

Jill Lepore

BY JESSICA TEISCH

Jill Lepore is a sleuth at heart.

“Unfortunately, all I ever really wanted to do was figure people out,” she said. “Meanwhile, I also always wanted to figure out what actually happened, like a detective, like a Chandler gumshoe” (*Humanities, the Magazine of the National Endowment for the Humanities*).

In all of her works, from her New Journalism essays to books on early America to historical fiction, Lepore—a professor of American History at Harvard, a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, and a public intellectual—interprets clues from the past and deftly ties together different eras in surprising, enlightening ways. Her newest book, *Joe Gould's Teeth* (reviewed on page 16), relates her search for the longest manuscript ever written, penned by the eccentric Joe Gould. “I was never drawn to his life,” Lepore told *Bookmarks*. “Instead, I was looking for a lost manuscript, and that required tracking his footsteps. It happened this way. For a class I was teaching last year, I assigned a pair of essays about Gould, both written by the *New Yorker* reporter Joseph Mitchell. The first essay, written in 1942, describes Gould’s monumental work, ‘The Oral History of Our Time,’ an unpublished, nine-million-word manuscript. The second essay, written in 1964, insists that the manuscript never existed. I got curious. Maybe the manuscript *did* exist. So I went looking for it.”

Gould, who shares good company with Benjamin Franklin’s sister and Wonder Woman (to name a few), is just the latest in a string of various subjects Lepore has explored. As a staff writer at the *New Yorker*, Lepore has written about the New Populism; reproduction, marriage, and the Constitution; economic inequality; the archiving of the Internet;

Elizabeth Warren; the polarization of American politics; torture; and child welfare—and that’s only recently. As a professor, chiefly of American political history, Lepore often focuses on specific events and the particularities of individuals’ life stories and their relationship to larger structures. “The life story . . . is merely the means to an end,” Lepore wrote in a well-known article, “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography” (*Journal of American History*, June 2001), “and that end is always explaining the culture.”

Culture, society, politics—those are the broad canvases on which Lepore works to examine, deconstruct, and reconstruct historical narratives and resurrect the forgotten voices of history. For in her view, it is not so much the story of America but the telling of it that matters—how histories are dictated by highly subjective, often unreliable, records of the past that, in turn, affect how we shape our stories. Take her book on Benjamin Franklin’s sister: “[t]heir lives tell an 18th-century tale of two Americas,” she writes, and hers—as a mother, as a wife—is equally important to the historical record, just as it is frequently left out.

“Lepore specializes in excavating old flashpoints—forgotten or badly misremembered collisions between politics and cultural debates in America’s past,” noted a *New York Review of Books* critic. “She lays out for our modern sensibility how some event or social problem was fought over by interest groups, reformers, opportunists and ‘thought leaders’ of the day. The result can look both familiar and disturbing, like our era’s arguments flipped in a funhouse mirror.” And in that, Lepore’s “discipline is worthy of a first-class detective.”



The Name of War

King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity (1998)

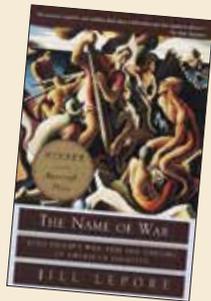
◆ BANCROFT PRIZE

◆ BERKSHIRE PRIZE

In her first academic book, Lepore, then an assistant professor of history at Boston University, reimagines the significance of King Philip's War (1675–1676) and gives voice to the Indian half of a narrative that has been lost to history. As she argues, the unimaginably barbaric war—waged between, on the one side, the Wampanoag, the Narragansett, and the Nipmuck Indians, led by sachem (or “intertribal leader”) Metacom (named “King Philip” by Puritan leaders) and, on the other side, the equally savage New England colonists and their Indian allies—not only jeopardized the existence of the colonies but also forged a nascent American identity in which the English positioned themselves against the Indians.

Challenging the traditional notion that the origins of American identity lie in the Puritan experience, Lepore examines King Philip's War through the written records (mostly from the British perspective) and pieces together fragments of the Indian viewpoint. The “central claim of this book,” writes Lepore, “is that wounds and words—the injuries and their interpretation—cannot be separated, that acts of war generate acts of narration, and that both types of acts are often joined in a common purpose: defining the geographical, political, cultural, and sometimes racial and national boundaries between peoples.” Before King Philip's War, cultural boundaries between English settlers and Indians had grown increasingly fluid; during the war, both groups, which feared losing their identities, engaged in further savagery. Portrayed through words justifying the settlers' actions, the war created more rigid cultural boundaries. It also shaped the stories Americans told themselves about their history and became a template for the centuries-long contest between American Indians and European settlers.

