Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 13 – Poison and Poisonability Transcript

Lizzie Peabody: Hey there, accomplices—I mean, Sidedoorables. Today's episode is all about poison and murder. Fascinating subjects for adults, but maybe not appropriate for children. So proceed if you dare, but remember, I warned you!

Lizzie: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: On a warm summer morning in the small town of Derby, Connecticut, Horatio Sherman woke up drenched in sweat.

Deborah Blum: *He had an upset stomach. He had a sore throat. He had tingling in his hands and feet. He just felt like crap.*

Lizzie: Deborah Blum is director of the Knight Science Journalism program at MIT, and she says Horatio was having a rough go of it. He was middle-aged and widowed. His two children, Ada and Frankie, had tragically gotten sick and died months before. It was 1871, so not uncommon for children to die of illness, but still, here he was grief stricken. And now sick, too.

Deborah Blum: *There were some speculation at the time that he had been drinking heavily following the illnesses and deaths of his children.*

Lizzie: Was Horatio going a little too hard on the brandy? Is that why he felt so bad? Or had he caught the same illness as his kids? He never knew the answer. Shortly after waking up sick, Horatio Sherman died. And as the doctor looked up from the dead man's bedside and nodded a solemn confirmation to the housekeeper standing by, he paused. Something was fishy.

Deborah Blum: *So one of the things that stands out in this case is that, the baby dies, the little girl dies, the dad dies, the housekeeper is radiant with health. That's not really the classic path of infectious disease.*

Lizzie: This wasn't just any housekeeper. She was also Horatio's new wife. He had married Lydia shortly before all these deaths began. On a hunch, the doctor ordered an autopsy for Horatio, wanting to get to the bottom of what was going on.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *We're entering the Albert H. Small Document Gallery. And in it right now is an exhibit called "Forensic Science on Trial."*

Lizzie: I'm at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. Curator Kristen Frederick-Frost

is showing me some glass test tubes fastened to a display board. They're lined up in a column, and at the top of the column is a name: Horatio N. Sherman.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *You have the copper test. Atop that is the silver test, hydrogen sulfide test. You have a reduction test, Fresenius and Babos test, and then Marsh test on top of that.*

Lizzie: These are the tests that were done with tissue from Horatio Sherman's liver and stomach following the doctor's autopsy.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *Everything that could have been done, I feel like at the time in 1871, he did it. To just determine one question, right? And that is: Is there arsenic in Horatio Sherman's stomach?*

Lizzie: Arsenic. A common poison. In one of the glass test tubes you can see a hazy coating, an almost grey coloration.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *So that is the deposit of arsenic.*

Lizzie: *Wow!*

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *From the sample.*

Lizzie: It was clear as day: Horatio had been poisoned!

Deborah Blum: *And that led them to go back and look at the dead kids and find arsenic in their bodies.*

Lizzie: The Sherman kids had also been poisoned. Was their stepmom, Horatio's new wife, a serial murderer?

Lizzie: Lydia Sherman was charged with the murder of her husband, Horatio. And this display of test tubes was part of the evidence used against her in her trial in 1872. But as Lydia sat in her jail cell, she began to tell her story. And the tale she spun sent a chill down the spine of everyone who heard it.

Lizzie: This time on Sidedoor, we journey back to the "golden age of poisoners," the 1800s. A time when countless women were arrested for poisoning their husbands and family members. What drove these femme fatales of the Victorian era? And how did the advent of modern forensics put an end to this Golden Age? That's coming up after the break.

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*[**VOICEOVER:** "All things are poison, and nothing is without poison; only the dose makes a thing not a poison." Swiss physician and chemist, Paracelsus.]*

Lizzie: As long as people have been living together, they've been poisoning each other.

Deborah Blum: *There's actually a Sumerian goddess called Gula, who is the goddess of herbs and healing, and then gradually becomes known as the goddess of poisons, and then gradually becomes known as the Terrible Goddess.*

Lizzie: Deborah Blum again. Besides teaching journalism, she's the author of the boldly titled *Poisoner's Handbook*, and other books about poison. She lives and breathes poison—figuratively speaking.

