



The lost apothecary

By Sarah Penner

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Genre and Subject

Historical – Fiction

Thrillers (Fiction)

Pharmacists – Fiction

Synopsis

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 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.

Author Biography

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 traveller, though my heart is stuck in London. Other favourite destinations include Thailand, Ireland, Germany, Belize, and Grand Cayman.

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.

Discussion Starters

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. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. Which of the three characters—Nella, Eliza, or Caroline—did you find the most compelling or enjoyable to read? Why? What solutions does the author propose? Who would implement those solutions? How probable is success?
9. 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?
10. Discuss the meaning of the title, The Lost Apothecary. In your opinion, which character is the real "lost apothecary"?

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