“Lepore understands that the struggles over language after the war were as important as the war itself,” wrote a *New York Times* critic. She “captures the experience of war, for whites and Indians alike, in prose that is worthy of the tormented writing that emerged from the Civil War, World War I and Vietnam.”



New York Burning

Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan (2005)

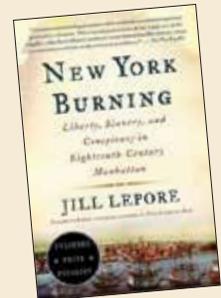
◆ ANISFIELD-WOLF BOOK AWARD

◆ PULITZER PRIZE FOR HISTORY FINALIST

Lepore's fourth book addresses a long-forgotten episode in early American history: a 1741 “witch hunt” in Manhattan that put 30 black slaves and 4 whites to death by hanging and burning at the stake and that threw more than 100 black men and women into a dungeon beneath City Hall. “It's a little like ... the 1692 [Salem] witchcraft trials in which twenty people died, except that what happened in New York was a lot worse,” she told *Humanities*. “No one was burned at the stake in Salem. That's just a figment of our collective imagination. What happened in New York was also, historically, far more significant. It played a role in how slavery evolved in the North. And it played a role, I think, in how American politics evolved and how Americans came to tolerate partisanship and the two-party system.”

In 18th-century Manhattan, a conglomeration of cultures and races, one in every five persons was enslaved. During the winter of 1741, whites saw “evidence” of a slave uprising as fires, allegedly set by slaves, raged across Manhattan. Sparking mass hysteria and fears of pillage, rape, murder, and a slave takeover of local government, the fires united white political pluralities, who now had a common enemy. Basing her story on a journal written in 1744 by New York Supreme Court Justice and interrogator Daniel Horsmanden, Lepore links the events of 1741 to Manhattan's economic climate, where slaves and poor whites competed for work, the city's past political upheavals, and the war between Britain and Spain. Lepore questions the idea of a slave conspiracy while showing the very real nature of the populace's hysteria. But what really happened, she admits, is “maddeningly unknowable.”

“Hers is the sort of photo-realistic portrait of a time and place that shows the shoulder-rubbing closeness of blacks and whites coexisting in the most naked form of inequality. ... [The] lesson at the heart of her book—how those who abuse power become haunted by the nightmare of retribution—could hardly be more timely” (*Nation*).

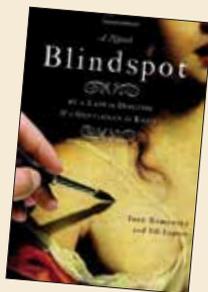


Blindspot

By a Gentleman in Exile and a Lady in Disguise (2008)

Lifelong friends Jane Kamensky, then chair of the history department at Brandeis University (now at Harvard), and Lepore, then director of Harvard's History and Literature Program, began writing the novel *Blindspot* as a birthday

present for their mentor, Yale historian John Demos. (Lepore and Kamensky also cofounded *Commonplace: The Journal of Early American Life*.) “The novel’s a loving imitation of eighteenth-century fiction, and we tried to stay very close, not just to the vocabulary, but to the sensibility,” Lepore said. “[W]e were trying, quite literally, to write a novel that could plausibly have been written in 1764” (*Humanities*).



A tribute to—and a send-up of—18th-century melodramas, *Blindspot* mimics the bygone era’s literary techniques: first person, epistolary narratives; adventure-studded story lines; and sensational plot twists. At the same time, Kamensky and Lepore skillfully capture the contradictions of early American history, particularly the colonists’ struggle to free themselves from the British while blithely ignoring the growing African slave trade (Colonial America’s “blindspot”).

