

The New York Review of Books

The Other Franklin

[Susan Dunn](#)

[Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin](#)

by Jill Lepore

Knopf, 442 pp., \$27.95



Tate, London/Art Resource

A scene from Samuel Richardson's novel *Pamela*, in which Mr. B. comes upon Pamela writing; painting by Joseph Highmore, 1744. Benjamin Franklin printed an edition of *Pamela* in 1742, and Jill Lepore writes that it is likely he gave a copy to his sister Jane.

"I blame myself for not sooner desiring you to lay in your Winter's Wood," Benjamin Franklin apologized to his seventy-five-year-old sister Jane in the fall of 1787. He was concerned that she might not have enough firewood to get through the rough New England winter. "But I have been so busy," he explained. It was the first letter he had time to write after the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia.

In her eloquent *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*, Jill Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard and a staff writer for *The New Yorker*, imaginatively weaves together the lives of Benjamin Franklin and his favorite sister Jane, the youngest of the family's ten children—

though Lepore keeps a far closer focus on Jane. Benjamin, she tells us, always worried about his sister. “I sometimes suspect that you may be too unwilling to acquaint me with any of your Difficulties,” he wrote to her in December 1787. She quickly reassured him. “I do indeed Live comfortable,” she replied:

I have a good clean house to Live in my Granddaughter constantly to atend me to do whatever I desier in my own way & in my own time...we live frugaly Bake all our own Bread...& if a Friend sitts and chats a litle in the Evening we Eate our Hasty Puding (our comon super) after they are gone.

And she shared with her brother her satisfaction at decorating the new house he had given her in the North End of Boston. “I am now Pritily settled have had two Rooms New Papered an Painted.”

Brother and sister met infrequently over the years. Benjamin ran away from home in 1723 when he was seventeen; he became a printer, philosopher, scientist, and diplomat in London and Paris and a Founding Father of the United States. He signed the Declaration of Independence, the Treaty of Paris that ended the American Revolution, and the Constitution. Jane Franklin married Edward Mecom, a poor saddler, in 1727 when she was fifteen years old. He was “either a bad man or a mad man,” Lepore judges, noting that none of their children ever named a child for him. He fell into debt, and Jane grew accustomed to sheriffs turning up at their door, demanding payment of bills. Did he wind up in debtors’ prison? “Very likely,” Lepore surmises.

Jane gave birth to twelve children—two of whom went mad—and buried eleven of them. As if writing a poem in prose, Lepore evokes the recurrent pattern of twenty years of childbearing:

Her nights were unquiet. Her husband reached for her. Her belly swelled, and emptied, and swelled again. Her breasts filled, and emptied, and filled again. Her children waked, first one, and then another, tumbling together, like a litter. She must have had very little sleep.

It is a discouraging picture of days cluttered with “rags for washing, rags for diapering, rags for catching blood.” At fifty-three, Jane became a widow, and the years after her husband’s death were scarcely less dark and troubled. She kept a boardinghouse and toiled as a seamstress. Throughout her life, she worked, overworked, and struggled.

From 1776 until 1785, Benjamin Franklin was the American minister in France, successfully securing crucial French economic and military assistance for the Revolutionary army. Plainly dressed, bespectacled, and unpowdered, he brought the spirit of the new nation to France and became the toast of Paris. “My Face is now almost as well known as that of the Moon,” he bragged to his sister. But those turbulent times brought her no such gratification.

“The Ravages of war are Horrible,” she wrote. Jane spent the war years wandering, seeking safe shelter with family and friends in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Philadelphia. “I am Grown such a Vagrant,” she sighed. After the war, always in need of money, she labored to survive—and relied on her brother’s assistance to stay afloat. In 1783 he arranged an annuity for her. “How am I by my Dear Brother Enabled to live at Ease in my old Age,” she wrote. The

following year, she forlornly referred to herself as “a Poor Useles, and wrothless worm.” Toward the end of her sad days, she did her best to make her peace with life. “It is trew I have some Trobles,” she admitted, but “when I Look Round me on all my Acquaintance I do not see won I have Reason to think Happier than I am.”

Though Lepore finds Jane on occasion “miffy” and “saucy,” Jane’s story is painfully claustrophobic; her confined life was one of frustration, intellectual deprivation, work, boredom, and loss. “Sorrows roll upon me like the waves of the sea,” Jane wrote to her brother in October 1767. “I am hardly allowed time to fetch my breath. I am broken with breach upon breach.”

Do insignificant lives on the margins of great events merit their own memorials? “Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life,” asked Virginia Woolf, “worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious?” For her part, Jill Lepore agrees with Woolf, believing that she will find value and meaning in the sad life of Jane Franklin. “I began to think that Benjamin Franklin’s sister had something to say after all, something true, something new.” She has in mind “a quiet story of a quiet life of quiet sorrow and quieter beauty.”

But is the periphery really as important as the center? Are the inarticulate people who were barely awake to the momentous times they were living in as worthy of our attention as those who shaped the institutions and landscape in which we continue to live? The answer is yes—and no. Or perhaps we can say that the recovery of a woman like Jane Franklin pertains not to the larger arc of American history, but instead to what we might call the importance of the ordinary. Rather than focusing on the astounding achievements of the “dead white males” of the Revolutionary generation and rather than aiming for the penetrating, complex portraits of its key figures drawn by Joseph Ellis or the sweeping, seminal interpretations of the founding period conceived by Gordon Wood, Lepore and many other young historians today prefer to search out those plain people who they feel have been ignored and neglected by past historians. They regard their mission as historians not to explain how and why the American Revolution happened, but rather to give voice to the voiceless.

