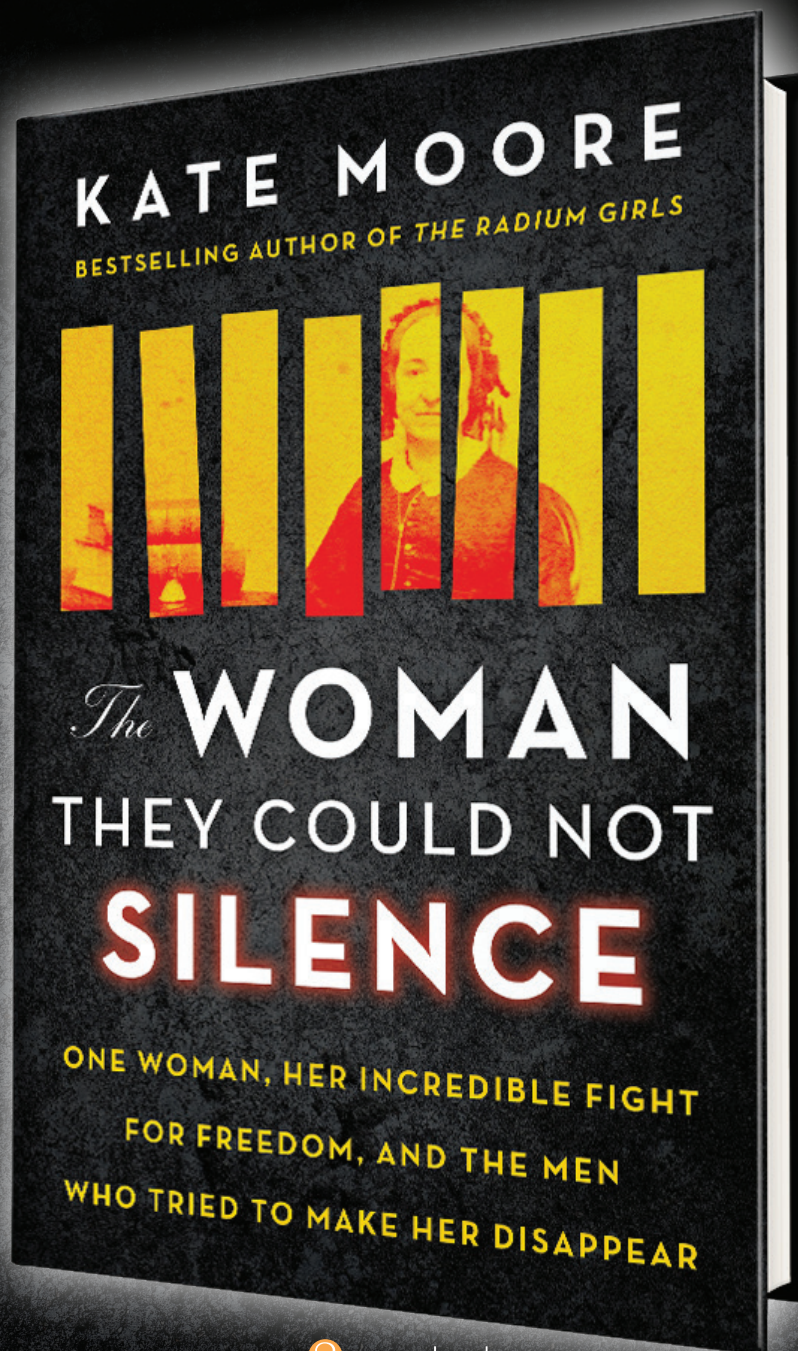


*The* **WOMAN**  
**THEY COULD NOT**  
**SILENCE**  
**READING GROUP GUIDE**





*A letter from*

**KATE MOORE,**

AUTHOR OF

# *The* **WOMAN THEY COULD NOT SILENCE**

**Dear reader,**

Some stories find you. Others, you have to go in search of.

In the fall of 2017, the world was set ablaze by the fire of the #MeToo movement. Everywhere, women's voices were raised and, more remarkably, heard. Yet many of the tales told in that cohesive chorus were historic. Why hadn't we been listened to—and believed—before?