Lizzie: *I see there's some bottles on the shelf behind you. Are those poison bottles?*

Deborah Blum: *They are, actually. That's my tiny collection of poison bottles. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Deborah says you can find evidence of poisoning in every early civilization. There are even Egyptian hieroglyphics that depict murder by poison.

Deborah Blum: *Some of them refer to cyanide poisoning "death by peach," because peaches contain cyanide.*

Lizzie: The earliest poisons were all natural—plants like hemlock, nightshade and foxglove. Animals like snakes, spiders and frogs, or elements, like cyanide and antimony. But as we enter the age of science in the 1800s, industrial chemical labs started mass producing new poison compounds. They were now cheap and readily available, especially one poison in particular: Arsenic.

Lisa Perrin: *In the Victorian era, or the 19th century, arsenic is called "the king of poisons." It's hands down the most popular one.*

Lizzie: Lisa Pellin is author and illustrator of the book, *The League of Lady Poisoners*. She says in the 1800s, arsenic was everywhere!

Lisa Perrin: *It is sold as rat poison and flypaper in every grocery and drug store. It was in everything from skin and beauty treatments to medications, wallpaper, fabrics—even children's toys.*

Lizzie: Arsenic was said to give you a pep in your step if you drank it. Or give your skin a nice white look if you rubbed it on your face—the paler the better, being the style of the day.

Lisa Perrin: *It's very interesting because they knew it was poison and they sold it as rat poison, and*

yet they put it in cosmetics and food.

Lizzie: Arsenic was cheap. Everywhere. Super easy to get.

Lisa Perrin: *And it's also colorless, odorless, tasteless. And can cause symptoms that are very similar to disease. So it ends up being unfortunately for some time, the perfect poison.*

Lizzie: People have called the Victorian era "The Golden Age of Arsenic," so it's not surprising that this was Lydia Sherman's poison of choice.

Lizzie: Lydia Sherman wasn't always Lydia Sherman. She was born Lydia Danbury in 1824. She was orphaned as a baby, raised by her uncle in New Jersey, and when she was 17, she met Edward Struck at the Methodist church they both attended. A few years later, Lydia and Edward got married.

Lisa Perrin: *And he was at least 20 years older. He already had a number of children. I've seen different sources that cite different amounts, but I commonly see six. He already had six children.*

Lizzie: *Oh, wow!*

Lisa Perrin: *And the couple marry, and they have up to eight more children.*

Lizzie: *Whoa!*

Lisa Perrin: *So just sort of a mind-boggling amount of progeny.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lizzie: Edward was working as a police officer in New York City, until ...

Lisa Perrin: *He is accused of cowardice in the line of duty and he loses his job.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh, what a reason to be fired!*

Lisa Perrin: *Unfortunately, this plunges him into this deep depression.*

Lizzie: So here's Lydia in New York with, like, roughly a bazillion mouths to feed, and an out-of-work, very sad, possibly very cowardly husband. She's at her wits' end. And what happens next comes from a confession Lydia gave while in jail, so take it with a grain of salt. In her confession, Lydia says when Ed was depressed, she went to one of his friends for help. And when the friend saw what shape Ed

was in, he said, "Look, the best thing you can do for this guy is to put him out of his misery." And then he told her exactly how much arsenic would get the job done. So Lydia runs to the drugstore in Harlem, buys some arsenic and puts a thimbleful in his oatmeal. Which he proceeds to eat.