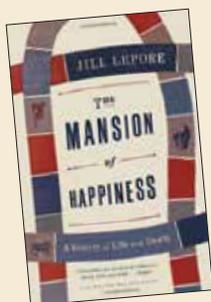
On the eve of the American Revolution, Stewart Jameston, a portraitist and notorious rake, arrives in Boston, having fled his native Edinburgh to avoid debtor’s prison. He swiftly sets up shop and hires a penniless orphan, Francis Weston, as an apprentice, unaware that Francis is actually Fanny Easton, the disgraced (and disguised) daughter of a prominent local family. Completely fooled by the charade, the normally unflappable, but bighearted, Lothario grows increasingly flustered by his attraction to the “boy” when he suddenly becomes entangled in the murder of revolutionary leader Samuel Bradstreet. He enlists the help of his old friend, Dr. Ignatius Alexander, the Oxford-educated son of African slaves, to solve the crime. “But what an engaging way to relearn American history!” noted a *Washington Post* critic. “And how amazing (and more than a little sad) to realize that we, as a country, are plagued by many of the same conundrums—pervasive racism, class distrust, venal officials—now as we were then.” (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2009)

The Mansion of Happiness

A History of Life and Death (2012)

◆ ANDREW CARNEGIE MEDAL FOR EXCELLENCE IN NONFICTION, FINALIST

It took a while for Lepore to realize she was writing a book—her seventh—about the ways Americans view and define the stages of life. She had written essays for the *New Yorker* on such topics as cryogenic freezing, old board games about life, and breast pumps. But it wasn’t until she received a \$6,000 overdue notice from Harvard’s Widener Library (later forgiven) that she



The Checkered Game of Life

noticed the connections between the seemingly disparate topics she had researched and profiled.

In the early 1800s, Britain’s most popular board game, the Mansion of Happiness—designed to instruct its players how to be morally upright—was introduced in the United States. By the second half of the 19th century, Milton Bradley had reinvented the game as the Checkered Game of Life, in which industriousness and prosperity replaced piety. Using the game as a starting point for the book’s chapters, many of which began as essays in the *New Yorker*, Lepore asks thought-provoking, but ultimately unanswerable, questions about life and death, from before the cradle to beyond the grave.

Progressing chronologically through life’s stages and using anecdotes from different eras, Lepore explores the various opinions and policies about life’s stages, while arguing that many that we take for granted (adolescence, for example) were invented at particular historical moments. In her far-ranging inquiries, Lepore discusses Aristotle, 16th-century notions of childlessness, Nazi medicine, eugenics, *Roe v. Wade*, the case of Karen Quinlan, and the history of breast-feeding (starting with wet-nursing in Babylonia), among other topics. “Whether reflecting on cryonics (in which the Mansion of Happiness becomes a freezer) or the children’s room at the New York Public Library (in which the Mansion of Happiness becomes a self-contained world of youth) or séances (in which participants hope for proof of a Mansion of Happiness beyond the grave), this history of ideas about life and death underscores the eternal verities: We know everything. We know nothing. We learn. We forget. In this game of life, we go on to roll the dice once more” (*New York Times*).

Book of Ages

The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin (2013)

◆ NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FOR NONFICTION FINALIST

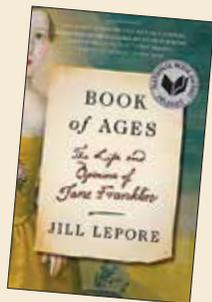
◆ TIME MAGAZINE’S BEST NONFICTION BOOK OF THE YEAR

Lepore’s ninth book—a history and biography that reads like an intimate novel—reimagines the life of Jane Franklin Mecom, Benjamin Franklin’s youngest sister and close

confidante. “Against poverty and ignorance, Franklin[’s voice] prevailed; his sister[’s] did not,” she wrote in the *New York Times*. “They left very different paper trails. He wrote the story of his life, stirring and wry—the most important autobiography ever written. She wrote 14 pages of what she called her ‘Book of Ages.’” Indeed, Jane’s story is allegorical because “it helps us to think about inequality,” Lepore told the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. “If people go around with the idea that the only people in the 18th century were John Adams and George Washington and Benjamin Franklin, then they are left with no ideas at all about inequality.

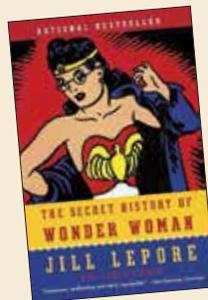
... I wanted to tell Jane’s story as a way to ask readers to think about how history gets written: what gets saved and what gets lost, what gets remembered and what gets forgotten, and what the consequences are of each of these choices.”