I was inspired by the movement. I wanted to write about the issues being raised. But it wasn't for me to be a mouthpiece for those women bravely speaking out in that incendiary fall: they were already powerfully representing themselves. Instead, I wanted to examine the movement in a different way, to delve into how women—who have in truth always spoken out—have been silenced in the past, their words devalued so their blazing fire burns out to worthless ash.

Too often, it seemed to me, women had been silenced and dis-credited with the claim that we were crazy. For centuries, whenever we women had used our voices, whether in accusation of abuse or in simple self-assertion, our mental health had been wielded as a weapon against us, used to undermine and control us. Our words and actions, our passions and our politics, even our very personalities had too often and too easily been manipulated through a lens of madness, which fell into focus whenever we acted in a way that challenged the powers that be.

Not for nothing does the word hysteria derive from the Greek for uterus.

As I began my research, it wasn't hard to find shocking real-life cases I could potentially write about. These stories all too often featured barbaric medical practices that silenced women physically as well as mentally, leaving them irreparably harmed: electroshock therapies, surgical lobotomies, even involuntary sterilizations. I uncovered cases such as that of Gennie Pilarski, a young woman from Illinois who'd simply wanted to live independently from her parents who was lobotomized in 1955, leaving her mute and unable to communicate. Her medical notes prior to the operation explicitly stated that she had "no signs of active pathology," but her doctors observed she was "unfriendly" and "disagreeable"—supposedly unfeminine attributes that have long been considered signs of female madness...because women are meant solely to simmer sweetly. Far too often, as with Gennie, a woman's psychiatric diagnosis is based not on her state of mind but on her social behavior.

Yet as fruitful as it was, my research was also profoundly depressing. Too many stories had tragic endings. Too many women finished their defiant journeys with their mouths stitched shut, their voices silenced by electric shocks or surgery or the solid brick walls of an insane asylum. "Crazy" was a cul-de-sac, a one-way street that only ever ended with one outcome. 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?

I went in search of this mystery woman, hoping she existed. And in a University of Wisconsin essay that I randomly found online, in a single paragraph four pages in, I first read about Elizabeth Packard.

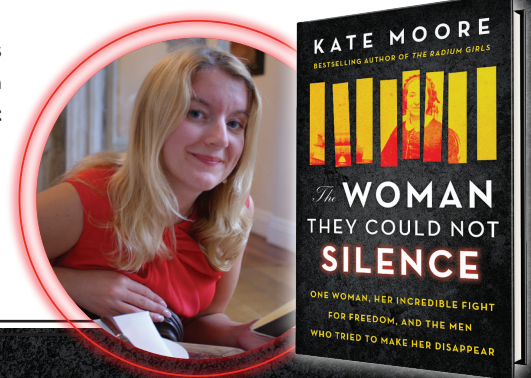
The woman they could not silence.

They tried. Oh, how they tried. Even after her death, they tried. So often in the course of my research into this extraordinary woman, I kept hitting dead ends and obfuscations, smacking up against a century of received wisdom that cast her in a very different light. It was striking how even I struggled at times to fight against that pernicious perspective, how often I felt on the defensive in my defense of her. But I kept on digging, excavating my way through those layers of lies and overtly biased legacies, until the shape of the true woman stood before me.

She cut an hourglass figure in her cage crinoline, her spirit as wide as her skirt. Yet as it had done when she lived, it was her voice that truly resonated, unsilenced through the century and a half since she had fought her battles, and still as strong and as smart as ever.

**Her story now lies in your hands. Like a fire, hear her roar.**

*Kate Moore, 2020*

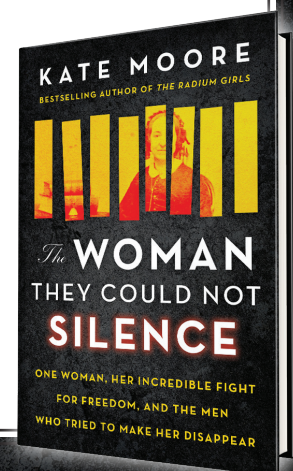


# The **WOMAN** THEY COULD NOT **SILENCE**

## READING GROUP GUIDE

### READING GROUP GUIDE QUESTIONS

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 US 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 Jacksonville 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 were 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 twenty-five 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?





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### 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 non-fiction—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 (i.e. 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.

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**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, 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 antennae 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 non-fiction, 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 distil 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.



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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 very newly decorated, tiny 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 that 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 that I only have the one story in my head. But the best non-fiction 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.