Lizzie: *There's this idea that we have from the movies, I think, that if someone drinks poison, they basically grab their throat and keel over in a matter of seconds. How accurate is that when we're thinking of arsenic poisoning?*

Lisa Perrin: *Completely inaccurate. The movies are lying to you.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] Okay.*

Lisa Perrin: *You see a movie, they're holding one bejeweled goblet, they take a sip and they collapse on the table and you think, "Oh, it wasn't so bad." No. Death by poison is—make no mistake, it is indeed violent. It's like biochemical warfare against the body.*

Lizzie: Edward's body loses the biochemical war against the arsenic. He gets violently ill and eventually dies. Lydia dusts her hands off. Problem solved—or was it? Her older children had moved out, but she still had six kids to support on her own. And if you're hoping she doesn't do what you think she's gonna do, I'm sorry. Over the next two years, she slowly poisoned the children one by one.

Lisa Perrin: *This is one of the darkest stories that I've come across actually in this research because she harms not just people in her care, but children and her own biological children.*

Lizzie: *So why did the death of her entire family? Not raise any eyebrows?*

Deborah Blum: *That's a really good question. And I think some of it was that it was over a period of time. She was a struggling widow with six children. The youngest of those children died over the next year, right? The other children died in the next year. So she paced it out and she was patient.*

Lizzie: Today, it's standard practice for doctors to screen for toxins in suspicious deaths, but Deborah says back in the 1860s, that was not the norm.

Deborah Blum: *It was random luck as to whether they looked for poison, unless it was a spectacularly obvious case of poisoning.*

Lizzie: For a long time, even if a doctor did suspect foul play, there wasn't much they could do. There

were a handful of hit-or-miss arsenic tests, including some we saw a few minutes ago in the exhibition.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *The silver test, hydrogen sulfide test. You have a reduction test, Fresenius and Babos test.*

Lizzie: But in 1840, a British chemist invented a test that changed the forensics game.

Lisa Perrin: *James Marsh, I think, ends up being the hero in a lot of these stories.*

Lizzie: In 1832, James Marsh was summoned to be an expert in the murder trial of a man named John Bodle.

Lisa Perrin: *John Bodle is accused of putting poison in his family's coffee with the intention of murdering his wealthy, disliked grandfather.*

Lizzie: Marsh uses a standard arsenic test at the time, and it reveals a yellow residue on the test tube—a clear sign of arsenic. Marsh whispers to himself, "Busted, Bodle!" But by the time he got to court, the yellow residue on the test tube had faded. The jurors are squinting their eyes and putting on their glasses, they're like, "I don't see anything." They find Bodle innocent and he walks.

Lisa Perrin: *And Bodle later brags that, "Ha ha! I did it and I got away with it!"*

Lizzie: *He brags? He, like, thumbs his nose at James Marsh? He's like, "Nanny nanny boo boo! Like, I poisoned my family and you couldn't prove it?"*

Lisa Perrin: *Not in so many words, but yeah.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Lisa Perrin: *And James Marsh resolves to develop a better test for arsenic.*

Lizzie: Marsh's redemption came just a few years later, and it came bearing the name Marie Lafarge.

Lisa Perrin: *Marie Lafarge is born into this aristocratic family in Paris. And she is tragically orphaned as a child and sent to live with her well-to-do aunt and uncle.*

Lizzie: Marie's uncle sends her to the best schools, teaches her how to be a true lady. But Marie struggles to find a proper suitor to marry her. And time is running out.

Lisa Perrin: *We get to Marie being about 23 years old, which heaven forbid, is a spinster for the time.*

Lizzie: *[laughs] She's over the hill.*

Lisa Perrin: *She's over the hill. 23 years old, a burden to her family.*

Lizzie: So her uncle marries her off to a man named Charles Lafarge, owner of an iron foundry and grand estate. Marie is like, "Au revoir, mon oncle. Je te verrai dans mon nouveau château." In other words, "See ya in my castle, suckers!"

