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***The Case of Lizzie Borden and Other Writings: Tales of a Newspaper Woman.* By Elizabeth Garver Jordan. Edited by Jane Carr and Lori Harrison- Kahan**

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Jordan, Elizabeth Garver. *The Case of Lizzie Borden and Other Writings: Tales of a Newspaper Woman*. Edited by Jane Carr and Lori Harrison-Kahan. New York: Penguin, 2024. 432 pp. ISBN: 978-0143137603. \$22.

The publication of *The Case of Lizzie Borden and Other Writings: Tales of a Newspaper Woman*, by Elizabeth Garver Jordan, is cause for celebration. Editors Jane Carr and Lori Harrison-Kahan's substantial selection from the first twenty-five years of this intriguing, prolific writer's work serves her wonderfully well. The book's appearance in the Penguin Classics series—including an audiobook version—is a valuable, vital step in scholars' continuing efforts to bring Jordan to the attention of twenty-first-century readers.

By all accounts—including her own—Elizabeth Jordan was an extraordinary woman. Born in 1867 into a prosperous Milwaukee family, she attended a convent boarding school and on graduation considered becoming a nun or pursuing a career as a pianist. But she loved writing as well and soon became a successful journalist, in 1890 moving to New York City and joining the staff of Joseph Pulitzer's *World*. The collection begins with Jordan's reporting, offers well-chosen examples of the fiction she quickly began to publish, and ends with excerpts from her collaboration with Anna Howard Shaw on the suffrage leader's 1915 autobiography.

The insightful introduction, which is supplemented by introductions to each section, offers a survey of Jordan's wide-ranging work and long life. Jordan edited *Harper's Bazar* (as the name was then spelled) from 1900 to 1913 and then was a literary advisor and editor at Harper & Brothers, playing an important role in Sinclair Lewis's success and working with many women writers. She wrote one play and many novels and even worked in the early movie industry.

Jordan lived an expansive and often public life. A letter Frances Hodgson Burnett wrote to Jordan in 1920 offers a glimpse into how greatly Jordan impressed her friends and colleagues: "My dear what have you been doing? Flying about on the snow and wind to lunches + dinners + theatres + opera? Yes, I know you have. Nothing keeps you at home. And are you blooming + magnificent as always! Ah! My Elizabeth how I wish you were here. Have you written two new books + a thousand articles?"¹ Jordan lived to be eighty-one, writing all the time, and the household she formed in 1900 with two other career women endured until her death in 1947.

The selections from Jordan's early reporting make lively, fascinating reading. The collection's title cannily references her coverage of the celebrated 1893 murder trial of Lizzie Borden. Foregrounding a name that is at least vaguely familiar to the general reader today seems a good strategy for promoting the volume; I think Jordan would have applauded it. And in fact the book was listed as one of *Parade's* "64 Best Mystery, Thriller, and True-Crime Books of 2024." The website's praise—"If you're a fan of true crime, you should know the work of pioneering journalist Elizabeth Garver Jordan. . . . She championed women's rights, denounced sexual violence, turned out detective tales and novels and if Emma Stone hasn't optioned *her* story, well then Hollywood knows nothing"—appears prominently on both the Penguin and Amazon web pages devoted to the book. As the editors note, the Borden pieces are remarkable for their vibrant detail and emotional nuance, for bringing the trial's crowds of female spectators into the story, for using narrative techniques that would come to characterize the true-crime genre. I am mildly skeptical of their claim that the episode importantly influenced the author's development; it may have "reinforced Jordan's understanding of the power of a woman's story," and she did "spend the rest of her career" telling those stories (xvii)—but it is difficult to imagine her taking a different path even without the trial. The section ends with two magazine pieces she wrote about being a newspaper woman, reflecting her commitment to helping other women and her complete confidence that her experience was important.

