



The Story of America: Essays on Origins

By Jill Lepore

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In *The Story of America*, Harvard historian and *New Yorker* staff writer Jill Lepore investigates American origin stories--from John Smith's account of the founding of Jamestown in 1607 to Barack Obama's 2009 inaugural address--to show how American democracy is bound up with the history of print. Over the centuries, Americans have read and written their way into a political culture of ink and type.

Part civics primer, part cultural history, *The Story of America* excavates the origins of everything from the paper ballot and the Constitution to the I.O.U. and the dictionary. Along the way it presents fresh readings of Benjamin Franklin's *Way to Wealth*, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe, and "Paul Revere's Ride" by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, as well as histories of lesser-known genres, including biographies of presidents, novels of immigrants, and accounts of the Depression.

From past to present, Lepore argues, Americans have wrestled with the idea of democracy by telling stories. In this thoughtful and provocative book, Lepore offers at once a history of origin stories and a meditation on storytelling itself.

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The Story of America: Essays on Origins By Jill Lepore Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

If the definition of a good book is one that makes a reader think, then Lepore has written a good book. If the definition of a very good book is one that makes a reader question prevailing thought, then Lepore has written a very good book indeed. Her collection of essays, all but one previously published in the *New Yorker*, places the stories Americans tell about America under a microscope, from the conflicting stories of Jamestown to the ubiquitous presidential campaign biography, from Poor Richard's Almanac to the surprising findings she gingerly, patiently, often humorously coaxes out of inquiries into subjects that should be but are too seldom investigated. The stories behind stories are more revelatory than the so-called facts they are ostensibly built upon. And while to have read the U.S. Constitution is one thing, to understand what it says is an altogether different matter, since its meaning seems to shift with the times and the reader's intent. This book ought to be intentional reading for every American history wonk. --Donna Chavez

Review

Runner-up for the 2013 PEN/Diamondstein-Spielvogel Award for the Art of the Essay, PEN American Center

"In this collection of essays (most of which previously appeared in *The New Yorker*), Lepore illuminates the various ways in which the story of our nation has been formulated as a narrative. From John Smith's largely fictionalized account of the founding of Jamestown, in 1607, to Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration address, these pieces comprise an examination of the nature of history and an exploration of how the way we tell our story has shaped the story itself."--*NewYorker.com's Page-Turner blog*

"*The Story of America*, like *A is for American*, serves up a delightful smorgasbord of synecdoches and allegories of the evolution of American democracy. . . . [A] deeply satisfying book."--**Amanda Foreman, *Times Literary Supplement***

"Anyone who has not yet had the pleasure of reading Jill Lepore might begin with *The Story of America: Essays on Origins*. Ms. Lepore is a gifted historian and a contributor to the *New Yorker*, where most of these essays appeared. Her subjects range from John Smith and the founding of Jamestown to the murder of a Connecticut family in 2007 by a pair of drug-addled drifters. She drops in on, among others, Andrew Jackson, Noah Webster, Edgar Allan Poe and Charlie Chan (the real one). Her voice is always fresh, her prose engaging and her insights original."--**Fergus M. Bordewich, *Wall Street Journal***

"Ranging from colonial times to the present, the essays are liberally sprinkled with fascinating facts--etymologies of 'ballot' and 'booze,' or that Davy Crockett was the first presidential candidate to write a campaign autobiography. Even the footnotes contain buried treasures; history buffs and general readers alike will savor this collection."--**Publishers Weekly (starred review)**

"She trains the literary equivalent of wide-angle and zoom lenses on seminal American documents, examining their subjects and their creators. . . . [E]legant."--**Julia M. Klein, *Los Angeles Times Book Review***

"Lepore, who teaches history at Harvard and writes for *The New Yorker*, brings to the task a keen eye for the often-competing claims of history, politics, and literature. . . . [T]errifically readable, intellectually engaging, and thoroughly entertaining. . . . Lepore's subjects mostly range from the 17th to the 19th centuries, but the

essays feel remarkably relevant, grappling with ideas about race, equality, voting rights, taxes, poverty, the role of America in the world."--**Kate Tuttle, *Boston Globe***

"In this collection of her essays from the magazine, she paints portraits of George Washington, Thomas Paine, Longfellow, and many forgotten figures in America's founding, rescuing them from dogmatic myth to show that they are as human and as able to surprise as your best friend is able to inspire and infuriate you. . . . Lepore knocks you out of your comfort zone. You thought you knew America?"--***The Daily Beast***

"Tackling a wide variety of subjects--e.g., the Founding Fathers, Charles Dickens, Clarence Darrow, Charlie Chan, voting regulations, the decline of inaugural speeches--the author proves to be a funny, slightly punky literary critic, reading between the lines of American history. . . . As smart, lively, and assured as modern debunker gets."--***Kirkus Reviews (starred review)***

"If the definition of a good book is one that makes a reader think, then Lepore has written a good book. If the definition of a very good book is one that makes a reader question prevailing thought, then Lepore has written a very good book indeed. . . . The stories behind stories are more revelatory than the so-called facts they are ostensibly built upon. And while to have read the U.S. Constitution is one thing, to understand what it says is an altogether different matter, since its meaning seems to shift with the times and the reader's intent. This book ought to be intentional reading for every American history wonk."--***Booklist***

"Lepore's elegant account of America's genesis is alert to discrepancies and exaggerations of all kinds. It's characteristic of her genial style that while examining the sticky history of Captain John Smith (he of Pocahontas fame), she observes that while he probably wasn't a liar, his pantaloons did on one notable occasion literally burst into flames."--***Olivia Laing, Prospect***

"[L]ively, funny, argumentative, and plain-spoken. . . . Lepore is trying to hear America through its stories, and there are a lot of voices in that choir."--***Chris Barsanti, PopMatters***