Lisa Perrin: *And then when she gets to the chateau, she finds out he is actually bankrupt, and he actually married her for her dowry. And she was misled into this marriage, and the chateau is dilapidated, has no modern conveniences and is infested with rats.*

Lizzie: *Oh my gosh!*

Lizzie: More like flat-eau? Anyway, Marie is disappointed. And stuck. Divorce is not an option. But she has an idea. When her new husband goes away on business, she mails him a piece of cake—as one does. After eating it, he starts to feel a little sick. And he's still sick when he returns home, so Marie says "Would you like some tea? Let me make you some soup." But his family, who has come to check on him, get suspicious of Marie.

Lisa Perrin: *They think they see her adding something to this chicken soup that she is bringing him.*

Lizzie: Shortly after, Charles gets even sicker and dies. His family says this is no accident. They begged multiple doctors to examine Charles's body for evidence of poison. They all refused, until one said, "Okay, fine. I will do an autopsy."

Lisa Perrin: *His stomach was removed and tested before he was buried, and she was arrested.*

Lizzie: Now by this time, the chemist, James Marsh, had perfected his new arsenic test. And Marie's case had become a cause célèbre in France. So the prosecution wanted the best experts and tests they could get. They called the world's leading toxicology expert.

Lisa Perrin: *He performs the Marsh test, and it does indeed prove the presence of arsenic in Charles Lafarge's body.*

Lizzie: The jury finds Marie Lafarge guilty of murder. Gavel bang!

Lisa Perrin: *The Marsh test is the thing that took Marie Lafarge down, and Marie Lafarge is still kind of described as the first person convicted of direct forensic evidence.*

Lizzie: This was a key milestone in the creation of modern forensics. The Marsh test became the gold standard, but like so much new technology, it took a little while to catch on.

Deborah Blum: *In the decade following its introduction, arsenic poisonings did not drop. I mean, everyone was just like, "Uh-huh. Scientists say they can do this, but whatever." Right? [laughs]*

Lizzie: And there was ample reason for 19th-century women to think they could get away with the occasional poisoning here and there—even with the tests. Women had jobs that positioned them perfectly to poison. And nobody suspected the meek little caregiver.*

Deborah Blum: *They often present themselves as complete nurturers. You know, they're housekeepers, they're housemaids they're ...*

Lisa Perrin: *Cooks, nurses. These are all occupations that sort of give them proximity to food and drink that other people are going to consume, as well as medications.*

Lizzie: So even though there were tests for arsenic, you could fly below suspicion if you were patient and planned your poisonings to make it look like cholera or typhoid.

Deborah Blum: *Poisoners are planners by nature, right? Of all the homicidal tools that we know, nothing requires more planning than poison. You cannot impulse poison. It just doesn't happen.*

Lizzie: And our Lydia Sherman—well, at this point in our story, Lydia Struck—was a planner with two things in abundance: Arsenic and patience. After poisoning her first family, she moves to Stratford, Connecticut, and takes a job as a nurse. Soon, she meets a wealthy farmer with a great name: Dennis Hurlburt.

Lisa Perrin: *Who is 80 years old.*

Lizzie: *Oh, poor Dennis!*

Lisa Perrin: *Poor Dennis.*

Lizzie: Shortly after he married Lydia, poor Dennis ...

Deborah Blum: *Made the mistake of changing his will and leaving her all his money.*

Lisa Perrin: *And then, as you might expect, he soon takes ill and passes away.*

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Lizzie: Nobody suspects a thing. Lydia collects her inheritance, dusts off her hands, pulls on her elbow-length gloves, picks up her valise and heads to Derby, Connecticut.

Deborah Blum: *She obviously did not have enough money from that to just set herself up as a wealthy widow. She went to work as a housekeeper for the unfortunate Mr. Sherman.*

Lizzie: And well, we know how that story ends. She poisons his two children before poisoning him and finally getting arrested. If Lydia's confession is true, she poisoned a total of 11 people—although some suspect it was even more.

Lizzie: Still to come: The trial of the century. What will become of Lydia Sherman? We'll find out after the break.