The next two of the volume's four sections are devoted to Jordan's fiction. The second section includes selections from *Tales of the City Room* (1898) about newspaperwomen, and *Tales of the Cloister* (1901) centered on convent life, with two slightly later stories from *Harper's Bazar*. The third contains selections from Jordan's three volumes of autobiographical *May Iverson* stories (1904, 1912, and 1914), all narrated in the first person. The emphasis on fiction drawn from Jordan's own experiences both accurately represents her body of work and supports the themes the editors are tracing. Jordan became linked with Lizzie Borden not only because of the success of her reporting but also because of her story "Ruth Herrick's Assignment," published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1894. In it, Helen Brandow, on trial for murder, admits her guilt to the reporter Herrick—who chooses not to publish her beat (what we would now call a scoop). Although Jordan always said she had written the story before the Borden murders, and the cases are different in various ways, many people concluded that Lizzie Borden had confessed to her.² And Jordan went on to write "The Case of Helen Brandow," in which May Iverson interviews the title character during her murder trial, then

publishes a short story with a female reporter as the protagonist—showing her too facing the dilemma posed by a confession and deciding to suppress it. May’s story creates a sensation and leads to a meeting after Brandow’s acquittal in which she *does* confess. (Both stories are included in this volume.) In this sequence, as Karen Roggenkamp has analyzed in detail, fact and fiction, sympathy and truth-claims intertwine vertiginously.³ All these materials show us much about the gendering of news narration, and the introduction locates them in the history of journalism in ways that will be helpful for the general reader and thought-provoking for scholars.

Jordan offers us both tales of supportive communities of women and tales of their lives in male-dominated workplaces. Consistently foregrounding the author’s relevance for our present moment, the editors include her forceful portraits of behavior that—thanks to feminist activists in the 1970s—we now call sexual harassment. They make a convincing case for seeing Jordan as a precursor of the #MeToo movement. (In fact, they make me yearn for a literary history of such representations, perhaps ranging from Harriet Jacobs, through the editing-out of scenes in the manuscript of Dreiser’s *Sister Carrie*, to current young adult novels.) They also emphasize how mixed and complicated Jordan’s ideas are—pointing out, for example, that as editor of *Harper’s Bazar* she was both “advising readers to safeguard their femininity by wearing long skirts” and “fiercely defending women’s right to the vote” (xxiii). To their credit, Carr and Harrison-Kahan acknowledge Jordan’s uncritical, even enthusiastic, participation in white supremacy and class elitism. In the first sentence of the first selection of the book, Jordan’s *New York World* article on “A Mountain Preacher” (1890), she writes that to travel into the Appalachians was to “step back 100 years” into “a narrow, contracted life” (5). I have come to see the fallacies embodied in such everyday terms as progress, modern, and civilized as founded on such gestures of condescension. The editors ask us instead to encounter Jordan con-temporally, inhabiting time *with* us in all her complexity.⁴

It is an unusual editorial choice to devote the brief final section of the volume to reprinting excerpts from a book that does not list Jordan as author. But Anna Howard Shaw gave Jordan full credit as co-creator of *The Story of a Pioneer*. Carr and Harrison-Kahan cite Jordan’s account of Shaw introducing her as “Miss Jordan, who wrote my book” (339); they also acknowledge Jordan’s secretary Charlotte Lambrecht, who deserves more credit than she gets in the book itself. As they note, this is deft narrative, and its appearance here emphasizes the importance of Jordan’s friendship network, and her commitment to the women’s movement. Including it is certainly true to Jordan’s constantly collaborative spirit and practice. She also played leading roles in the production of two composite novels, each published serially in a magazine and then as a book: *The Whole Family* (1907–8) by twelve hands, and, as a fundraiser for the suffrage campaign, *The Sturdy Oak* (1916–17), by fourteen. These appeared before and just after the collection’s end point of 1915, and more material on them would have been valuable—although as the editors note, unlike the rest of Jordan’s work, they already have been brought back into print. Samples of Jordan’s editorial writing for the *Bazar* would have reflected another aspect of her collaborative work and are a more costly omission—but the volume is already approaching four hundred pages.

