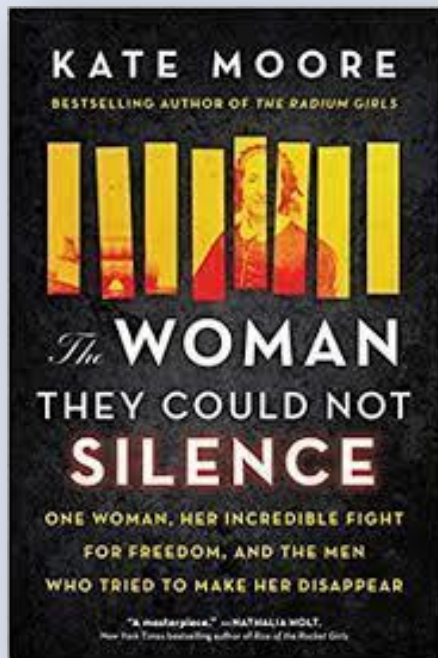


## Allison's Book Corner September 2021

***The Woman They Could Not Silence***: One Woman, Her Incredible Fight For Freedom, and the Men Who Tried to Make Her Disappear, by Kate Moore (Sourcebooks 2021)

I was not too far along into this incredible piece of history when the famous poem "Still I Rise" by Maya Angelou came to mind. Truly the words of this poem capture the spirit of this book's heroine, Elizabeth Packard. Here is an excerpt from the poem:

*You may write me down in history  
With your bitter, twisted lies,  
You may tread me in the very dirt  
But still, like dust, I'll rise.....*



I must be honest: if you are looking for some light reading, this book is not it. However, this is a piece of American history that is vital for each of us to know. Kate Moore's impeccable research has made a 400-plus page book a real page-turner.

The story of Elizabeth Packard, a housewife and mother of six in the year 1860 could be the story of any American woman at the time - and even of some today. Elizabeth dared to differ with her Pastor husband on many different things. She spoke her opinion freely at home and sometimes even at their church. This was, admittedly, not the usual behavior of wives at that time. However, after 21 years of marriage and six children, Elizabeth felt she

had earned her voice.

She had not.

Her husband warned her to change her behavior and be compliant again, or he would have her committed to an asylum. Elizabeth honestly did not believe her husband would execute his plan. However, on the morning of June 18, 1860 in Manteno, Illinois, they came for her. Elizabeth's husband and men from their church carried her from her own home straight to the doors of an asylum in Jacksonville, Illinois.

There are things in American culture that are always whispered and wondered about. (Hadn't we heard for years about men committing their wives to asylums - the reasoning always being "she is crazy"? Nothing more must be said, just the mere pronouncement of being crazy.) As Elizabeth tried to be a little independent and have thoughts separate from her husband's, he grew increasingly jealous and began telling friends and neighbors that she was deranged, a danger to herself and her children. Many believed it. Elizabeth's true friends did not, but they could do nothing about her confinement to the mental ward. A husband held all of the legal rights, the wife none.

Author Kate Moore brings this well-researched history to life with her skillful narrative style. Elizabeth's story leaps off the page. Her words from her diaries and letters feel so real, so current and alive. We are not merely surprised, but shocked, when Elizabeth arrives at the asylum and meets other sane women there. She finds several women who also have been institutionalized by their husbands, husbands who felt threatened by the intelligence of their wives. It is just so sad and awful. You can also imagine the horrible conditions and abuse inside one of these hospitals at that time. I will not describe it here, but I was so upset by some of the details that I had to put the book down to take a breath before resuming reading.

Elizabeth went into the asylum at the age of 43 and was there for three long years. During that time she fought as hard as she knew how to be released. Her freedom was based solely on the decision of the doctor in charge, Dr. Andrew McFarland, with whom her husband had made a pact to keep Elizabeth in the asylum. It is a very interesting and complex story of how Elizabeth eventually wins her freedom. On one level, the journey is exciting to read - but also very sad and disturbing. Like so many freedom fighters in our society, Elizabeth's travails paved the way for the freedom of others.

Elizabeth Packard fought for 30 years for women's rights and for the rights of the mentally ill. She achieved long-lasting change in many areas. She was able to secure the passage of 34 bills in 44 legislatures across 24 states, which is extraordinary in any context but even more so during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her most lasting achievement was to gain patients uncensored access to their mail, a freedom she never enjoyed while under Dr. McFarland's care. Letters to and from Elizabeth were stolen or heavily censored by the doctor himself.

Elizabeth was a very special woman - extremely intelligent, with a sharp mind and wit. Patients in the asylum were drawn to her. Everyone wanted to be her friend or to be near her. She would devise tasks for herself to keep her sanity while she was imprisoned. She relied on her strong faith and firmly believed that she would not forever remain within the asylum walls. The most devastating thing to her was the separation from her children. She always longed to be reunited with them, but her new cause was to also fight for the rights of the other patients.

The reader finishes this book with an attitude of gratitude for Elizabeth Packard's long life. It is also astonishing that she is not more well-known. I can envision a major motion picture being made based on this book.