

Reading Group Guide for **THE NAKED QUAKER**

TRUE CRIMES AND CONTROVERSIES FROM THE COURTS OF COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND

By *Diane Rapaport*

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Finalist, *ForeWord Magazine's* 2007 "Book of the Year" Award for History

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ABOUT THIS BOOK



Lawyer and historian Diane Rapaport brings colonial history to life with 25 surprising true stories from court records. Chapters include *Witches and Wild Women*, *Coupling*, *Tavern Tales*, *Slaves and Servants*, and *Neighbor vs. Neighbor*. **The Naked Quaker** reveals how our ancestors behaved and spoke. A woman walks into Puritan Sunday meeting and drops her dress as a protest tactic. A highway robber threatens his victim: "I will take you by your eyelids and make your heels strike fire!" A mysterious vagabond wields "enthusiastical power" over men, who break the law to follow her. The word "Puritan" conjures up dour images of 17th-century New Englanders. We rarely think of Puritans as people who had fun, or sex, but human nature was not so different 350 years ago.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR BOOK GROUPS

1. Did you learn anything new or unexpected from **The Naked Quaker** about Puritans and life in colonial New England? Do you see aspects of Puritan values that carry over into modern American life?
2. Do you agree with Rapaport's observation that "human nature was not so different three hundred fifty years ago" [p. 34]? What do the stories in **The Naked Quaker** tell you about human nature?
3. Why did Lydia Wardell (the "naked Quaker") choose nudity to call attention to her grievances? Do you think she achieved her goals? Can you imagine circumstances where you would take similar dramatic action to express your views?
4. In the chapter "Witches and Wild Women," and throughout the book, we meet colonial women of varying ages and social classes. Did these women share similar traits or life circumstances? Why did "outspoken unmarried women" [p. 1] face so much community suspicion and disapproval in Puritan times?
5. The witchcraft hysteria in 17th-century New England (most notably at Salem Village, Massachusetts) continues to fascinate us today. Why? Although we no longer accuse people of being witches, do you see any parallels in modern times?
6. Rapaport says, in chapter 10 [p. 117]: "If I could travel back in time somehow to meet just one person in colonial New England, I would choose Thomas Danforth." Which of the people profiled in **The Naked Quaker** would you most like to meet? Why? What questions would you ask him or her?

7. What does Rapaport mean when she says: “the distinction between slave and servant was often blurred, especially in the 1600s” [p. 51]? What can we learn from **The Naked Quaker** about servitude and social mobility in 17th-century New England?
8. What role did law and courts play in the daily life of 17th-century New England? How does the 21st-century legal system affect you? Do you see similarities and differences? Why do you think we enjoy watching Court TV and reading accounts of trials and crime?
9. Several stories in **The Naked Quaker** involve the legal consequences of words—insulting, slanderous, angry—spoken to or about other people. Did the spoken word have more significance for people in colonial New England than for us today? Why or why not?
10. Discuss the author’s use of language and writing style. Does her focus on separate narrative stories make history more accessible to modern readers? Do you see advantages and drawbacks to presenting history in this way?
11. Does this book make you curious about the lives of your own ancestors? Do you have stories to share from your heritage?

“We 21st century citizens seem to pride ourselves on inventing vice, but as the true (and frequently peculiar) stories in *The Naked Quaker* reveal, we’ve got nothing on our raucous ancestors! You’ll enjoy reading this book as much as your favorite, guilty-pleasure tabloid, but will look eminently more respectable doing so!”

—MEGAN SMOLENYAK SMOLENYAK, co-author of *Trace Your Roots with DNA*, co-founder of Roots Television, and Chief Family Historian of Ancestry.com

“Diane Rapaport's *The Naked Quaker* is a marvel of New England storytelling. Highly entertaining and grounded in the best scholarship, it leaves a new and lasting impression of true crimes and other incidents in the colonial period.”

—D. BRENTON SIMONS, President and CEO, New England Historic Genealogical Society, and author of *Witches, Rakes & Rogues*

“Diane Rapaport's use of early court records is ingenious. With careful reading of these overlooked archives, she brings life to dozens of little known individual stories. Read together, they add dimension to our understanding of the rigors of daily life in colonial New England.”

—MEGAN SNIFFEN-MARINOFF, Harvard University Archivist

“*The Naked Quaker* lays bare Colonial justice through the colorful tales of a woman accused of witchcraft because chickens died after she passed by, a man named Bacon charged with stealing pigs, a semi-literate sailor whose sentence for illegally selling wine included serving as a constable Court TV is no match!”

—LAURIE BECKELMAN, President, Women’s National Book Association

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Diane Rapaport is a former trial lawyer who has made a new career as an author and speaker. Her first book, **New England Court Records: A Research Guide for Genealogists and Historians** (Quill Pen Press, 2006), won three 2007 Benjamin Franklin Awards from the Independent Book Publishers Association—for Best History Book, Best Reference Book, and finalist for Best New Voice in Nonfiction. Visit her website at www.DianeRapaport.com.

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