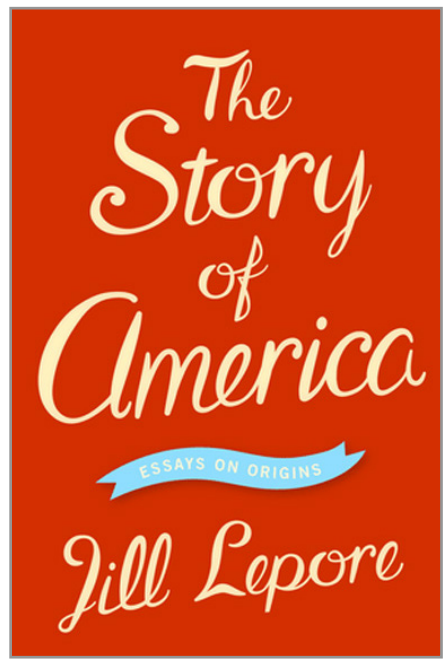
*History for "We the People"*

# THE STORY OF AMERICA:

## ESSAYS ON ORIGINS

REVIEWED BY **BROOKE ALLEN**




By Jill Lepore
Princeton Univ. Press
416 pp. $27.95

THE ERA WHEN SERIOUS HISTORIANS ASpired to write works that also qualified as literature are long, long gone. During the Enlightenment, David Hume and Edward Gibbon wrote prose as grand as any in our language, and brought sophisticated literary techniques to the craft of history writing. Their tradition was carried on by the great historians of the 19th century: Thomas Babington Macaulay, Hippolyte Taine, Francis Parkman, Alexis de Tocqueville, George Bancroft, Jacob Burckhardt, and Thomas Carlyle all composed their epics with an eye to the literary immortality they eventually achieved. Exciting, mellifluous narrative was, to them, no insignificant part of the historian's craft, and the result is that while many of their ideas are no longer groundbreaking, we continue to read them for their flair, their masterful syntax, and most of all their big-picture perspective.

The 20th century saw a narrowing of focus, an increased specialization and professionalization. Historians, like social scientists, joined university faculties and began to write more for their peers than for the general reader, and—again like social scientists, not to mention literary scholars—to develop an opaque jargon that might almost have been designed to repulse the non-specialist. "Popular" history was often left to nonacademic historians, whose work was enjoyed by readers but looked at askance by the professionals—viz. the academy's snide disparagement of the biographer David McCullough, whose work has provided pleasure and edification to millions.

But there continue to be a few academic historians who write for a broad public, and one of the most visible is

Jill Lepore, the Harvard historian who is also a staff writer for *The New Yorker*. Tellingly, Lepore's first ambition was to be a writer rather than a scholar, and she did an undergraduate major in English literature before going on for a PhD in American studies at Yale. Throughout her career, she has adhered to the storytelling standards of an earlier era: Her historical works have garnered numerous mainstream honors (including a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize), and she contributes frequently to widely read periodicals apart from *The New Yorker*. She has even written (along with fellow scholar Jane Kamensky) a frothy romantic novel set in 1770s Boston.

*The Story of America* is a new collection of Lepore's essays, almost all of which initially appeared in *The New Yorker*. As with so many essay collections, a rather awkward attempt has been made to corral the disparate pieces under an overarching theme, in this case that of "American origins"—to show, as the jacket blurb informs us, "how American democracy is bound up with the history of print." Not all the pieces quite fit the mold (there are essays, for instance, on Edgar Allan Poe, Charlie Chan, and Clarence Darrow that have quite different things to say), but there are enough of them to make a satisfactory whole, from a discussion of John Smith's famously unreliable account of the founding of Jamestown to a disquisition on the history of the presidential inaugural address, culminating with that of Barack Obama. According to Lepore's own description, "The essays in this book concern documents—things like travel narratives, the Constitution, ballots, the inaugural address, the presidential biography, the campaign biography, the IOU, and the dime novel. Historical inquiry relies on standards of evidence because documents aren't to be trusted." Neither, she implies, are grand narratives:

> To say that the United States is a story is not to say that it is fiction; it is, instead, to suggest that it follows certain narrative conventions. All nations are places, but they are also acts of imagination. Who has a part in a nation's story, like who can become a citizen and who has a right to vote, isn't foreordained, or even stable. The story's plot, like the nation's borders and the nature of its electorate, is always shifting. Laws are passed and wars are fought to keep some people in and others out. Who tells the story, like who writes the laws and who wages the wars, is always part of that struggle.

