

KATE MOORE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE RADIUM GIRLS*



The WOMAN
THEY COULD NOT
SILENCE

ONE WOMAN, HER INCREDIBLE FIGHT
FOR FREEDOM, AND THE MEN
WHO TRIED TO MAKE HER DISAPPEAR

"A masterpiece." —NATHALIA HOLT,
New York Times bestselling author of *Rise of the Rocket Girls*

READING GROUP GUIDE

1. Elizabeth is locked up in the asylum because her husband does not agree with her religious views. Do you think modern-day America is more or less tolerant of diverse religions (and controversial viewpoints) than in Packard's time? How free are followers of minority faiths to practice in the U.S. today?
2. Elizabeth employs a variety of tactics—physical resistance, negotiating with hospital staff, writing—to protest her treatment throughout the book. Which techniques were most effective for her? What strategies would you turn to in her place?
3. Novel reading, masturbation, and irregular menstrual cycles are a few of the many reasons that women were admitted to asylums in Elizabeth's time. Which, if any, of these justifications stood out to you? How has our understanding of these “causes of insanity” changed?
4. Dr. Duncanson, the doctor who supports Elizabeth in her insanity trial, testifies that: “I did not agree with...her on many things, but I do not call people insane because they differ with me.” How relevant is this statement in America today when political opinions are so divided, and what does it do to public discourse when the idea of insanity is brought into politics? Do you think we might ever

return to a time when people are locked up for holding an opposing viewpoint to those in power?

5. Elizabeth and McFarland have a complicated relationship, to say the least. What did you think of her continuous attempts to redeem him? Did she truly think he would change, or was she just trying to improve her own circumstances? What were the long-lasting effects of the relationship on each of them?
6. When Elizabeth is first released from the asylum, how does her homecoming compare to her daydreams and expectations? Have you ever had a similar experience? How did you handle the difference between your expectations and reality?
7. Elizabeth's landmark case for her sanity was originally a trial regarding habeas corpus. What did you think of the judge's decision to shift focus? Is a jury qualified to confirm or deny someone's sanity?
8. What did you think of the spate of releases that occurred right before the asylum came under scrutiny?
9. Right or wrong, McFarland was completely trusted by the Jacksonville Asylum's Board of Trustees. What impact did this have on his patients? How did the Board respond to Fuller's investigation and recommendations? Can you think of a way to avoid such conflicts of interest?
10. Governor Oglesby was not required to act on the findings of the investigative committee and planned to keep them under wraps until the next meeting of the Illinois General Assembly. What motivated him to keep the report under wraps? Do you think modern politicians play the same games with important information?
11. The book explores the power of rumor and reputation. Even though Elizabeth is declared sane, rumors persist about her sanity for the rest of her life and are used to discredit her. Can you think of

any modern-day examples where, even though someone has been cleared of something, their opponents continue to use that something against them? Do you think this is “fair game,” or is it morally wrong?

12. How did Elizabeth’s status as a woman, mother, and asylum patient both help and hinder her lobbying efforts? How did she use men’s expectations of her to bolster her causes?
13. Which of Elizabeth’s many accomplishments do you think she was most proud of? Is there anything else you see as her greatest achievement?
14. Elizabeth writes: “To be lost to reason is a greater misfortune than to be lost to virtue, and the...scorn which the world attaches to it [is] greater.” Do you think this is still true today? The American Psychological Association recently stated that only 25 percent of adults with symptoms of mental illness believe that people will be caring and sympathetic toward them. How can we improve sympathy for those who struggle with their mental health? And which do you think carries more societal shame: having a mental health problem or being “lost to virtue”? Is the answer dependent on gender?

A CONVERSATION WITH THE AUTHOR

How did you first encounter Elizabeth's story? When did you decide that you wanted to write about her?

Before I even knew her name, I actively went looking for Elizabeth's story. The background to that quest: In the fall of 2017, the world was set ablaze by the #MeToo movement, and I wanted to write about some of the issues being raised. Namely, why hadn't women been listened to—and believed—before? Too often, it seemed to me, women had been silenced and discredited with the claim that we were crazy. Was there any woman in history, I wondered, who had been declared insane by a patriarchal society for speaking her mind, but who had somehow, against the odds, proved her sanity and prevailed? (Because I wanted a happy ending for my book!) I went in search of this mystery woman, only hoping she existed. And on January 15, 2018, after having fallen down a rabbit hole of internet searches about women and madness and insane asylums, I first read about Elizabeth Packard in a University of Wisconsin essay that I randomly found online.

That first reference was just a single paragraph in length, but a few Google clicks later, having learned a little more about her life, I was hopeful I had found the central protagonist of my next book. (I noted in my diary she looked “promising.”) Yet it wasn't until I had completed my due

diligence—reading the other books about her that existed at that time so as to be sure that my vision for her story, a work of narrative nonfiction, hadn't already been published—that I knew for definite she was “The One.”

Elizabeth's story relies heavily on her personal tenacity. How do you think she cultivated that strength? What resources do you draw on when you feel like giving up?

I think Elizabeth's strength is absolutely remarkable. Ultimately, I think the bedrock to it was that she *knew* she was in the right, but even more remarkably, she maintained the confidence to *insist* on that truth, something with which some of us struggle. Her faith clearly helped too.

What resources do I draw on? Hope, knowledge that things will always get better (because nothing lasts forever), and sometimes (e.g. when writing a book!) the knowledge that you have to put the hard work in to enjoy the outcome. Nothing worthwhile is easy.

Elizabeth is a great role model for standing up for yourself and always following the truth. Who are your role models, historical or modern?

My role models are the radium girls, who I wrote about in another book. These incredible women are, to me, inspirational beacons of courage and strength. Whenever I'm anxious, I always think of how they might have responded to a situation or simply of what they went through, and they give me the strength to carry on.

