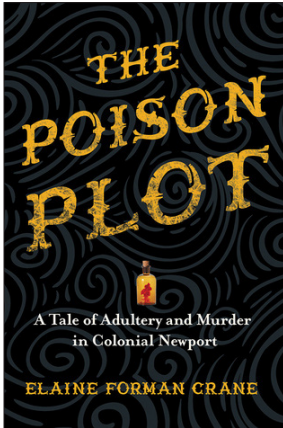


*May 2021***Reading Guide:*****The Poison Plot* (2018) by Elaine Forman Crane**

1. Mary Ward Arnold was clearly a complicated person and the center of the narrative presented, and yet we never get to hear her perspective. How do you think she would tell this story if she had the opportunity? Do you believe the claims about her made by others?
2. *The Poison Plot* features a huge cast of characters, many of whom behaved badly in various ways. Whose story were you most curious about? Why?
3. Elaine Forman Crane faces a problem common to early American historians—hints of a fascinating story, but very little evidence available to explore it. Do you think there was enough evidence available to make a compelling narrative of the story of Benedict and Mary Ward Arnold? Why or why not?
4. *The Poison Plot* focuses on the divorce and accompanying accusations between Benedict Arnold and Mary Ward Arnold and sets them in the context of consumerism in the Atlantic world. Do you think this is the most interesting way to frame the narrative? What might some alternatives be?
5. For those who have also read *Book of Ages*, Jill Lepore's book about Jane Franklin that also faces the issue of writing 18th-century women's history with limited sources, how would you compare the two books?
6. Would you recommend this book to others? Who do you think the ideal reader for this book would be?
7. What other resources on the subject would you recommend to someone who wanted to find out more on the subject?

**Author Biography**

Elaine Forman Crane is also the author of *Witches, Wife Beaters, and Whores: Common Law and Common Folk in Early America* and *Killed Strangely: The Death of Rebecca Cornell*. She is a professor of history at Fordham University and earned her BA in history from Cornell University and her MA and PhD From New York University.

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## Books to Explore

### *Under Household Government: Sex and Family in Puritan Massachusetts* by M. Michelle Jarrett Morris (2013)

In a society where one's sister's husband's brother's wife was referred to as "sister," kinship networks could be immense. When out-of-wedlock pregnancies, paternity suits, and infidelity resulted in legal cases, courtrooms became battlegrounds for warring clans. As she elaborates the ways family policing undermined the administration of justice, M. Michelle Jarrett Morris shows how ordinary colonists understood sexual, marital, and familial relationships. Their stories of love, sex, and betrayal allow us to understand anew the depth and complexity of family life in early New England.

### *Bitten By Witch Fever: Wallpaper & Arsenic in the Nineteenth-Century Home* by Lucinda Hawksley (2016)

The shocking story of a deadly trend in Victorian wallpaper design: In Germany, in 1814, Wilhelm Sattler created an extremely toxic arsenic and verdigris compound pigment, *Schweinfurt* green—known also as Paris, Vienna, or emerald green—which became an instant favorite amongst designers and manufacturers the world over, thanks to its versatility in creating enduring yellows, vivid greens, and brilliant blues. Most insidiously, the arsenic-laced pigment made its way into intricately patterned, brightly colored wallpapers and from there, as they became increasingly in vogue, into the Victorian home. *Bitten by Witch Fever* tells this fatal story of Victorian home decor.

### *The Coquette* by Hannah W. Foster (1797, many reprint editions available)

*The Coquette*, one of the first American novels by a female author, retells the much-publicized story of the seduction and death of Elizabeth Whitman, a poet from Hartford, Connecticut. Written as a series of letters—between the heroine and her friends and lovers—it describes Whitman's long, tortuous courtship by two men, neither of whom perfectly suits her. When, in her mid-30s, the main character finds herself suddenly abandoned when both lovers marry other women, she willfully enters into an adulterous relationship and becomes pregnant. Eliza Wharton was one of the first women in American fiction to emerge as a real person facing a dilemma in her life.

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## Bayou Bend/Rienzi Book Club

Join us for the next selection of the Bayou Bend/Rienzi Book Club July 14, 2021, via Zoom: *The Caesar of Paris: Napoleon Bonaparte, Rome, and the Artistic Obsession That Shaped an Empire* by Susan Jaques. For more information, visit [mfah.org/historybookclub](http://mfah.org/historybookclub).

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## MFAH Book Club

Art and literature meet here! Designed for both established book clubs and individuals interested in creating connections between literary and visual arts, the MFAH Book Club links works of literature to works of art from the collections of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. The MFAH Book Club presents three selections per year. Each book is accompanied by a downloadable discussion guide and is featured on the MFAH Goodreads group: [mfah.org/goodreads](http://mfah.org/goodreads). For more information and resources, visit [mfah.org/bookclub](http://mfah.org/bookclub).

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