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*[**VOICEOVER:** "The poisoning wife became the specter of the 19th century, the witch who lurked in woman's sphere and haunted the minds of men." - Ann Jones, author of* Women Who Kill*]*

Lizzie: *Whoa! That's a lot of organ models.*

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *You haven't been in here before?*

Lizzie: *I don't think so.*

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *So this is the medicine storage.*

Lizzie: Kristen Frederick-Frost is showing me an area of Smithsonian's National Museum of American History that's only accessible through the—side door! Storage for the medicines collection. There are drawers and cabinets filled with anatomy models, vials, flasks, beakers and old, old books. Kristen puts on black latex gloves and sets three small jars on a table. Each has maybe a quarter ounce of liquid in it.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *This particular one says arsenic sulfide, from six and two thirds ounce of the liver of Horatio N. Sherman.*

Lizzie: *Can I just say, like, these vials are beautiful. But are we looking at, like, a 150-year-old liver juice, basically?*

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *Well, at least arsenic from 150-year-old liver juice. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Gross, but cool! These are the actual samples that Dr. George F. Barker took from Horatio Sherman's liver in 1871. At the bottom of the juice is a tinge of yellow.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *The name of the game here was to take the arsenic out of the sample and weigh that. And so we're looking at the arsenic that was pulled from the sample.*

Lizzie: This is the exact same arsenic that Lydia Sherman was accused of putting into Horatio Sherman's brandy 150 years ago. During her trial, Dr. Barker showed the jury all the tests that we saw earlier in the exhibition, including the Marsh test. But he also showed them these exact vials, which were filled with the tissue-solution mix—aka liver juice—he used to perform the tests.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *And he talks about holding them up in trial, so I think it's pretty safe to say that at least this one was what he brought with him to the trial. The reason why these are so super special, I feel like, is this is really what gets the play in the testimony.*

Lizzie: In the courtroom, Barker holds up one of these vials and says "Look what I found!"

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *"There's arsenic here. This is the amount of material I recovered. You can see it, you can see how much." You can imagine somebody maybe scooping something like this amount of powder into a tea or coffee or milk and then mixing it in.*

Lizzie: The jury can see the poison with their own eyes. The defense and prosecution rest their cases. The jury deliberates, and then they come back with their verdict—guilty. The trial made Dr. Barker famous.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *Later on, George Frederick Barker was invited to basically give his trial testimony verbatim to a book about medical jurisprudence to basically show how it's done. So I think that's a pretty big recommendation for his work.*

Lizzie: But Dr. Barker wasn't the only one who got famous. While in jail, Lydia Sherman gave a full confession, which was turned into a book published under the title ...

Lisa Perrin: The Poison Fiend: Life, Crimes and Conviction of Lydia Sherman, the Modern Lucrezia Borgia. Recently tried in New Haven, Connecticut for poisoning three husbands and eight of her children. Her life in full. Exciting account of her trial, the fearful evidence, the most startling and sensational series of crimes ever committed in this country. Her conviction and confession.

Lizzie: *That's the title?*

Lisa Perrin: *That's the title. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Lisa Perrin again. She says audiences were enraptured by Lydia's crimes.

Lisa Perrin: *So this becomes a very hot news story, mostly because of how salacious these details are, and how completely disturbing the story is. And you'll see tabloids calling it, "The horror of the century." And she's often referred to as this poison fiend.*

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *I've seen things that have called her a female monster.*

Lizzie: *Why does she have to be a female monster? Can't she just be a monster?*

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *She's a female monster, let's be clear. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Kristen says Lydia's story played into a common trope of the time that women were sneaky and conniving.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *It's this idea that women are kind of deceitful. And that if they're gonna choose a way to commit murder, they're not going to come at you with a knife or a sword or a gun or something like that. They're gonna choose a sneaky way to get rid of somebody in their life.*

Lizzie: But Deborah says when you start to consider why so many women turned to poison at this time, you can't help but talk about power. The science historian Daniel Kevles once referred to poison as quote, "The great equalizer for women in the 19th century."

