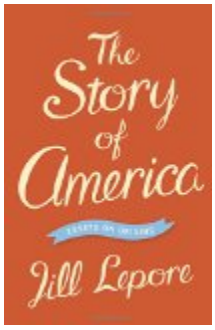
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jill Lepore. *The Story of America: Essays on Origins.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012. 420 S. ISBN 978-0-691-15399-5.



Reviewed by James Gilbert
Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (January, 2013)

J. Lepore: The Story of America

Jill Lepore's collection of short essays (all but one published previously in the "New Yorker Magazine") about the American character, or better, characters in America contains sketches of individuals as odd and diverse as Charlie Chan (the fictional Chinese detective), President James Garfield, Clarence Darrow, the lawyer, and George Washington. While the subtitle of the book promises "an essay on origins," this phrase scarcely defines the scope of the book or its intention. Nor, she asserts at one point, does the book actually tell the story of America as her title suggests. There are, to be sure, essays on Captain John Smith, the Pilgrims, Franklin, Jefferson, and Tom Paine, and John Adams makes frequent appearances in her discussions of the early centuries of American history, but this is not really a book about origins. It ranges much more widely than colonial history or the events of revolution. Instead the essays are set pieces that pick out an element of American history, or some oddity that offers a degree of enlightenment about the whole.

In her introduction, Lepore recalls Richard Hofstadter's landmark work, "The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It." Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition and the Men Who Made It, New York 1948. This too, she reminds us, was a book of stories. But it is not really a model for her work. Hofstadter had a distinct and complicated argument to make, whereas this book, if it has an argument at all, is devoted to the proposition, as she puts it, that "American history is inseparable from the study of American literature." So we are called upon to judge the quality of her story-telling itself rather than the original ideas or new interpretations that might be discovered.

The tone of these pieces is conversational and, although there are abundant footnotes (most from secondary sources) the tone is one of amused curiosity. There is also a kind of uniformity of execution that results in ironic or abrupt endings that do not make a point so much as they finish the story with a rhetorical flourish. Most of the essays highlight one or two particular aspects of her subjects: Benjamin Franklin's writings such as the "Autobiography" and "The Way to Wealth," or Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" Benjamin Franklin, The Private Life of the Late Benjamin Franklin, London 1793; Benjamin Franklin, The Way to Wealth (1758), Carlisle 1986; Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "Paul Revere's Ride," in: Atlantic Monthly Magazine (Jan. 1861), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1861/01/paul-revere-s-ride/308349/> (04.01.2013). , the much memorized and frequently lampooned mid-19th century poem. About such works, she offers some fascinating insights, as well as, for example, about ill-fated President James Garfield's unsuccessful struggle to write a Presidential inaugural address that could match the profound but simple cadences of his predecessor, Abraham Lincoln. Some of the other essays seem less successful: on Kit Carson and Edgar Allan Poe and Clarence Darrow. But most of them are appealing, if only because of the lesser known subjects: Captain John Smith and Charlie Chan, for example. In the end these are all stories, and as any writer of fiction or biography will tell you, most stories are likely to be about an indi-

vidual and written in the singular. History just provides the stage, the setting, and the backdrop. And the distinctive mark of most literature—with its capacity to breathe life into the singular experience—can provoke the reader to use his or her imagination to draw larger conclusions. One's reaction to this book will probably be, like mine, to single out essays that appeal and those that don't.

The appropriate audience for these stories will surely be the literate citizen, if not the student of history or American Studies. But that, of course, is a vast and important group. 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. Not every book on one's shelf need be a monograph and sometimes the pleasure of reading itself is justification enough. In fact, in her introduction, she makes a plea for this type of writing, by citing some of the great early popular historians and founders of American Studies, whose writings were once widely distributed and intended for a larger audience. If her book succeeds in bringing this audience back to history then, who can object?

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/

Citation: James Gilbert. Review of Lepore, Jill, *The Story of America: Essays on Origins.* H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38143

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.