, and despite Nora's high regard for President Lincoln, Nora remains loyal to Mary. Would you have been?
2. In a lecture given in 1870, John Surratt claimed that while hiding out in Canada, he sent an agent to confer with his mother's attorneys and was advised that Mary was in no danger and that any action on his part would only make matters worse. Many have speculated that if he had come to Washington, Mary would have been spared and John would have been hanged. Would you have returned in his position? Whose death do you believe Mary could have borne better, John's or her own?
3. As John Surratt reminds Mary, following Ulric Dahlgren's failed raid on Richmond, papers were found on his body detailing a plan to kill Jefferson Davis and his cabinet. Assuming the papers were genuine, do you think such a plan, if carried out, would be regarded as an atrocity or as an act of war?
4. Mary Surratt maintained until the very last that she was innocent of the charges against her. Do you believe that she was

innocent of conspiring to kill the president? Of conspiring to kidnap him?

5. In prison, Mary tells Anna that she is stronger than she realizes. Is she right? How do Anna and Nora change over the course of the novel?
6. Defending his kidnapping plot in his lecture, John Surratt said that his motives were honorable and that any young man in the North would have gladly entered into a plan to kidnap Jefferson Davis. Do you agree? What if John and his accomplices had succeeded in kidnapping President Lincoln in March 1865?
7. President Johnson believed that if he pardoned Mary Surratt, it would only encourage women to commit treason. Do you agree with him? Would you have pardoned Mary? What about Powell, who failed to kill Secretary Seward? Atzerodt, who lost his nerve and never tried to kill Vice President Johnson? Herold, who assisted Booth's escape but shed no blood? What of the fact that each of the four, had he or she alerted the authorities, could have saved President Lincoln's life?
8. Bearing in mind that under the law of the time, Mary would have not been allowed to testify, but a jury would have had to reach a unanimous verdict, do you believe she would have met the same fate had she been tried in a civilian criminal court?
9. While on the run, John Wilkes Booth wrote in his pocket calendar that his assassination of the president "was not a wrong, unless God deems it so." Few would agree with him in President Lincoln's case, but can assassination ever be justified? What if one of the numerous plots to assassinate Hitler had succeeded? What about the assassination of a terrorist leader?

10. The two leading witnesses against Mary Surratt were her boarder, Louis Weichmann, and her tenant, John Lloyd. If Weichmann had refused to cooperate with the government, do you believe Mary could have been convicted on Lloyd's testimony alone? What if only Weichmann had testified?
11. In his lecture, John Surratt emphatically denied plotting to assassinate President Lincoln. Do you believe him?
12. At trial, Louis Weichmann claimed that he had confided his suspicions about John Surratt and his companions to a colleague at the War Department. If your close friend was involved in criminal activity, would you notify the authorities? What if the offense was a relatively minor one? What if your friend's activities were treasonous? Do you believe that Weichmann knew more about John Surratt's activities than he admitted?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

What drew you to Mary Surratt's story?

I've always been interested in the Lincoln assassination, but I'd never read about it in depth. A few years ago, I read James Swanson's *Manhunt*, and it rekindled my interest. I picked up Kate Clifford Larson's book about Mary Surratt's role in the conspiracy, *The Assassin's Accomplice*, and it occurred to me that Mary would make an excellent subject for a novel. The fact that I lived just a few hours away from the setting of the novel made the idea even more appealing.

How did you research *Hanging Mary*?

There's a wealth of material related to the Lincoln assassination, including witness statements and transcripts of the conspiracy trial, so that part of the book wasn't at all difficult to research—it was more a matter of accumulating all of the sources and sifting through them. What was a bit more challenging was researching the character of Nora Fitzpatrick. I knew nothing about her life after 1869 when I began researching the novel, so to get started, I put a query into the Lincoln Discussion Symposium, a discussion board where there's almost no question relating to Abraham Lincoln or the assassination that someone can't answer. Sure enough, someone was able to provide me with some basic genealogical information about Nora—as well as the shocking fact that she had died in an insane

asylum. Fortunately, St. Elizabeths's records from the nineteenth century are available to the public, so I was able to obtain her file. Even better, her brother had written a long letter to the superintendent detailing her history. From that, I learned where Nora had gone to school, and I also got some insight into her character.