As children, Benjamin Franklin and his younger sister Jane (1712–1794) were inseparable. As adults, they maintained a lively and affectionate correspondence spanning 63 years. However, though she spoke her mind freely in her witty letters, Jane spent her life constrained by society’s gender expectations. “I Read as much as I Dare,” she wrote to Ben, alluding to popular negative beliefs regarding educated women. While her brother left to make his way in the world, she stayed home and learned to cook, clean, and manage a household, though she secretly longed for something more. At 15, she married a man she didn’t love and bore him 12 children. “[Ben] became a printer, a philosopher, and a statesman,” observes Lepore, and he wrote a famous autobiography in which he left Jane out—the person to whom he wrote more letters than anyone else. Jane, instead, “became a wife, a mother, and a widow.” “Society has conspired to wipe lives like Jane [Franklin’s] from the record,” declared a *New York Times* critic. “Ms. Lepore has done a service in restoring her to us.” (★★★★ Jan/Feb 2014)



book writer—had a hand in nearly everything feminist in the early and mid-20th century.

In her *New York Times* best seller, Lepore gives a feminist rereading of the world’s most popular female superhero, created by Marston in 1941. When Marston was a student at Harvard in the 1910s, he was fascinated by suffragists such as Emmeline Pankhurst, who was prevented from lecturing there. In Marston’s unconventional home life, his wife shared him with his lover, Olive Byrne, birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger’s niece—though he and Byrne masqueraded as a traditional couple for their *Family Circle* column. (“As curious and fascinating as the family story is, to me it’s chiefly a prompt for other interesting structural, economic, cultural and political questions,” Lepore said in a *Comic Book Resources* interview.) Indeed, Marston’s life at times seems too strange to be true; he also helped invent and commercialize the lie detector test. Playing detective, Lepore reveals details of Marston’s unusual career and contextualizes Wonder Woman, at heart a Progressive Era feminist, within 20th-century feminism. “Marston had Wonder Woman do everything,” she told *Comic Book Resources*. “She organizes boycotts, she tells women to leave their husbands, she runs for president. It’s pretty extraordinary stuff.”



“Having devoted her last work to Jane Franklin Mecom, Benjamin Franklin’s sister, Lepore clearly has a passion for intelligent, opinionated women whose legacies have been overshadowed by the men they love. In her own small way, she’s helping women get the justice they deserve, not unlike her tiarad counterpart. ...

It has nearly everything you might want in a page-turner: tales of S&M, skeletons in the closet, a believe-it-or-not weirdness in its biographical details, and something else that secretly powers even the most ‘serious’ feminist history—fun” (*Entertainment Weekly*). (★★★★ Mar/Apr 2015)

The Secret History of Wonder Woman (2014)

◆ AMERICAN HISTORY BOOK PRIZE

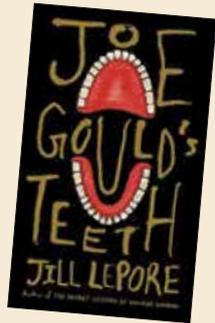
Like many of Lepore’s larger projects, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*—which tackles the superhero’s eccentric creator, psychology, the American family, medicine, the lie detector test, Planned Parenthood, the women’s suffrage movement, comic book culture, and more—came together from initially separate inquiries. When Lepore repeatedly encountered the name William Moulton Marston while conducting seemingly disparate research, she realized that this near-forgotten man—a psychologist, lawyer, inventor, filmmaker, novelist, popular science writer, and comic



Joe Gould’s Teeth

“As I write in the book, I was never drawn to Joe Gould’s life; instead, I was looking for a lost manuscript, and that required tracking his footsteps,” Lepore told *Bookmarks*. “I got curious. Maybe the manuscript *did* exist. So I went looking for it.” *Joe Gould’s Teeth*, which began as a search for the missing tome, evolved into a portrait of a man and his time.

THE TOPIC: In 1942, *New Yorker* writer Joseph Mitchell profiled Joe Gould (1889–1957), a Greenwich Village eccentric friendly with a group of literati including E. E. Cummings, Ezra Pound, and others. Gould was, Mitchell claimed, penning the longest book ever written, *The Oral History of Our Time*. Although born into a wealthy family, by the time Mitchell encountered him, Gould was, more or less, a homeless drunk. After Gould's death in a mental hospital, Mitchell wrote a second article (and later a book) debunking the manuscript's existence. Unpersuaded, Lepore decided to investigate. Her inquiries lead to revelations about Gould's life: his fascination with eugenics, his possible autism, and his harassment of a Harlem Renaissance artist. As she follows leads and encounters dead ends, Lepore argues that the manuscript may, in fact, once have existed—and that Gould's cultivated fame resulted from his friends' attempt to keep him out of an institution.