A number of the essays in this collection illustrate this contention in sometimes startling ways. It's important for us to remember, in this era of vocal constitutional "originalists," that the Founders never foresaw many things we now consider inevitable—such as universal suffrage, to take an obvious example. After all, as Lepore reminds us, the now-hallowed word "democracy" was actually considered a slur until the advent of Andrew Jackson in the 1820s, and democracy's rise "was neither inevitable nor swift. It countered prevailing political philosophy. If democracy is rule by the people and if the people are, as Federalists like John Adams believed, 'the common Herd of Mankind'—the phrase was a commonplace—then democracy is the government of the worst, the tyranny of the idle, the ignorant, the ill informed." For a century and a half, it has been the done thing to deride this theory as reactionary and to poke fun at Adams as a relic of monarchism. From the vantage point of the 21st century, however, as we observe the fruits of 200 years of Jacksonian democracy in both our elected government and our national discourse, one is tempted to give Adams credit for a little more sense on the subject than he normally gets.

All evidence to the contrary, we continue to believe, deep in our hearts, that the Founders' "We the People" meant *all* the people, not just the propertied white men. We also seem to believe that the act of voting was always an inalienable right, justly administered—hence our righteous outrage when innovations such as the Diebold voting machine or, currently, the South Carolina Voter ID law are introduced. Lepore's fascinating essay "Rock, Paper, Scissors" puts the voting booth into historical perspective, demonstrating that we don't know nearly as much as we think we do about our political institutions. In the early years of the Republic, voters had to write their own ballots, and the potential for manipulation, intimidation, and falsification was enormous:

> Early paper voting was, to say the least, a hassle. You had to bring your own ballot, a scrap of paper. Then you had to (a) remember and (b) know how to spell the names and titles of every candidate and office. If "John H. Jones" was standing for election, and you wrote "John Jones," your vote would be thrown out. (If you doubt how difficult this is, try it. I disenfranchise myself with "comptroller.") . . . . As suffrage expanded—by the time Andrew

> Jackson was elected president in 1828, nearly all white men could vote—scrap-voting had become more or less a travesty, not least because the newest members of the electorate, poor men and immigrants, were the least likely to know how to write.

A travesty, yes, but the method by which it was eventually improved turned out to be a mixed blessing at best. Political parties stepped into the breach by printing ballots in partisan newspapers (*all* early American newspapers were openly partisan) that came to be called "party tickets," and listed the entire slate of candidates for their favored party. For the voter, there was no need to know how to write—or to read, for that matter. This innovation facilitated the rise of the major parties (thus limiting voters' choices) and led to "massive fraud, corruption, and intimidation." (The development of the party system was another eventuality the Founders did not plan for, and would not have liked; in fact, in his Farewell Address, George Washington warned that "the alternate domination of one faction over another, sharpened by the spirit of revenge, natural to party dissension, which in different ages and countries has perpetrated the most horrid enormities, is itself a frightful despotism.") It was not until the 1890s that America adopted the so-called Australian ballot, "with its radical provision that governments should provide ballots."


**Thomas Nast's political cartoons helped bring down the New York City political machine of William "Boss" Tweed in the 1870s. Reformers in many American cities were outraged by the Boss's blatant manipulation of voting.** CORBIS

It's clear that many aspects of our political culture that we look on as sacrosanct and traditional are in reality nothing of the sort, and Lepore is at her most provocative when she takes these on. In another excellent essay, "To Wit," she discusses the history of the presidential inaugural address, a custom that, like so many in our political culture, developed almost accidentally. There is no mention of such an address in the Constitution, which calls only for an oath of affirmation; Washington inadvertently set a precedent when he addressed Congress after being sworn in at Federal Hall. His address was characteristically brief and to the point, but subsequent presidents saw the inauguration as a forum for populist oratory and developed the address accordingly: The worst was William Henry Harrison, whose speech went on for more than two hours and brought on the pneumonia that would send him to the grave a month later. Length did not make for quality, as James Garfield noted in his diary: "I have half a mind to make none. Those of the past, except Lincoln's, are dreary reading." Arthur Schlesinger Jr., nearly a century later, thought much the same thing: "The platitude quotient tends to be high, the rhetoric stately and self-serving, the ritual obsessive, and the surprises few."

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Lepore's strength as a popular historian is her ability to make her target audience—informed but non-specialist readers—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. A number of these essays are surprising and enlightening; invariably, they are also too short and simplistic. But this is because they are "popular" works, tailored to the attention span of the *New Yorker* reader. We should be grateful that they are also tailored to the *New Yorker*'s standards of literacy and elegance. Let's hear it for popular history! ■

**BROOKE ALLEN** is the author of several books, including *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (2006). She teaches literature at Bennington College.