The quality of the supporting material in the volume, from the foreword to the explanatory annotations, deserves praise. The editors add substantial value both by how they arrange the material and by what they have added. There are some minor lapses in the notes (is it helpful to gloss “perquisites” as “perks”? and “peradventure” does not mean “beyond any doubt or uncertainty” but the opposite). The

notes are in the back of the book, where I suspect they will be consulted less often than they should be. I also question the editorial choice to put the source of a given selection not at its beginning but at its end; one either reads without provenance, or makes the effort to turn to the table of contents or page forward to the end of the selection and then back. Penguin may well have (at least) influenced these placements, since it seems to be received wisdom that visible apparatus discourages the general reader. I wonder, however, if editors should be working for change on this point. Surely having context makes readings not less, but more, accessible?

Carr and Harrison-Kahan's decision to limit this collection to Jordan's work from 1890 to 1915 is no doubt a key factor in making it so cohesive and compelling. But it is irresistible to wonder about Jordan's later production. Did she continue to write about (what we now call) sexual harassment, in articles and stories still buried in the periodical archive? How different from her earlier work are the views expressed in hundreds of pages of theatre criticism she published in the Catholic magazine *America* between 1922 and 1944? How does she rework her established characters and plots, and what new themes emerge in the next thirty years of her work? She published (by my count) twenty-four novels between 1918 and 1945. Many of them present themselves as mysteries; at least some of them are about quite strange situations. In *Publishing the Family* (Duke University Press, 2001), I discuss her 1929 novel *The Devil and the Deep Sea*, in which a spinster's will keeps her nieces and nephews, her lawyer, and her nurse together in her mansion after her death, to reform them and make them all into a happy family. In *The Four-Flusher* (1930), the protagonist has an independent income yet works as a live-in personal secretary to a dreadful woman who never pays her wages. *First Port of Call* (1940) follows passengers through an airplane crash and its aftermath—but it turns out they have died and are experiencing a gradual transition to the next world. These novels and others, as well as Jordan's autobiography, are available on HathiTrust, thus accessible to those with an academic library affiliation although not to the general public.

The introduction to *The Case of Lizzie Borden and Other Writings* reveals what I consider exciting news: the distinguished scholar Sharon Harris has a biography of Jordan forthcoming. So we will soon have much new information about Jordan's life, and new lenses for reading her work. Carr and Harrison-Kahan indicate that Harris will portray Jordan's close friendship with Frances Hodgson Burnett as a romantic partnership; I hope to learn what the record beyond Jordan's autobiography shows about her editorial and film work; and an overview of her late work may help us understand those puzzling novels. I anticipate that the remarkable Miss Jordan will continue to be surprising. As she demonstrates in this volume—ably assisted by her editors—she is always very much a woman of her historical moment, and always inventing and reinventing herself.

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1. The letter is dated April 24 and is in Jordan's papers at the New York Public Library, Box file 21. [!\[\]\(633dd45d48d71eb51a85c6dd83ee51e9_img.jpg\)](#)
 2. Ruth Herrick reappears as the editor of a major women's magazine in Jordan's play *The Lady from Oklahoma*—here and elsewhere, analysis of the autobiographical elements of Jordan's work might be extended. [!\[\]\(bdddf9191a284aa0945448444083c5b0_img.jpg\)](#)
 3. Karen Roggenkamp, *Sympathy, Madness & Crime: How Four Nineteenth-Century Journalists Made the Newspapers Women's Business* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2016). [!\[\]\(944943bcf87a12c5b9337bf7ed1ef546_img.jpg\)](#)

4. I borrow the term from Steven Connor, “The Impossibility of the Present: Or, from the Contemporary to the Contemporal,” in *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, ed. Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (New York: Pearson Education, 1999), 14–35. ↩