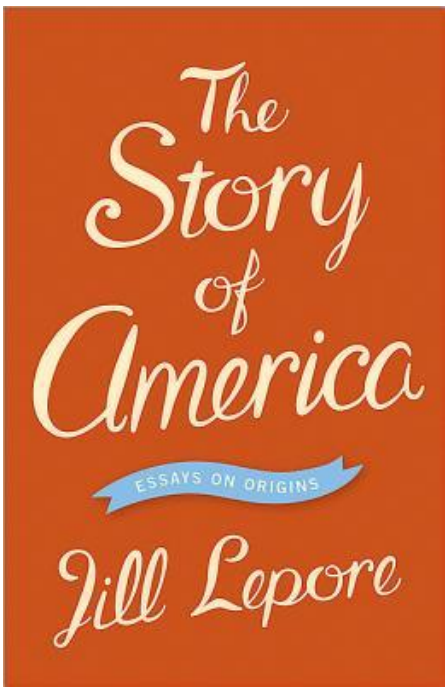

The Story of America: Essays on Origins

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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.

The Story of America: Essays on Origins Details

Date	:	Published October 7th 2012 by Princeton University Press
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From Reader Review The Story of America: Essays on Origins for online ebook

Daniel Chaikin says

Lepore brings a lot into her essays. She is a professor of history and a staff writer on the New Yorker, where I believe all the essays here were originally published. She writes on a variety of subjects, including literature and history. And whatever she writes about, she leaves the impression of having some authority. When she writes a book review, it almost sounds like she knows the material better than the author.

The essays here seem to be ordered somewhat in chronological order of subject, beginning with an essay on the Mayflower, where she shreds Nathaniel Philbrick's book of that title, and ending with a history of the generally uninspiring presidential addresses. The focus is always the United States, even for her essay on Charles Dickens. Essay evolve in different ways. Her essay on the history of the misrepresentation of the US constitution works toward originalism (the principle of interpretation that views the Constitution's meaning as fixed as of the time of enactment) and becomes something of critique of modern America conservatives, without ever saying so.

She would lose my interest sometimes, although some fault could go to the rapid pace of the reader, which, when I was less interested, sounded relentless. But when I was in the right frame of mind, these essays were all terrific. Highlights for me were here essays on Dickens in America, on Edgar Allen Poe's effort to find a market, and most of all, on Thomas Paine.

Thomas Paine arrived in the Americas destitute, nearly dead from sickness, with a piece of paper from from Benjamin Franklin recommending him. That would be enough to revive him. He wrote Common Sense, a key work of inspiration for the American revolt. Then, in Valley Forge, he wrote the *American Crisis*, which include his most famous line, "*These are the times that try men's souls.*" More than anything else, Paine was devoted revolutionary, always against the power. He flowered briefly during the American Revolution, but afterward returned to England the write Rights of Man, which was instantly banned. Paine fled to France during the French Revolution, and spent the reign of terror in prison writing The Age of Reason, which included a polemic against all organized religion (although he was not atheist). The now out-there thinker who maybe belonged in another time, or maybe just bristled against any time, somehow survived his imprisonment. When he finally returned to the newly formed United States, he found he was politically untouchable. One person (Jefferson?) wrote that while many read The Age of Reason, none could admit to it. Paine is considered a founding father of the US. He lived his remaining life in obscurity in America. There were six people at his funeral.

Amanda says

An excellent collection of fascinating, just-rightly-sized essays on American origins. Compiled in 2012, I finished the last essay on inaugural addresses with a touch of sadness in the time of Trump. This too shall pass. Highly recommended!

Ken says

The Story of America consists of 20 essays Jill Lepore wrote for *The New Yorker*. If you like history, you'll find it interesting, if surface-skimming, material. That is, Lepore is not diving in deep here, she's making her point in 15 pages or so, and moving on.

Me, I bought it strictly in hopes of using some essays for school, but Lepore's writing, as a rule, is a bit above your average 8th grader's ken. That's not to say I can't use certain excerpts. I can (and will). In these dark (bright? yet to be determined?) days of the Common Core, this would count as a "complex text" that improves "background knowledge." Oh, the shivers buzzwords give me! It's what's known as a twofer!

