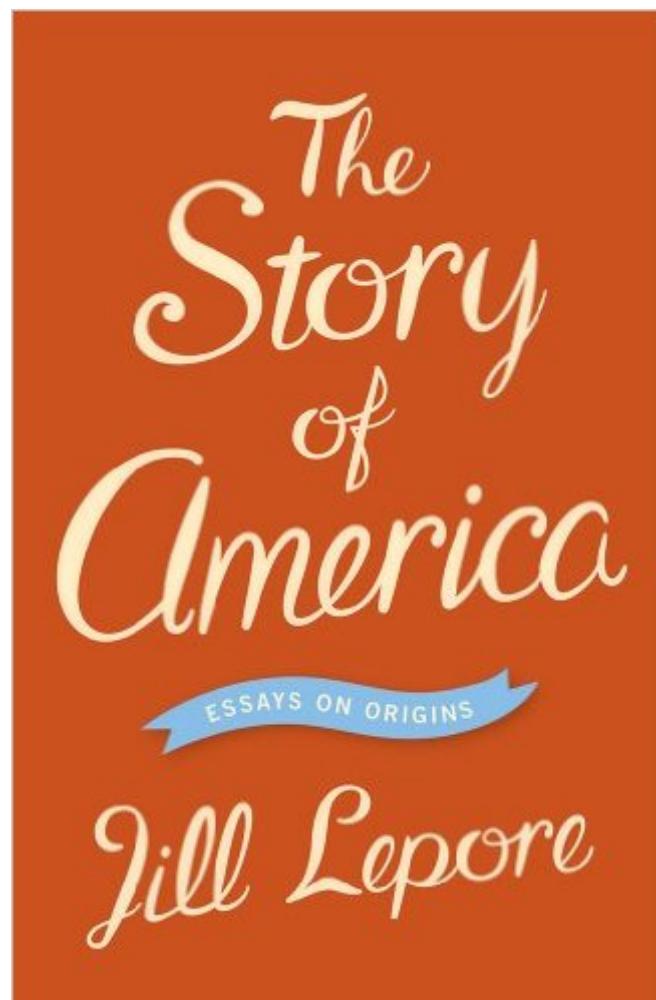


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# The Story Of America: Essays On Origins



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a marvelous, scholarly and completely accessible tour of American history, perceived via assorted documents, ideas and personalities. Topics, to name a few, include debtors prisons, Noah Webster, Inaugural speeches, biographies of George Washington and Charles Dickens' 1843 visit to America. The chapters are written with charm, authority and brio. The extensive endnotes are an added bonus, and every page of the book is fun to read.

What a delight to read! The book is worth every penny I paid. In fact, after buying the Kindle edition, I purchased a second, hard copy as a gift for a friend. I am an admirer of Lepore's scholarship and writing anyway--found her book on King Philip's War enormously useful as a teacher and scholar. These essays are less academic. They're quicker and lighter but have just enough historical heft to leave a thinking reader with something to muse on.

This book should be required reading in secondary and high school history classes. It gives a human perspective to our nation's historical turning points. The reader can understand the very human motives and reasons and blunders that are treated so dryly and one-dimensionally in the ordinary history textbooks.

Lepore's book was delightful, and after reading it in my Kindle I bought a hard copy to give my teen-age granddaughter because it is not like the boring surveys of American history one gets in high school. It is a set of interesting stories that might get her into the larger subject. Some pieces are a bit wandering, but they usually made me want to read more on that period or incident.

A delightful series of essays about the various ways we have written about and interpret our origins as a nation. I think she illustrates by means of a series of essays about significant writings in our history, and not always those one would expect, that we are what we have created from the literary imaginations of our people striving to bring the ideals of democracy, freedom, justice, and equality before the law to fruition in a rapidly changing world and a nation of changing political and social values. A very engaging study of how we have perceived ourselves and how those perceptions have passed into the public consciousness. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in American history.

This thoroughly enjoyable book is a collection of essays published previously in *New Yorker* magazine. It's a jumble of subjects that Lepore perhaps bumped into while professing at Harvard, then turned into articles for popular consumption in a venerable magazine. Her subjects vary widely: Edgar Allan Poe, the history of voting, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, debtor's prisons, Kit Carson, presentation of the U.S. in school plays, and others. Lepore did research on all of them and has her subjects in hand. She writes popular history drolly with a weakness for descriptive metaphors--both her own and others'. For example: In the pantheon of American "superhero" Founding Fathers, she

writes, Tom Paine is a lesser demigod, made use of only occasionally, like Aquaman. Another example: she quotes farmer/ex-Revolutionary soldier William Manning in the 1790s: "It [the Constitution] was made like a Fiddle, with but few Strings, but so that the ruling Majority could play any tune upon it they please." Her book is surprisingly free of the political bias seemingly a prerequisite for a person who 1) has a Ph.D. in American Studies, and 2) chairs the history department at Harvard. I scrutinize history books assiduously, just waiting for political nonsense to appear and ruin them so I can grind my teeth. I had nary an objection to Lepore's book. Want to read a well written, entertaining collection of informative historical essays? Here is one worth the price.

I purchased this as a Christmas gift for my high school granddaughter. She's a history buff. She has already read most of this book in the few days since she received it, and she tells me that she loves it. What caught my attention when selecting this book was the fact that it's a series of essays. So if you are the type of reader who doesn't want to get bogged down in a history book with long chapters and tons of footnotes, this may be a book for you.

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