Deborah Blum: *If you're a married woman, you can't write a will, you can't own property, you can't get a job, you can't get a good job. And if you're in an abusive marriage, well, too bad for you.*

Lisa Perrin: *Doing this research gave me a newfound appreciation for divorce.*

Lizzie: It was nearly impossible to get a divorce for most married women in the 1800s. In England, you needed an act of Parliament.

Deborah Blum: *So a lot of the poisonings we saw were about women with no power trying to defend themselves. That doesn't justify. It's not like I'm saying, "Yes, great." But there were reasons that had to do with power, where they were completely trapped, and this—and poison would look like their only way out of a really bad situation.*

Lizzie: And no story better exemplifies this than the Angel Makers of Nagyrév.

Lisa Perrin: *I think this is one of the stories that has stayed with me the most.*

Lizzie: Nagyrév is a rural village in central Hungary.

Lisa Perrin: *We're talking dirt roads, agrarian community. A lot of poverty. And we find out a lot of abuse.*

Lizzie: In the late 1800s, alcoholism was rampant there. There were countless reports of husbands beating their wives and children.

Lisa Perrin: *And women have no recourse. You know, they are seen as property in this circumstance. There is nothing they can do.*

Lizzie: But one day, a midwife shows up in the village. The women tell her about their drunken husbands abusing them, and she says something like ...

Lisa Perrin: *"Why are you putting up with them? Why are you bothering with this?"*

Lizzie: She says, "You prepare the men's food and drink, right? Well, whenever you want, come to me and I will give you a bit of my special powder—arsenic." The women begin poisoning their husbands, one by one, for 20 years. Until someone from outside the village says, "Um ..."

Lisa Perrin: *"We have a town almost devoid of men in this little village in Hungary. What's going on?"*

Lizzie: When investigators go to talk to the midwife, she drinks her own poison. And dozens of women from the village are arrested. The Angel Makers are tried in the late 1920s.

Lisa Perrin: *And that's when we get all of this testimony about the abuse these women suffered. You know, their husbands threatened their life or the life of their child. They were beaten. A woman named Maria says, "I do not feel guilty at all. My husband was a very bad man who beat and tortured me. Since he died, I have found my peace." And that's a really complicated example of this sort of nuance, where you're like—not to condone what she did, but you can understand what might have driven her, or what was going on in her mind.*

Lizzie: Some suspect the Angel Makers of Nagyrev killed as many as 300 people. Let's be clear, nobody is condoning murder by poison—or any other means. But knowing the circumstances of women in the 1800s helps us understand how it came to be The Golden Age of Poisoners.

Lisa Perrin: *I really think the Victorian relationship with arsenic is part of the problem here, just that it was such an ordinary, banal part of their lives, and that granted so many people such easy access to it. It really created a very dangerous situation.*

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Lizzie: People are people, no matter the time and place. And if you make a deadly weapon available, well, people are going to use it. Whether that's because they're powerless, locked into an abusive marriage 'til death. Or because they simply enjoy killing. Like, for example, the case of Martha Grinder, the Pittsburgh Poisoner.

Lizzie: She was described by newspapers as "boundless in her villainy," and was suspected of poisoning a string of family members and neighbors. When she was sentenced for her crimes in 1866, she told the jury, "I loved to see death in all its forms and phases and left no opportunity to gratify my tastes for such sights. Could I have had my own way, probably I should have done more."

Deborah Blum: *She basically publicly said, "And if you don't stop me, I'm going to kill someone else."*

Lizzie: We can never know for sure what Lydia Sherman's motivations were, but they seem to be a mix of all the above: powerlessness, easy access to poison—and psychopathy. In her confession, she never really takes responsibility for killing anyone.

Deborah Blum: *So there's a couple of parts of it in which first she's like, "Well, you know, my husband was really tired of that baby, and I was just trying to help him out by poisoning the baby. And Frankie was really annoying." And then when she kills her stepdaughter, it's more, "This girl really didn't deserve to live. She was so whiny and annoying."*

Lizzie: So whatever happened to Lydia Sherman? She was sentenced to life in prison, but five years into her sentence, she began to feel ill. She had an upset stomach, a sore throat, tingling in her hands and feet. And then she died. No, she was not poisoned. It was a natural death—as far as we know.