Looking back without looking, the essay that struck me the most was the one on Thomas Paine. I knew him as the man who wrote *Common Sense*, but never realized just how reviled he was, even by fellow patriots like Jefferson and Adams. Paine did himself in by writing more books and getting involved with the French Revolution. Hoo-boy. Those are some *mauvais* guys to hang out with. Not surprisingly, Paine wound up in a prison. But at least he got out.

His biggest problems were England (gee, I wonder why?) and Christians (that's a bigger problem than any Union Jack can muster). An atheist, Paine came out swinging about God and paid the price. On his deathbed he was given a last chance to repent. He used his remaining strength to spit on such common sense. Now *that's* going in style.

Other essays deal with Capt. John Smith's truth-telling problems, the Pilgrims' historians, Ben Franklin's knack for almanacs, the Constitution, debtors' prisons, Noah Webster and the American Dictionary, Dickens in America (not good, not good), Edgar Allan "Woe Is Me" Poe-man, anti-slavery books, Kit Carson, the no-longer-read Longfellow (short on fans these days), and inaugural addresses. An eclectic list, if ever I saw one.

The trouble I have with any anthology is lack of momentum. The end of each essay means another speed bump. Perhaps fiction, with its penchant for "cliff hangers" hanging at the ends of chapters, has spoiled me. That said, the writing is smart, the topics are interesting, and the passing of time respectable, if not awe-inspiring. In short, your typical, no-brainer 4.

Peter Mcloughlin says

This collection of essays by historian Jill Lepore contains some interesting odds and ends of American history. It is fun for history buffs and the writing is good. Anyone who likes a good essay and is interested in American history will get some enjoyment from this book.

Alexandra says

This is probably one of the most well-written books I have ever read. I just enjoyed the way the author wrote. Even if you don't care much for history, you'll appreciate the writing style. The writing is what really earned the 4 stars.

The information given in the book was interesting. I found that I already knew a lot of it. But there were some small facts that I didn't know, which I really enjoyed.

Edward Sullivan says

A great collection of essays previously published in The New Yorker in which Lepore assesses how American history has been told by historians, literary figures, and others. Lepore is as masterful a writer and storyteller as she is a historian. Lively, funny, thoughtful, and provocative, a genuine pleasure to read.

Gillian Allen says

I enjoyed the first few chapters of this, but abandoned it because it's not something I'm that interested in right now. Each chapter is really an essay from The New Yorker, and they're all about different topics in American History. The writing is entertaining, but I didn't feel the need to continue.

Kelly says

This was by no means an easy read, but it was immensely satisfying. Each essay revealed something I didn't know or straightened out some misconception I picked up in high school history.

My favorite quote:
"Thomas Paine is, at best, a lesser Founder. In the comic-book version of history that serves as our national heritage, where the Founding Fathers are like the Hanna-Barbera Super Friends, Paine is Aquaman to Washington’s Superman and Jefferson’s Batman; we never find out how he got his superpowers, and he only shows up when they need someone who can swim."

Robert says

A collection of short essays by one of our best 'storytelling' historians, this work is a joy to read. All but one essay appeared in The New Yorker; the exception, the Longfellow, appeared in The American Scholar. Although the author is a Harvard history professor, these essays are not 'academic history'. Although they embody solid scholarship and fresh insights, they are best characterized as 'historical stories'. Are written in a style so entertaining that it rivals the best fiction in its appeal to the general reader.

One way the author achieves this transformation of dry history into memorable tales is by using a succinct biography of an individual to incarnate a particular historical event or practice. Thereby she makes that history understandable, real, memorable. For example, the life of John Pintard, a wealthy New York businessman who suffered a major financial reverse, is used to illustrate the evolution of bankruptcy law in the early republic, to explain why the law was adopted and to whom it applied, and because the reader is

made to care about Pintard, this little known aspect of early economic legislation is brilliantly elucidated, is made unforgettable. Similarly the life of George Kyle is used to 'bring to life' the need for and the adoption of the secret ballot in American elections - no reader is likely to forget his death defying struggle to reach his Baltimore polling place.

The author has a real talent for writing these succinct biographies. That of Noah Webster transforms a name connoting only a 'word book' into a real flesh and blood man, into an individual fully present to the reader. Her short biography of Edgar Allan Poe brings order, believability, to a tragic life that has been overly mythologized, made into a grotesque fantasy, even by Poe himself. And some of the biographies are just fun - as is the one of Chang Apana,the actual Hawaiian detective who inspired Biggers to create the movie/detective story character of Charlie Chan.

