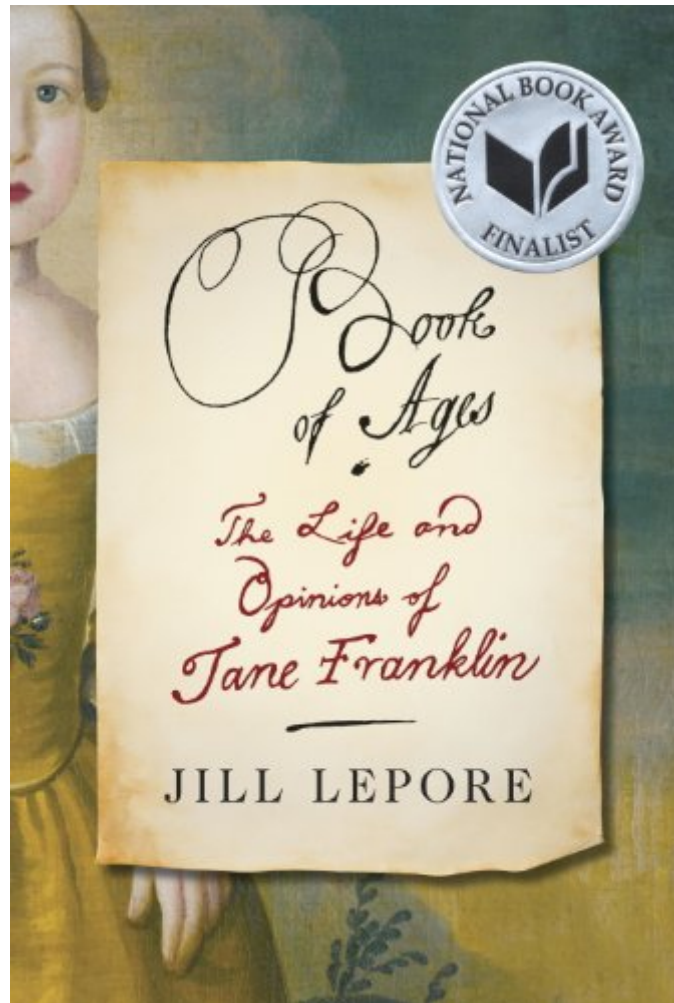


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Book Of Ages: The Life And Opinions Of Jane Franklin



Synopsis

National Book Award Finalist From one of our most accomplished and widely admired historians, a revelatory portrait of Benjamin Franklin's youngest sister and a history of history itself. Like her brother, Jane Franklin was a passionate reader, a gifted writer, and an astonishingly shrewd political commentator. Unlike him, she was a mother of twelve. Benjamin Franklin, who wrote more letters to his sister than he wrote to anyone else, was the original American self-made man; his sister spent her life caring for her children. They left very different traces behind. Making use of an amazing cache of little-studied material, including documents, objects, and portraits only just discovered, Jill Lepore brings Jane Franklin to life in a way that illuminates not only this one woman but an entire world—a world usually lost to history. Lepore's life of Jane Franklin, with its strikingly original vantage on her remarkable brother, is at once a wholly different account of the founding of the United States and one of the great untold stories of American history and letters: a life unknown. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

This remarkable history links the great Benjamin Franklin to his little-known younger sister, Jane

Franklin Mecom, and in doing so explores the meaning and scope of history itself. The brother and sister, one of whom is justly celebrated for statecraft, diplomacy, and science; the other who toiled in obscurity raising (and mostly losing) children, grand-children and great-grand-children, maintained a remarkable camaraderie throughout their lives. Drawing on the few surviving letters of Jane (and the many of Benjamin), the author attempts to reconstruct the life of this spirited and intelligent woman who has been so overshadowed by her brother. The book is not exactly a biography of Jane Mecom; in fact it's hard to classify. It is also a history of the colonial era in America, the American revolution, the culture and way of life in those times, the hardships experienced by most people, the few opportunities for women to express themselves, their limited education, the poor state of medicine in those days, the outrageous infant mortality, and the sad fate of the mentally ill. And, the author says, that's what history is really about--people who were more celebrated in fiction than in what was thought of as history. All that, rather than the names, dates, battles, and accomplishments of a few giants. Author Jill Lepore has written a work of vast scholarship, drawing on a range of sources, that is also interesting, entertaining, and endearing. The characters come vividly to life, with all their struggles and suffering; and the emerging nation, the United States, as well. In fact author Lepore has created an amazing work from the scant historical traces of her subject, Jane.

Most know of Benjamin Franklin, American entrepreneur, inventor, printer, writer, patriot and statesman. In the aftermath of the American Revolution, when he served as the American Ambassador to France, he became international famous, with his picture appearing on many every day articles. Few know of his sister Jane, who leads a ordinary life in Franklin's hometown of Boston - marrying, suffering through a life burdened by debt, raising and losing children. But in this delightful book, the author Jill Lepore creates a lively parallel biography of the two siblings, who correspond with one another until Franklin's death, using their letters as the unifying element. In doing so, the author paints a picture of the specifics of each person, as well as how the differences in the opportunities for men and woman shaped the lives of these people. This is done both through the thoughts of each, and by bringing in other contemporary sources. However this is not a harangue about "how women were put down"; it is described through the writings of real people of the period, and feels more like a reporting on the period. I found their stories fascinating - though I am quite familiar with Ben Franklin, and the time period, I learned many new things, and found this a wonderful view into the life of a relatively ordinary woman of the period. Jane is less educated than her brother, and often apologizes for her spelling and writing, but is a woman with a love of thought, though for many of her child bearing years, she has no money or time to invest in books or learning.

Ben Franklin leaves behind religion, while it remains an important part of Jane's life - this becomes a point of contention at times.

I took a different tactic in reading this book that may well have shaped the review you are about to read, so it is worth mentioning. A speaker in a TED conference talked about how reading had shaped her life and one of the things she had done was read books in tandem. She chose the pairs based on either subject or a time period so she would experience a story woven from two perspectives instead of one; a kind of stereo effect. Given that I had a biography of Benjamin Franklin (by Walter Isaacson) waiting to be read, to me this book was a perfect companion book. Having read several biographies about him prior, I knew that he was a man of many faces. This would give him the additional face of brother. I kept the books in synch by the years mentioned in each. First I have to say, being born a man in that timeframe was a distinct advantage. A woman was more like a beast of burden or a living accessory. Not only what she could do was limited, but the skill sets she was "allowed to have" were too. She could be taught to read, but writing was a man's exercise, unless it benefitted her husband. Then and only then should she be taught to write. The fact that Jane Franklin could write and it was not an occupational thing had much to do with her brother flaunting this custom. This did not make him all warm and fuzzy when it came to his own wife and child however. They were very much encouraged to toe the line and fit into societal norms. Funny how that is. In this day and age, women were all about the homefront, regardless of their interests and families were big. For a woman, this meant in her fertile years, she was most always pregnant. Jane Franklin's Book of Ages, listed one birth after another. However, many children were lost at very young ages.

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