

THE  
LOST  
APOTHECARY

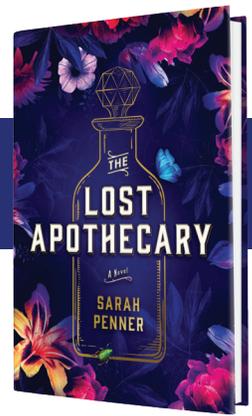
A Novel

SARAH  
PENNER



# Discussion Guide

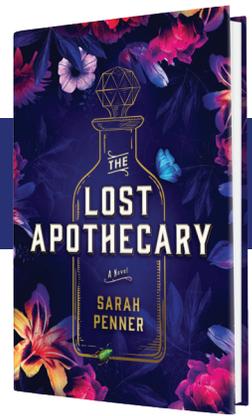
## BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION *THE LOST APOTHECARY*



- 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?

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## BOOK CLUB DISCUSSION *THE LOST APOTHECARY*



- 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”?

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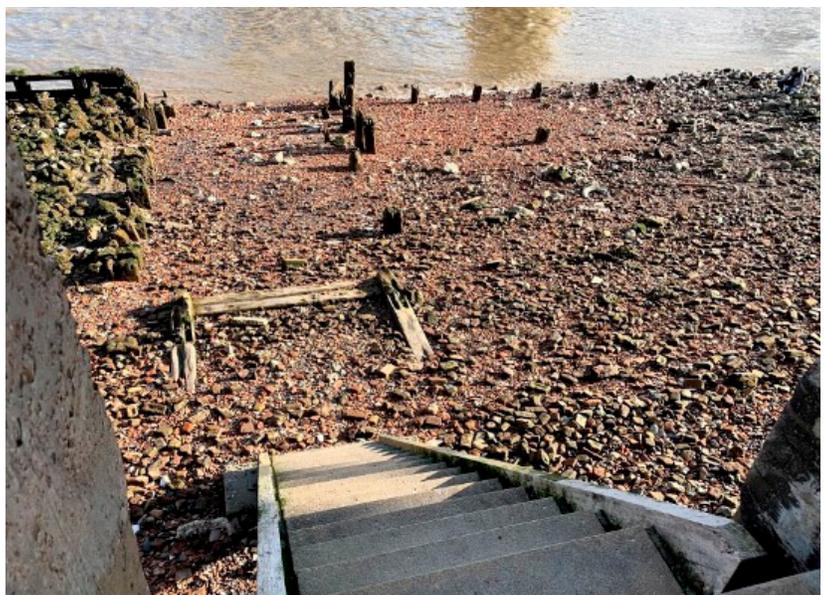
## BEHIND THE BOOK



In the summer of 2019, I found myself along the banks of the River Thames in London, wearing old tennis shoes and blue latex gloves. In my backpack was a small card—my temporary license from the Port of London Authority, granting me access to go mudlarking on the river’s foreshore. Over the course of several days, I went down to the river three separate times, finding an assortment of pottery, clay pipes, metal pins, and even animal bones.

As readers learn from Bachelor Alf early in *The Lost Apothecary*, mudlarking has been around for hundreds of years. Victorian children used to scrounge around in the mud looking for items to sell for money to support their families. Today, mudlarking instead represents a pastime for locals and tourists alike. I first learned about mudlarking years ago while reading *London in Fragments: A Mudlark’s Treasures* by Ted Sandling. In the book, he shares striking images of interesting things he’s found near the River Thames. It is here that I first spotted a fragment of a mid-seventeenth century delftware apothecary jar—the inspiration for *The Lost Apothecary*.

The word *apothecary* is evocative, drawing forth visions of a candlelit storefront with sash windows, its walls lined with mortar bowls and pestles, and countless glass bottles. There is something beguiling, even enchanting, about what might lie within those bottles: potions that bewitch us, cure us, kill us. When describing Nella’s hidden shop, I did my best to capture this allure. Indeed, many contemporary retail shops are doing the same, and it seems most cities now have some sort of “apothecary” shop selling cosmetics or natural remedies.



