

QUEER ROMANCE MEETS HORRIFIC VIOLENCE AND SKIN-CRAWLING DREAD IN **LIZZIE**, DAWN IUS' CONTEMPORARY REIMAGINING OF THE INFAMOUS BORDEN MURDERS

# Love AND MADNESS

BY APRIL SNELLINGS

**M**OST OF US ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE ALLEGED CRIMES OF LIZZIE BORDEN, THANKS TO AN EERIE CHILDREN'S RHYME DOCUMENTED IN AN 1894 NEWSPAPER. According to the most enduring version of the chant, Borden killed her mother (actually her stepmother) with 40 axe blows before doling out 41 to her father. That's 81 whacks, if anyone's counting – about 50 more than the killer actually dealt, but enough to forever cement Borden's status as one of America's most notorious accused murderesses.

The unsolved killings have inspired dozens of works over the years, including an upcoming film by director Craig William Macneill (*The Boy*, TV's *Channel Zero*), but Canadian author Dawn Ius' new novel puts a fresh twist on the case: not only does *Lizzie* (out April 10 from Simon Pulse) reframe the story for a young adult audience, it places it in present-day America – and imagines Borden as a gay teen struggling to come to terms with her sexuality in a suffocatingly religious family.

"I didn't set out to say, 'Aha! I shall make Lizzie a lesbian,'" says Ius, who put a contemporary spin on another ill-fated historical romance with her 2015 debut *Anne & Henry*. "But as I started fleshing out her character – some of it based on historic facts and theories – it felt *right*. Of course, there is a theory that [*Lizzie*] was gay and I read all about it. But so many theories didn't make the cut because they didn't fit *my* Lizzie. This one did."

Many of *Lizzie's* beats will be familiar to true-crime enthusiasts, even if the novel is peppered with selfies, *Star Wars* references, and other modern touchstones. When the story begins, Borden is a demure seventeen-year-old working in her family's bed-and-breakfast in Fall River, Massachusetts. (The real Borden was 32 when her parents were slaughtered on August 4, 1892.) Introspective and intensely lonely, Borden is beset by demons from within and without: she is afflicted with a rare condition that causes her to black out during excruciatingly painful menstrual cycles; sees gory visions of death and mutilation; and suffers physical, emotional and

psychological abuse at the hands of her conservative father and stepmother.

Into this cauldron of dysfunction and despair steps Bridget Sullivan, a free-spirited young woman who is hired as the inn's new maid. The attraction between the girls is instant, but as their romance grows, so do the elder Bordens' suspicions that something is amiss in their household. *Lizzie* finds genuine delight in its wistful love story, but a pervasive sense of gut-twisting dread looms on every page.

"I knew from the outset that *Lizzie* was going to be a dark book, but my first draft was tame compared to what it is now," Ius points out. "I was testing the boundaries of what I could get away with in YA, and I was lucky enough to work with an amazing editor who encouraged 'more darkness, more suspense.' I'm not sure I pushed it as far as I could, but the balance feels right for this book."

Though the murders occupy only a few gore-soaked pages, Ius finds plenty of ways to inject suspense and horror into her tale. As Borden's behaviour grows more disturbing and her visions become increasingly violent – there's a dinner scene that would have *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre's* Sawyer family clamouring for seconds – the true horror of *Lizzie* isn't what its protagonist might do, but what she endures before she reaches that bloody breaking point. And considering the real-life ordeals suffered by many queer teens in a time caught between progress and the terrifying resurgence of hate, perhaps it's not surprising that *Lizzie* was almost as gruelling for its author as its protagonist.

"This book was *hard*," says Ius. "I went through a bizarre and uncharacteristic sadness while writing it. There were times I cried for Lizzie, or a scene I had written kept me up thinking about her all night. I'm very proud of this book, but I also know what it took from me. I promised my husband I wouldn't write another dark book for a bit... but yeah, I'm well into a proposal for another historic YA retelling that could be as dark – or darker – than *Lizzie*." 🖤