Knopf. 256 pages. \$24.95. ISBN: 9781101947586

Boston Globe ★★★★★

"Although Mitchell, who died in 1996, figures heavily in the narrative, it is another relationship of Gould's that, in Lepore's view, is crucial to understanding her subject's life story: his romantic pursuit of an African-American artist named Augusta Savage, whom he met in Harlem in 1923. ... If aspects of the mystery remain unsolved, Lepore weaves them into a haunting portrait of Gould, a 'toothless madman' who believed he was his generation's preeminent historian—and who in fact helped inspire the modern oral history movement." JOSEPH P. KAHN

Kirkus ★★★★★

"Like a detective, Lepore describes her mazelike quest, her clues, her dead ends, the many people she met and talked to, the dusty archives visited in a wonderful, sprightly prose lusciously filled with allusions and references. ... A fascinating, sharply written, thoroughly engaging jeu d'esprit."

NPR ★★★★★

"Although she is denied access to Gould's medical records at Pilgrim State Hospital, she makes a convincing case that he probably was subjected to the extraction of all his teeth (because infection was thought to be the root cause of mental illness), electroshock therapy, and prefrontal lobotomy, all in widespread use before being supplanted by psychopharmacology. ... Using the tools of her trade, Lepore ended up broadening her search for his lost notebooks to encompass trenchant questions about journalism, race, and mental illness. The result has bite." HELLER

MCALPIN

Portland Press Herald ★★★★★

"Lepore's book is not only a work of scholarship, but a layered

gem of storytelling. It's a puzzle, mystery and archaeological dig rolled into one." JOAN SILVERMAN

Minneapolis Star Tribune ★★★★★

"Savage is a vital counterpoint here, and Lepore seemingly plucks her story from the air, a sculpted piece of African-American experience all its own, but you know she found it in those cobwebby archives. It is easy to get a charge out of this parti-colored, flabbergasting tale, one that typifies what Lepore understands as 'the asymmetry of the historical record.'" PETER LEWIS

New Republic ★★★★★

"[Lepore] also judges Gould in ways Mitchell never thought to, looking beyond the spectacle of his own abjection to the pain and misery he caused others. ... Like any historian, Lepore is limited by the evidence available to her, and Gould is inevitably at the center of this story, but it is a Gould as Augusta Savage, and the other women he hounded, might have seen him." EVAN KINDLEY

Washington Times ★★★★★

"[Lepore] appears as a Harvard professor teaching a course on biography, as a researcher peddling between New York libraries, as a feminist sympathizer with Augusta Savage, whom she describes in affecting detail. ... As for the questions about Gould's *Oral History*, they were hardly burning issues, and little if anything changes because of this book, though aficionados of literary history will be entertained and perhaps enlightened." CLAIRE HOPLEY

Publishers Weekly ★★

"Lepore never finds definitive evidence, but the more she learns, the uglier the story gets—including Gould's fascination with 'race pride' and his harassment of African-American sculptor Augusta Savage. ... Lepore's book, which itself originated as a *New Yorker* article, unfortunately comes across as thin and overstretched, and its subject is unlovable and unsympathetic."

CRITICAL SUMMARY

Lepore plays detective in this breezy and enjoyable "homage and corrective" to Mitchell's portraits of Gould; while she admires Mitchell's writing, "something doesn't sit right with her about his portrayal of Gould, which for more than 50 years has stood as the definitive account" (*New Republic*). In exploring what happened to her subject and his 9-million-word manuscript, Lepore veers into the related topics of journalism, race relations, the public mental health system, how we record history, and Gould's fascination with Harlem Renaissance sculptor Augusta Savage, all but forgotten in the historical record. Lepore displays an infectious curiosity and conducts excellent research into myriad avenues, but a few critics cited a thin, disjointed narrative with narrow appeal. As for the fate of the mysterious manuscript? That, perhaps, is a book for another time. ■