

# The Lost Apothecary

by Sarah Penner

Martin County Library System Book Club Kit:

## *The Lost Apothecary* by Sarah Penner

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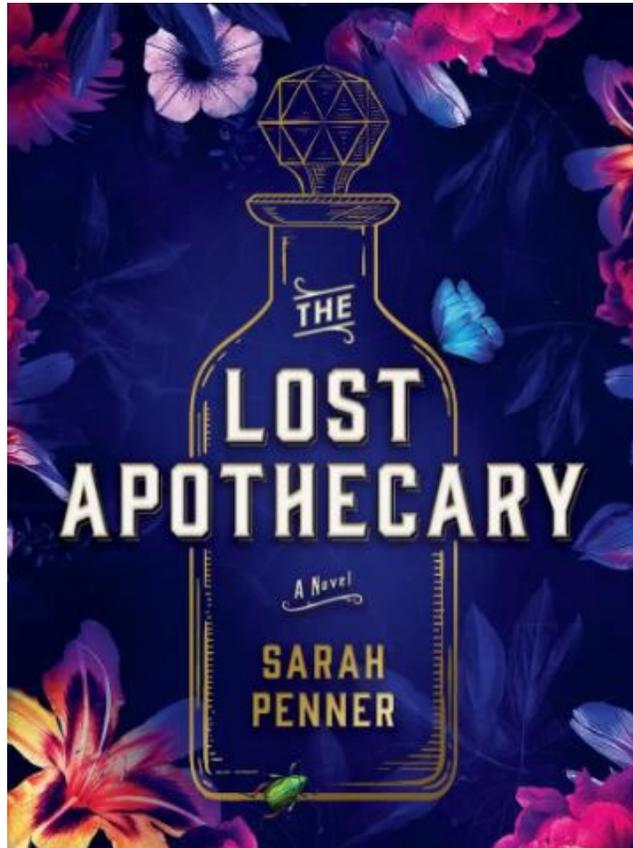
### Book summary

In this addictive and spectacularly imagined debut, a female apothecary secretly dispenses poisons to liberate women from the men who have wronged them—setting three lives across centuries on a dangerous collision course.

Rule #1: The poison must never be used to harm another woman.

Rule #2: The names of the murderer and her victim must be recorded in the apothecary's register.

One cold February evening in 1791, at the back of a dark London alley in a hidden apothecary shop, Nella waits for her newest customer. Once a respected healer, Nella now uses her knowledge for a darker purpose—selling well-disguised poisons



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to desperate women who would kill to be free of the men in their lives. But when her new customer turns out to be a precocious twelve-year-old named Eliza Fanning, an unexpected friendship sets in motion a string of events that jeopardizes Nella's world and threatens to expose the many women whose names are written in her register.

In present day London, aspiring historian Caroline Parcewell spends her tenth wedding anniversary alone, reeling from the discovery of her husband's infidelity. When she discovers an old apothecary vial in the River Thames, she can't resist investigating, only to realize she's found a link to the unsolved "apothecary murders" that haunted London two centuries ago. As she deepens her search, Caroline's life collides with Nella's and Eliza'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 exploration of women rebelling against a man's world, the destructive force of revenge, and the remarkable ways that women can save each other despite the barrier of time.

Source: Author's website. ([sarahpenner.com](http://sarahpenner.com))





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## Meet the Author

I was born and raised in northeast Kansas, growing up in a small log cabin nestled deep in the woods. This picturesque retreat, where I lived until early adulthood, frames most of my early memories. I began writing seriously in 2015, after attending a moving lecture given by Elizabeth Gilbert. She was on tour for *Big Magic*, a game-changing book for creatives. Soon after her talk, I enrolled in my first online creative writing class. I haven't looked back since. I'm an avid traveler, though my heart is stuck in London. Other favorite destinations include Thailand, Ireland, Germany, Belize, and Italy. I graduated from the University of Kansas with a degree in finance. In early 2021, after thirteen years in corporate America, I left my day job. I'm thrilled now to call myself a full-time writer. When I'm not at the keyboard, you'll likely find me in the kitchen, the yoga studio, or running outdoors in the Florida heat. I'm married to my best friend, Marc. We're proud residents of the Sunshine State, where we live with our "silky hair" miniature dachshund, Zoe.



Source: Author's website. ([sarahpenner.com](http://sarahpenner.com))



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## Discussion Questions

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





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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?





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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”?

Source: Author's website. ([sarahpenner.com](http://sarahpenner.com))



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## Recipes

### Rosemary Butter Biscuit Cookies

(A traditional shortbread. Savory yet sweet, and in no way sinister)

- 1 sprig fresh rosemary
- 1 1/2 cup butter, salted
- 2/3 cup white sugar
- 2 3/4 cup all-purpose flour

Remove leaves from rosemary and finely chop (approximately 1 tablespoon or to taste). Soften butter; blend well with sugar. Add rosemary and flour; mix well until dough comes together. Line 2 cookie sheets with parchment paper. Form dough into 1.25 inch balls; press gently into pans until 0.5 inch thick. Refrigerate at least 1 hour.



Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Bake for 10-12 minutes, just until bottom edges are golden. Do not overbake. Cool at least 10 minutes.

Source: The Lost Apothecary, recipe appendix.



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### Black Cherry Water

- 6 lb. Black cherries
- Sprigs of rosemary, marjoram, mint, celery leaf, and marigold
- 1 oz. Dried flower petals
- 1/2 oz. Anise seed, lightly crushed
- 1/2 oz. Sweet fennel seed, lightly crushed
- 1 quart Cold water

Lightly mash 6 lbs. of black cherries and add several sprigs of rosemary, marjoram, mint, celery leaf, and marigold. Add dried flower petals, anise seed and sweet fennel seed.

Mix well.

Add water and soak overnight. Strain water with a fine sieve and serve.

Source: Author's website, from *The London Art of Cookery*, John Farley, 1792.  
(sarahpenner.com)

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