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## ARTS

# IUS professor helps interpret Jean Smart's ancestral history on TLC genealogy show

By [LISA HORNUNG](#) | July 4, 2018 10:00 am



Dr. Kelly Ryan, left, helps actress Jean Smart read documents from the 1600s on "Who Do You Think You Are," on TLC. | Courtesy of TLC

A familiar face around Indiana University Southeast appeared on the season finale of "[Who Do You Think You Are](#)" on

Dr. Kelly Ryan, a historian and dean of the School of Social Sciences at IUS, made a guest appearance on the cable network show to help actress Jean Smart, known for her roles in “Designing Women” and “24,” understand her lineage.

Ryan, who lives in Louisville, said she was initially contacted by the show to help with another celebrity who later backed out. They never told Ryan who the celeb was, so the mystery will remain, but when Smart had an ancestor in Salem, Mass., they contacted Ryan again.

Smart, with the help of genealogists, traced her ancestry back to one particularly interesting person, Dorcas Hoar, her eighth great-grandmother. In 1678 in Essex County, Mass., Hoar was charged with running thievery ring, which used domestic servants to pilfer items from wealthy homes. Her daughter Annis Hoar, who was 14 at the time, testified against her in the case. Annis is Smart’s seventh great-grandmother.

This is where Ryan comes in. She specializes in race, gender, sexuality and violence in early United States history, and her first book “[Regulating Passion: Sexuality and Patriarchal Rule in Massachusetts, 1700-1830](#)” tells the stories of women charged with sexual crimes in early Massachusetts. She is currently working on a second book about women who faced criminal charges.

“They find this ancestor, and they start seeing if any records exist about this person, and then I’m the one who can contextualize what this actually means,” Ryan told Insider Louisville. “In the case of Jean Smart’s ancestor Dorcas Hoar, they had these thievery documents, and they were curious what all this meant. And my second book deals with different types of crime in addition to the first book on sex, so I was able to speak to those issues.”

It’s unknown what happened to Hoar after her trial for thievery, but 14 years later, she was tried as a witch in the Salem Witch Trials. Ryan said she knew that Hoar had been tried as a witch, but she had to keep that a secret from Smart initially because the producers wanted an authentic reaction.



## A depiction of the trial of Mary Wolcott, another woman accused of witchcraft in Salem, Mass. | Wikimedia Commons

In the episode, Smart traveled to Beverly, Mass. where she saw the court records accusing Hoar of being a witch. Hoar was tried and convicted, then later confessed. She bought time by petitioning for more time to “realize and perfect her repentance for the salvation of her soul.

Hoar was granted one month’s reprieve by the governor of Massachusetts on Sept. 21, 1692. The next day, eight people were executed for witchcraft.

During that month of Hoar’s reprieve, the tide turned against the witch trials, said Emerson W. Baker, a history professor at Salem State University, who also appeared on the show. People began to realize that innocent people were being tried and killed, he said.

Smart teared up several times in the show when she realized the struggles her ancestor went through. “She was a tough lady,” Smart said.

Ryan agreed that the story is unique.

“I mean, it’s incredible,” she said. “The one thing that really struck me: She was extremely courageous or brave or dumb. She took a risk. I think she made an extremely calculated gamble when she confessed. I think she was like, ‘I don’t have anything to lose at this point. What happens if I change the narrative? What happens if I don’t protest my innocence?’ We know from these 19 people who were executed previously, they were dying. So, I think she thought outside of the societal

narrative and turned it on its head. I think they didn't know what to do with her."

## Ryan's experience

Ryan said she enjoyed working with Smart on their segment of the show.

"She was just like on the show, just funny," she said. "A good sense of humor, very playful but very earnest. I think that really comes out in the episode. She has a deep love for her family. She was calling her son between the breaks and worried about her daughter. She's very involved with her family."

Ryan said Smart told her that history is something she's really interested in, too.

"I think she came to the project with a great deal of interest, really wanting to connect, especially after the recent loss of her mother," she said.

For  
Ryan,  
who  
got



Jean Smart starred on the season finale of "Who Do You Think You Are," on TLC. | Courtesy of TLC

her master's degree at Boston College and did much of the work on her dissertation at the Massachusetts Archive in Boston, the show was a bit of a homecoming for her. And just

like most historians, Ryan saw getting into the archives as a treat.

“This was just such a nice adventure for me to get back to what I love doing,” Ryan said.

Visiting Boston in February wasn’t her favorite, she said, but the thrill of finding a great moment in history and helping a layperson connect with her ancestors was worth it.

“We were looking at documents from the 1600s,” Ryan said. “I’m used to it. I’ve been sitting in dusty archives for years, so it doesn’t phase me anymore. She had thought we were looking at photocopies, and when I told her it was the original, she was like, ‘Whoa!’”

As for appearing on television, Ryan said she wasn’t nervous.

“I have to admit, a normal person would have been nervous — I’m not a normal person,” she joked. “I don’t know if it’s because I moved so much growing up or what. I was just completely comfortable. I didn’t even think about the cameras for the most part. I just kind of enjoyed our conversations.”

What the episode Ryan is featured in on TLC On Demand or [online](#).

## **LISA HORNUNG**

Lisa Hornung a native of Louisville and has worked in local media for more than 15 years as a writer and editor. Before that she worked as a writer, editor and photographer for community newspapers in Kansas, Ohio and Kentucky. She has a bachelor’s degree in journalism from the University of Georgia, and after a 20-year career in journalism, she obtained a master’s degree in history from Eastern Kentucky University in 2016.



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