Lizzie: Today, you'll still see the occasional arsenic poisoning, but they're very few and far between. And many of those poisoners are caught because the Golden Age of Poisoning has given way to the Golden Age of Crime Scene Investigation.

Deborah Blum: *People think because we live in what I loosely call our "CSI age," that forensic science is this well-established, knowledgeable science, but it isn't. It's really recent, right? It's barely a hundred years old.*

Lizzie: Forensic science, even in the early days, likely saved countless lives. It's what led to the conviction of many female poisoners in the 19th century, including Lydia Sherman.

Kristen Frederick-Frost: *These tests were extremely important. They didn't really have a motive per se for her to want to kill the children and her husband, and so this evidence is really what sent her to prison.*

Lizzie: Kristen says these stories of lady poisoners are horrible and fascinating, but also a great way to learn about the evolution of criminal forensics. And Deborah thinks there's a valuable lesson here as well, but she's got a different take.

Deborah Blum: *If you go to people and you say, "Name a serial killer," they name a man, right? So not that this is an incredibly feminist move to, you know, bring really bad women to the forefront.*

Lizzie: *[laughs]*

Deborah Blum: *Come on! We're—women are really good at this. At least give them some credit.*

Lizzie: *You know, if you're gonna ask for credit for the good things, you also have to ask for credit for the bad things.*

Deborah Blum: *Thank you. Exactly.*

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Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: If you liked this episode, you should definitely check out the new "Forensic Science on Trial" exhibition at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History. There's DNA autoradiographs from the OJ Simpson trial. Images of bite marks from Ted Bundy. And even some props from the TV series *Dexter*. We'll include more info in our newsletter, as well as pictures of poison vials and more from our visit with Kristen Frederick-Frost. You can subscribe at SI.EDU/Sidedoor.

Lizzie: For help with this episode, we want to thank Katherine Frederick-Frost, Diane Wendt, Lisa Perrin and Deborah Blum. Lisa's book, *The League of Lady Poisoners*, is beautifully illustrated with green, gilded pages. It looks like something you'd pick up in the Victorian Age—that might be laced with arsenic. Deborah's book is *The Poisoner's Handbook: Murder and the Birth of Forensic Medicine in Jazz Age New York*.

Deborah Blum: *And I'm finishing up a book about female poisoners, tentatively titled* The Weapon: Women and Poison in Our Murderous World*.*

Lizzie: *Ooh, that's a good title!*

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison, and me, Lizzie Peabody. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant, who voiced our poisonous quotes this episode. Mimi Plato writes our newsletter. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Transcripts are

done by Russell Gragg. Fact-checking by Nathalie Boyd. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor [at] si.edu. If you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship [at] prx.org.

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP:** [singing] Mary Ann Cotton/She's dead and she's rotten/Lying in bed with her eyes wide open. Sing, sing, what should I sing? Mary Ann Cotton is tied up in string. Where? Where? She's up in the air/And now their selling puddings for a penny a pair.]*

***Lisa Perrin:** I've always been really haunted by that eerie children's nursery rhyme about this woman poisoner who tragically uses poison against children.*

***Lizzie:** Yeah, that is a very creepy note to end the episode. I wonder if my brother could into, like, a cheerful, upbeat song about poisoning children?*

***Rufus Peabody:** [singing] Mary Ann Cotton/She's dead and she's rotten/Lying in bed with her eyes wide open. Sing, sing, what should I sing? Mary Ann Cotton is tied up in string. Where? Where? She's up in the air/And now their selling puddings for a penny a pair. I said ooh, it's the Mary Ann Cotton Blues. She's dead and she's rotten, too. Oh, Mary Ann Cotton!*

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