A unifying tread running through most of these essays is the critical analysis of the creation of history, as it is done both in formal works written by professionals as well as in the narratives formed by common people in shaping their opinion on what it means to be an American, in creating their own national self-understanding, their own self-image. The author delights in exploding some of the 'taken for granted' myths - enjoys replacing or deepening the legendary understanding with the actual complexity of the historical record. Does this not in a debunking, 'push the statue off its pedestral' spirit, but, rather, does so by revealing the hero to be 'like us', highlighting his basic humanity, connecting his life to that of the reader.

A guilty pleasure of this book is her ruthlessness in pointing out the errors of other historians, scholarly and popular. Is ruthless both in exposing their 'repressions' of unpleasant facts and in highlighting their 'creative' interpolations. One fine example of the latter is her calling attention to the full psychological profile of George Washington's mother, Mary, given in Ron Chernow's biography of Washington - a profile which details at some length the influence that this 'pious', headstrong', 'feisty' woman had on George's character, even though, despite the many inferences Chernow draws, there are only two verifiable facts known about the woman: that she 'was little polished by education'; and that she was 'remarkable for taking good care of her ducks and chickens'.

Probably the best essay (at least, my favorite) is her defense of Longfellow. By analyzing 'Paul Revere's Ride' and placing it in its historical context, she reveals the poem's hidden depth - and counters the current, condescending judgment that Longfellow is no more than a 'poet for children' -that he is not to be taken seriously because his work is too accessible, too much fun to read. This reassessment of Longfellow is long overdue. But it is not surprising that it comes from an author who writes accessible history, history that is fun to read.

Mike says

My history teacher mantra, which I repeat often to my students' amusement, is "History is not just a bunch of stuff that happened… it's the stories we tell ourselves about what happened." In Jill Lepore, I have found a kindred spirit. In the essays that comprise "The Story of America", Lepore explores many of the stories that make up Americans' knowledge of our history. Along the way, she fills in many gaps and emends many misconceptions- but never in a sophomoric "Lies My Teacher Told Me" fashion.
I didn't spot the word "historiography" in Lepore's introduction (Lepore certainly could have used it but an editor would have certainly informed her that a single appearance of that word in a book will reduce sales by

at least 80%- despite the fact that, for my money, that's where all the action is.) Nonetheless, the introduction alone, at least, should be required reading for anyone curious about the development of American history- that is, history in the sense I define it above. She concludes her introduction with "I have tried to cherish ideas worth cherishing, and to question ideas that need questioning. I have tried to do that here, by studying stories, and by telling them." This should be adopted as a mission statement by any historian seeking publication.

In the essays that follow, Lepore ranges widely over American history, from the settlement of Jamestown to the twentieth century. Her chronological scope is expansive, and her topics varied- bankruptcy, lexicography, murder, and electioneering among them. She also provides fascinating biographical vignettes of historical figures, including some vaunted "founding fathers" and literary luminaries. Lepore takes a broad perspective in each essay, carefully weaving together strands of history, historical memory, popular culture, and literacy into a tapestry much richer and more detailed than any survey text, or any but the most erudite monograph, could ever accomplish.

Lepore is a crackerjack scholar and a first-rate wordsmith, and she's also extremely funny. She deserves some sort of recognition for the most amusing use of the word "pantaloons" by an academic historian- she sums up some historians' assessments of John Smith as having "a liar-liar-pantaloons on fire quality." And adds "As it happens, and for the record, they were: the injury that sent Smith back to England was a severe burn he sustained to his thighs and groin when his gunpowder bag , lying in his lap, caught the spark of a tobacco pipe and exploded."

Any student of American history, or anyone with a casual interest in our past, will be greatly edified by Lepore's work. I cannot recommend it highly enough.

One negative note, however: I think Lepore missed an important opportunity with the title. A casual shopper, glancing at the title on the shelf or on display, might assume that "The Story of America" is another narrative work of historical synthesis- exactly the type of book that we don't need any more of. A better choice, perhaps, would have been "The STORIES of America"- alerting the reader that there is much more between those covers than they might expect.