I also made use of both the National Archives and the District of Columbia Archives, where I looked through prison records, wills, guardianship reports—everything I could that was connected with Nora or her family. Much of what I learned never made it into the book, but it was great fun finding it out. My dream now is to be locked in the vaults of the National Archives for a weekend.

One source I found tremendously helpful was newspapers from the period. Not only did they publish detailed accounts of major events such as the president's assassination, the conspiracy trial, and the executions, but they published what we would consider the most minor of human interest stories—such as an article about the retirement of Nora's father from his bank, which gave me not only a little history of him, but some keys to his personality.

Did you change your mind about any of your characters?

I started the novel thinking of Anna Surratt as a high-strung bigot—I really didn't like her much. But as the novel progressed, I began to like her more, and I developed a great deal of respect for her. It took a strong character, much more than she's usually given credit for, to get through those horrible weeks culminating in her mother's execution with her sanity intact.

John Surratt is another character I warmed to. He didn't exactly play a heroic role in history—staying away from his mother in her hour of need—but I found it hard to dislike him. His letters to his cousin, including the one Nora sneaks a peek at, are lively and winning, and he speaks of his mother with warmth. A letter from his granddaughter in the files of the James O. Hall Research Center speaks of him as a loving husband and father who was haunted by his mistakes in 1865.

Nora's brother called Alexander Whelan a worthless drunkard, and I was inclined to agree until I did some further research on him. He patented three inventions; he took the pledge occasionally; and when Nora died, he had the good sense to put his youngest son's small inheritance from her in the hands of a guardian. So he turned out to be quite likable in the final draft of my novel.

Louis Weichmann is a different story. While he was in an unenviable position at the trial, which cast a shadow over the rest of his life, it also brought out some of the most unattractive aspects of his personality. He never let anyone associated with the prosecution forget the role he had played in securing Mary's conviction, and in one particularly off-putting letter written in 1896, he told the aging Judge Bingham that the judge might not have many years left to him and asked him to contribute a letter to Weichmann's book about the "mead of praise" to which Weichmann was entitled for testifying!

Did you find it difficult to write John Wilkes Booth's character?

Actually, he was one of the easiest characters to write. Most people found him charming and engaging, so it wasn't hard to bring out those qualities in him. I think it is a pity he didn't enlist in the Confederate army and die a valiant death on the battlefield—many people, and the nation, would have been a lot better off for it.

Is there something you wish you had been able to find out?

Although she's a minor character, it really annoys me that I haven't been able to find out what happened to Catherine Baxley, who shares the ladies' imprisonment for a brief time. Her trail grows cold in 1867, when she and Robert E. Lee corresponded about a donation he had made to a charity in which she was involved. I check the various newspaper archive sites from time to time in hopes that one day I'll run across a mention of her. It's difficult for me to imagine that she simply vanished into quiet obscurity, because she wasn't a quiet lady.

Would you like to have lived in 1860's America?

As interesting as it would have been, no—I like antibiotics and our other modern conveniences. Especially air conditioning, having spent summers in Washington, DC! But I would like to wear the clothes from the period. For author appearances, I got together a period ensemble, complete with corset, drawers, and hoop skirt, and I felt downright shabby after changing back into my usual sweater and jeans. I wish I could find more occasions to wear my gown, but the neighbors might think it a bit odd to see me walking the dogs in it.

All of your previous novels were set in medieval or Tudor England. Was it difficult for you to make the transition to nineteenth-century America?

Once I stopped typing “1565” for “1865” it was fine! Actually, it did take a little adjustment going from the high nobility in England to the middle class in America. I had to remember not to have my characters address each other as “my lord” and “my lady,” and to have them do for themselves instead of having servants waiting on them. And my nineteenth-century characters were more buttoned up—in every sense of the word—than my characters from centuries before.

Would you write another novel set during this period?

Certainly! I have some ideas percolating. And doing archival research is addictive.