"Lepore's strength as a popular historian is her ability to make her target audience . . . take a second look at the political culture we have long taken for granted, and realize that our system was not preordained, not historically inevitable, not even, always, very well planned. . . . [S]urprising and enlightening."--***Brooke Allen, WilsonQuarterly.com***

"Jill Lepore's fascinating, provocative and wide-ranging essays explore the 'origin stories' Americans have told themselves, from the 17th-century English settlers in Jamestown and Plymouth to the Founding Fathers to Barack Obama's origin story today. Lepore offers at once a history of American origin stories and a meditation on storytelling."--***Minneapolis Star-Tribune***

"In an engaging and entertaining style, Lepore questions and exposes the political motives underlying commonly accepted versions of history. Each enlightening essay reveals that what most of us think of as history is often a tangle of prejudice, speculation, and imagination. An enjoyable and thought-provoking read for history buffs at all levels and for anyone seeking to understand how history is written."--***Library Journal***

"Elegant, enlightening, and engaging, [Lepore's] essays give the lie to the proposition that contemporary America lacks public intellectuals. . . . Most important, Lepore's analysis is smart, sharp, and sassy."--***Tulsa World***

"The appropriate audience for these stories will surely be the literate citizen, if not the student of history or American Studies. . . . Lepore's ability to bring characters and subjects to life might well persuade such

readers to delve more deeply into the biographies of the famous as well as the less famous Americans she engages."--**James Gilbert, H-Net Reviews**

"[C]opiously researched, deftly written and anecdotally instructive."--**John Cussen, Erie Times-News**

"Simple, short and appealing, Jill has told the story of America well."--**R. Balashankar, Organiser**

"In this thoughtful and provocative book, Lepore offers at once a history of origin stories and a meditation on storytelling itself."--**World Book Industry**

"*The Story of America* is a must-read for anyone interested in American history and the history of American publishing and writing. A fascinating, engaging, and expertly written book. I cannot recommend it highly enough."--**Politics Reader**

"The author's fecundity is matched by the breadth of her reading and wit. . . . Lepore makes a great deal of sense, here and elsewhere. First rate sense."--**Michael Kammen, European Legacy**

From the Back Cover

"As both a Jeremiah and a troubadour, Jill Lepore has one of the most distinctive voices in American literary life. So skilled in the art of the essay, she has a sense of narrative that is breathtaking. She tells resounding, surprising stories about real people forging American roots and development, but always through a deeply documented history. Both subtly and explosively, Lepore brings the power of history right into your lap and makes you shudder at just how deeply tangled past and present really are."--**David W. Blight, author of American Oracle: The Civil War in the Civil Rights Era**

"Jill Lepore is one of America's most interesting scholars--a distinguished historian and a brilliant essayist. This prolific collection of articles and essays is a remarkable body of work that moves from early America to our present, contentious age."--**Alan Brinkley, author of The Publisher: Henry Luce and His American Century**

"Jill Lepore is one of our finest historians of the battle over the story called 'America,' which, as she says, is constantly being fought over and over. In this stunning collection of essays, Lepore makes the case that the rise of democracy is bound up with the history of its reading and writing. That history is conflicted, ragged, and contradictory but, in Lepore's capable hands, as gripping and compelling as a novel."--**Cathy N. Davidson, Duke University**

"Concise, clear, vivid, witty, insightful, and rich in turns of phrase. More than any other historian I know, Lepore cares about good writing and has a talent for making sophisticated ideas accessible to a broad readership."--**Alan Taylor, author of The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies**

"Jill Lepore's storytelling power is on full display here. As much literary exercises as historical inquiries, these essays are compact, highly readable, and often written from an unexpected angle. Combining a lightness of touch with the authority of a historian who knows her field inside out, Lepore moves effortlessly through the length of American history."--**Wai Chee Dimock, Yale University**

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Charles Beaudoin:

Playing with family in a park, coming to see the sea world or hanging out with pals is thing that usually you have done when you have spare time, in that case why you don't try issue that really opposite from that. 1 activity that make you not sense tired but still relaxing, trilling like on roller coaster you have been ride on and with addition of information. Even you love The Story of America: Essays on Origins, you could enjoy both. It is fine combination right, you still would like to miss it? What kind of hangout type is it? Oh come on its mind hangout folks. What? Still don't have it, oh come on its named reading friends.

Renee Chagnon:

In this era which is the greater man or woman or who has ability to do something more are more treasured than other. Do you want to become among it? It is just simple solution to have that. What you should do is just spending your time very little but quite enough to get a look at some books. Among the books in the top record in your reading list is definitely The Story of America: Essays on Origins. This book which is qualified as The Hungry Mountains can get you closer in growing to be precious person. By looking upwards and review this reserve you can get many advantages.

Edward Suniga:

That guide can make you to feel relax. This book The Story of America: Essays on Origins was multi-colored and of course has pictures on the website. As we know that book The Story of America: Essays on Origins has many kinds or style. Start from kids until teens. For example Naruto or Detective Conan you can read and believe you are the character on there. So , not at all of book usually are make you bored, any it offers up you feel happy, fun and loosen up. Try to choose the best book for you personally and try to like reading this.

Kimberly Towe:

What is your hobby? Have you heard which question when you got college students? We believe that that concern was given by teacher to the students. Many kinds of hobby, All people has different hobby. And also you know that little person similar to reading or as looking at become their hobby. You should know that reading is very important as well as book as to be the matter. Book is important thing to provide you knowledge, except your own teacher or lecturer. You get good news or update regarding something by book. Amount types of books that can you go onto be your object. One of them is this The Story of America: Essays on Origins.

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