Jeremy says

Don't tell my wife: I am in love with Jill Lepore. I have been since I read her debut book, The Name of War, during my senior year of college back in 2003.

Since then I have feasted upon her New Yorker essays whenever I stumbled on them. This book, which assembles many of those essays, is a beautiful thing to behold: a brilliant mind at play—and a historian who can write with grace. She collapses space and time to explain how we Americans came to be who we are, or try to be, or fail to be.

Essay after essay, I found myself astonished by her research and storytelling powers. The essay on Benjamin Franklin, which peels back the layers of lazy stereotype surrounding his name to reveal a fuller (and endlessly interesting) man, is a highlight, as is the Dickens in America essay. There are just 2 or 3 3 pieces I wasn't dazzled by.

Simply put, she can connect American dots—from John Smith to Andrew jackson and onward—like no one else alive. She even makes Longfellow interesting, which is a true feat.

Long live Jill Lepore. Aside from the New Yorker, this is the best introduction to her work.

Loni says

Meh. Jill Lepore is a Harvard College Professor, and chair of Harvard's History and Literature Program. She is also a staff writer at The New Yorker. Who am I to argue with that? Even so I found her writing to be “gotcha” and “I bet no one else ever told you this” gimmicky. She examines historical documents to reinterpret them. She insists we only use reliable sources and then she relates “facts” that aren’t verified. For example, we don’t know the true circumstances behind James Callender’s drowning contrary to her breathless insistence that she does. Therefore, her statement: “History is not just a bunch of stuff that happened… it’s the stories we tell ourselves about what happened” seems ironic.

In my opinion, the best part of this book was her suggestion that Longfellow’s” The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere” was actually about abolition was fantastic. I am going to research that more closely.

Richard Subber says

There were “westerns” before John Wayne put his mark on them.

The men in blue and gray in the Civil War—the ones who could read, and the ones who had buddies who could read—were avid fans of the dime novel.

New printing technologies in 1860 made it possible to churn out an endless succession of the cheap (10 cents, hence “dime novel”) so-called “blood-and-thunder” stories, often about heroes of the American West like Kit Carson.

These dime novels in the mid-19th century were the “westerns” before Hollywood invented the movie genre of the same name in the early 20th century.

The flood of cheap books was unleashed by improvements in the steam printing press and stereotype plates, the cast metal plates that used a reversed image of a full page on the press. The resulting increase in productivity and cost reduction permitted publishers to do huge press runs of the formula “western” novels that were written by assembly lines of writers. Some of the more respectable authors cranked out a new book every three months. Some of the hacks claimed to be able to produce a brand new novel in 24 hours. As you might guess, originality and quality weren’t the principal standards of excellence.

Jill Lepore, in The Story of America: Essays on Origins, notes: “Blood-and-thunders were ‘sent to the army in the field by cords, like unsawed firewood,’ one contemporary reported. After the war, dime novel westerns cultivated a vast, largely Eastern, and altogether male audience: they were the first mass market fiction sold to men and boys.”(1)

Dime novel readers who weren’t Kit Carson (1809-1868) fans must have been a rare breed. Between 1860 and 1900, the American frontiersman was the hero of more than seventy of the popular books.

(1) Jill Lepore, The Story of America: Essays on Origins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012),

212, 217.

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Maire says

I've loved any New Yorker essay that I've read by Lepore, so I suppose I picked up this book with a bit of a bias. However, these essays actually surpassed my expectations. They are so fun to read because each essay looks deeply at a small little part of American history (one of my favorites was about how the physical act of casting a vote changed throughout history). In addition to her ability to find interesting stories to tell, Lepore is also an amazing writer--I loved her wit, her touch of snark, and her "tell it to ya straight" style. I also really liked how she didn't let any of the founding fathers off easily for their racism and sexism. Highly recommended.

John says

I first encountered Jill Lepore in the New Yorker. She regularly writes there and most if not all of the essays in this book are from that magazine.

The common thread is people and their place in American history. She is a witty and engaging writer, and the essays present a unique look at people. The essays are not long, are peppered with humor, and tend to focus on things we may not have known about various personalities. The essays on Samuel Eliot Morrison, Thomas Paine, and Sally Hemings are particular standouts in a collection that is entertaining and informative.