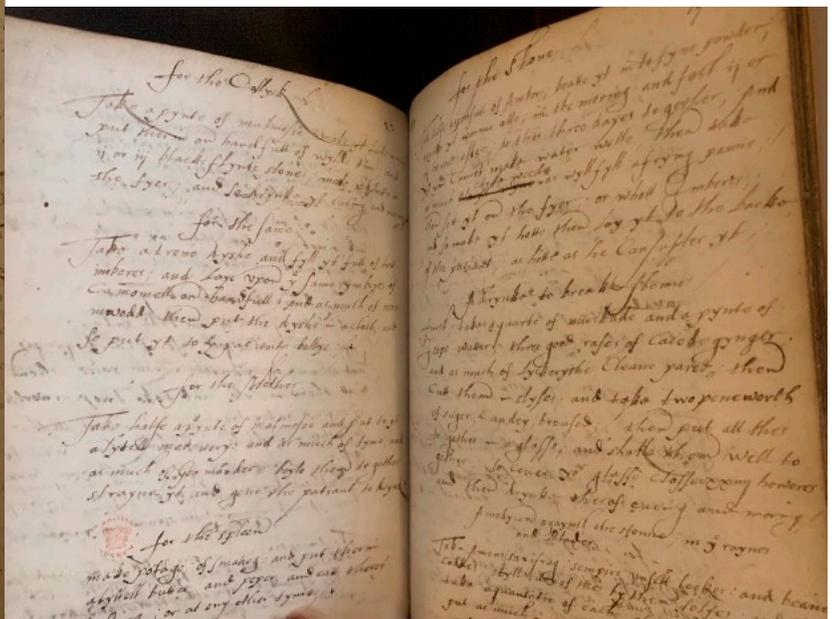
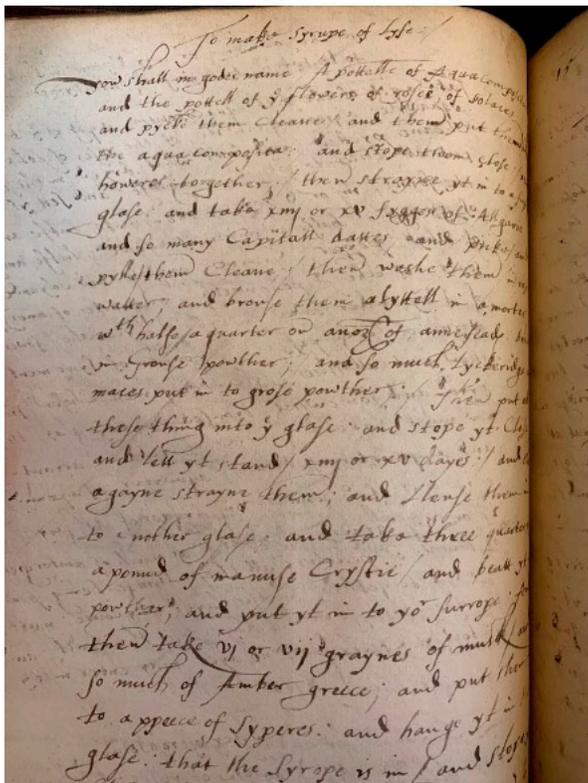
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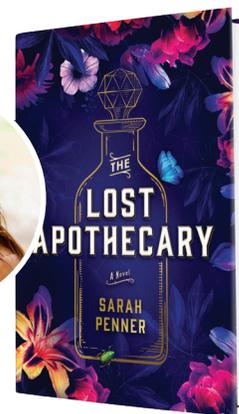
Researching the many herbal and homespun remedies for this story was a time-consuming, albeit entertaining, task. I spent many hours in the British Library reviewing old manuscripts and druggist diaries; I reviewed digitized pharmacopoeias; and I studied extensively some well-known poisoning cases in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I was surprised by the number of plants and herbs that are highly toxic (including many household plants, and eucalyptus oil, if ingested) and I was fascinated while reading about the clever, if ineffective, remedies used by the predecessors of modern-day pharmacists.

I believe it's entirely possible, if not probable, that an apothecary shop like Nella's existed prior to the nineteenth century. Until the mid-1800s, death examiners were unable to detect the presence of poison when performing autopsies, and thus poisoning homicides are rarely mentioned in bills of mortality prior to this time. And yet, historical records tell us that toxic compounds like arsenic, nux vomica, mercury and opium were readily available at stores throughout the eighteenth century and, in some cases, used around the house (e.g. rodent poison). The hurdle would not be acquiring the toxin, but in cleverly disguising it so the recipient would remain blissfully unaware of what the poisoner intended. This is when a customer might have sought out an apothecary shop like Nella's: she was, after all, a master of disguise.



# Discussion Guide

## RECIPES



To enhance your book club, I highly recommend serving a tray of the Rosemary Butter Biscuit Cookies in the back of *The Lost Apothecary* with either of the cocktail recipes below.

A recipe for Orange Brandy,  
printed in *English Housewifery*,  
Elizabeth Moxon, 9th edition (1786)

- To 1 qt. brandy, add the peels of eight oranges. Cover in a pitcher for 48 hours.
- To 3 pints of water, add  $\frac{3}{4}$  lb. sugar and boil until reduced by half. When cooled, mix with brandy and serve.

308. *To make ORANGE BRANDY.*  
Take a quart of brandy, the peels of eight oranges thin pared, keep them in the brandy forty-eight hours in a close pitcher, then take three pints of water, put into it three quarters of a pound of loaf sugar, boil it till half be consumed, and let it stand till cold, then mix it with the brandy.

A recipe for non-alcoholic Black Cherry Water,  
printed in *The London Art of Cookery*,  
John Farley, 7th edition (1792)

Lightly mash 6 lb. black cherries and add several sprigs of rosemary, marjoram, mint, celery leaf, and marigold. Add an ounce of dried flower petals and a half ounce each of anise seed and sweet fennel seed, lightly crushed. Mix well. Add 1 qt. cold water and soak overnight. Strain water with a fine sieve and serve.

### *Black Cherry Water,*

**BRUISE** six pounds of black cherries, and put to them the tops of rosemary, sweet marjoram, spearmint, angelica, balm, and marigold flowers, of each a handful; dried violets, an ounce; anise-seeds, and sweet fennel seeds, of each half an ounce bruised. Cut the herbs small, mix all together, and distil them off in a cold still.