You aptly note the ways that our public discourse *hasn't* changed when it comes to denouncing opponents by calling them “insane.” Why does that technique have such staying power? How do you think we can combat it?

I think it has staying power because it's *so* dismissive. The accuser isn't

even trying to engage with or debate their opponent, probably because they fear they may be bested. I think part of combating it is actually already happening: demystifying those who are genuinely mentally ill and treating them with love and understanding, and with an appreciation that either we or someone we know is likely to suffer with mental health issues. With that changed approach, the former “slur” of being called crazy has less power. And the accusation itself is revealed to be fearful and hollow in nature.

When writing nonfiction, you can’t always expect events to be “story-shaped.” What kind of work do you do to make a cohesive narrative out of complicated true events? What’s the hardest part of that process? The most fun part?

The key thing for me is to complete my research before I write a word of the book. Doing so not only enables me to see the big picture, from which I’ll craft the narrative, but it also often throws up intriguing twists that enhance the book’s plot. I first plot all my research into a chronological timeline, and only after that do I plot the book itself, which is different, because for dramatic purposes you may want to include “reveals,” etc. Even as I’m researching, though, I’ve got an antenna quivering for possible end-of-chapter slam-dunk quotations and potentially dramatic scenes.

The hardest part of the process? Two answers. One, because I’m writing nonfiction, at times the historic sources simply don’t exist to tell you exactly what happened. That can be really frustrating. Two, almost the opposite problem, the act of sifting through the sources and the data that you *do* have and deciding what—or perhaps more importantly, what *not*—to include. It’s essential to know the story *you* want to tell from those sources and to stick to it, but that’s often easier said than done. I find the editing process is usually essential to help truly distill the narrative you’re crafting.

The most fun part? Hands down, actually writing a scene after you've done your research and know all the intimate details that will bring it to life. For example, what the weather was like that day, what clothes the person might have been wearing, the nature of their surroundings and what they looked like, etc. All those details may have come from many different sources, and to combine them as the scene flows out from your pen is a wonderful feeling—you can see this historic scene so clearly in your own mind, brought to life by the collected facts.

Both *The Woman They Could Not Silence* and your previous book, *The Radium Girls*, required extensive research. How do you work with archives and other sources for primary texts and historical data? What recommendations do you have for other researchers and writers?

I have to give a shout-out to librarians and archivists across the country here. They're always so knowledgeable and helpful. The *how* of how I work probably boils down to knowing the story I want to tell and how I want to tell it, so I'll mine a source for descriptive details, for example. Staying focused helps you to sort through what is always a mass of data. That said, it's critical to remain open-minded, too, because until the research is finished, you don't necessarily know what is important!

As for tips, I would say be inspired by those who have come before you down a research path. When you're taking your own first steps, it can be useful to consult bibliographies of other books in order to find out what archives even exist. Some of them may prove useful to you too. Secondly, relish pursuing the various serendipitous trails that pop up along the way, whether that's "following the money" to discover corruption and influence or simply saying yes to opportunities for further research that, for example, those wonderful librarians may suggest!

Speaking of research, were there any surprising facts that didn't make it into the final book? What was the most interesting thing you discovered but weren't able to include?

There was so much that didn't make it in! I had to cut an entire part as the first draft was too long. (It was the original part one, which I'd written as a *Crucible*-esque witch hunt, as Elizabeth's religious community tightened the noose of alleged insanity about her neck until she was committed to the asylum.) Similarly, at the other end of the book, I did a heap of research into twentieth-century facts around the book's themes. Here, a surprising fact to me was that it wasn't until 1974, with the passing of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act, that independent women could get credit cards themselves. Until then, a single, divorced, or widowed woman had to get a man to cosign any credit application before it would be granted.

I also regretted deeply that I wasn't able to write more about how Black people face increased prejudice when it comes to alleged insanity. Statistics show that Black women are institutionalized far more frequently than white women with exactly the same symptoms, and they're also disproportionately affected by extreme "treatments," such as, in former times, involuntary sterilizations. Black women made up 85 percent of those legally sterilized in North Carolina in the 1960s; in other operations, Black children as young as five were lobotomized. These things occurred after Elizabeth's time, however, and I wasn't able, in the end, to find a place for them in the postscript (they had featured in my first draft).

What does your writing space look like? How do you keep all your research and drafts organized?

I have written books all over my house, so I don't have a dedicated writing space as such. I wrote *The Radium Girls* at my kitchen table. For *The Woman They Could Not Silence*, I wrote in our tiny, very newly

decorated study. It was all very minimalist, as our furniture was still in storage from the renovation. I literally just had a desk, a chair, and a side table with a CD player on it so I could listen to music while I wrote (for this book, generally Ludovico Einaudi's *Eden Roc* or the soundtrack to *The Mission*, composed by Ennio Morricone). The study walls are painted a cream color—for the interest of readers of *The Radium Girls*, it is a shade named Ottawa—and I wrote with four pictures of Elizabeth stuck onto them so that she was always with me.

It's a very tidy space. I just have one A4 printout beside me—my book plan—which I check off and annotate as I go along. My research and various drafts are all stored on my laptop, so there are no piles of paper. On that laptop, the research is organized to the nth degree. Every source has a unique reference number I've given it, which is plotted into my chronological timeline. All that time-consuming, painstaking preparation means I can locate a specific quotation from a source in seconds. This also enables me to write fluidly and fast.

What are you reading these days?

I haven't had much time for reading lately. Rightly or wrongly, when I'm deep in the writing and editing process, I tend not to read so I only have the one story in my head. But the best nonfiction I most recently read was Karen Abbott's *The Ghosts of Eden Park*. And I have Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* waiting for me on my bookshelf once this book is done.