These historians often face the challenge of a paucity of solid historical evidence. Jane Franklin’s slim “Book of Age’s”—the chronicle she kept of births and deaths in her family—has survived, but most of the letters she wrote to her brother Benjamin Franklin have not. Though they corresponded with each other their entire lives—from 1727 when Benjamin was twenty-one and Jane fourteen until he died in 1790—all of Jane’s letters from the 1720s, 1730s, and 1740s are lost. The first letter of hers to survive is from 1758, when she was forty-six years old. “The facts of Jane Franklin’s life are hard to come by,” Lepore acknowledges. And so, she tells us that she decided to make Jane’s silence the object of her investigation, rather than an obstacle to it.

Lepore compensates for the absence of historical evidence with interesting excursions into eighteenth-century commerce, publishing, literature, and law, and also with her own diverse ruminations, associations, speculations—and inventions. She confesses that, faced with the hurdle of a “miserably scant” paper trail, she “thought about writing a novel instead.” Jane Austen did. “Men have had every advantage to us in telling their own story,” commented Anne Elliot, the heroine of her novel *Persuasion*. Austen’s novels, Lepore suggests, with their female

heroines, were her answer to the conventional biographies of great men. And so, following Austen's lead, she describes her own book as "a history, a biography, but, in the spirit of the age in which Jane [Franklin] lived, it borrows from the conventions of fiction."

Infusing her study with some of the intimacy and domesticity of fiction, she tells a melancholy tale, simply, artlessly—in brief chapters and short sentences, in simple language, as if she were adopting, along with Jane's unschooled spelling, her unsophisticated, uncomplicated, unworldly perspective. She searches for the rhythms of Jane's speech, the sadness in her voice, the thwarted aspirations, the feelings of disappointment and disillusionment. And thus we enter a realm in which fiction and nonfiction blend together. "I rendered some epistolary exchanges in the form of dialogue," Lepore notes. The fusion of her voice and Jane Franklin's along with her own reflections and associations leave us with an intellectual self-portrait of Jill Lepore along with her warm and engaging biography of Jane Franklin.

Deeply sensitive to language, Lepore rightly suggests that history can be revealed not only by analyzing events but also by creatively analyzing words themselves. Etymologies are particularly helpful. The first periodical to be called a "magazine," she informs us, was *The Gentleman's Magazine* in London in 1731. Etymologically, a magazine is an arsenal, "an arsenal of knowledge.... A magazine is a library—knowledge—cut into bits, so that more people can use it. Magazines, then, contained the great and soaring promise of the age: knowledge for all."

Knowledge for all—but what about knowledge for Jane Franklin?

At the root of Jane's sunless life Lepore discerns an act of seduction. Ben Franklin had admonished his sister when she was only fourteen to "remember that modesty, as it makes the most homely virgin amiable and charming, so the want of it infallibly renders the most perfect beauty disagreeable and odious." Had he been worried that she might lose her virtue, her reputation, and thus her future? Would she listen? The following year, Jane found herself married to Edward Mecom.

Lepore conjectures that, the day Jane wed, she might have been pregnant, "which would explain why her father gave her permission to marry so unpromising a man at so unwise an age." Many eighteenth-century brides were pregnant, Lepore notes. Still, the parish register of the Mecoms' Brattle Street Church in Cambridge recorded no child born to Jane until nearly two years after her marriage. And so Lepore hypothesizes that "if she was pregnant when she married, she either miscarried or gave birth to a baby born dead. And then she might have stared out across the water in the harbor and known that she had married a wastrel for naught." Mixing genres of biography and fiction as she told us she would, Lepore creates a novelistic tableau of a heartsick young woman, pitifully recognizing that her future has evaporated.

Had Jane seen glimpses of an alternative life? In 1742, Benjamin Franklin printed an edition of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*. That famous novel recounts the story of a girl working as a servant for a wealthy family, who finds herself in dire peril of being seduced by the gentleman of the house after his mother dies. But when Mr. B. comes across the girl's letters—"Why, *Pamela*," he cries, "you write a very pretty Hand, and spell tolerably, too"—he is so impressed by her innocence and native intelligence that he marries her. Might Jane Franklin

Mecom, by now many years into an unhappy marriage that had crushed any dream of higher aspirations, have read Richardson's novel? Lepore can only guess, finding it "likely" that Franklin gave a copy to his sister. "What must she have made of it?" Lepore wonders. "She was Pamela, unimproved. She was Pamela, undone."

Another novel, published in 1787, *Charlotte: A Tale of Truth*, became a best seller. This time seduction takes a mortal course: a fifteen-year-old girl is seduced by an older man, gives birth, and dies. The author, Susanna Rowson, who would go on to found the Young Ladies' Academy of Boston, apparently knew that the antidote to seduction was education.

The words "seduction" and "education" in fact share the same Latin root: *ducere*, to lead. Seduction leads astray ("se-"), while education leads out ("e")—out of our unformed, primitive selves. Education civilizes us, prepares us for participation in society, in culture, in public service. Education opens the gates of the world. It provides the exit, the one way out.

But few men of the founding generation believed that women were capable of intellectual equality with men. Thomas Jefferson proposed universal education for girls—but only to an elementary level. It was boys—white boys, actually—who might aspire to the "natural aristocracy" of the learned and wise who would govern the new republic. In the many letters of advice and encouragement that Franklin, Washington, Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson, and other eminent members of the Revolutionary generation wrote to their sons, grandsons, and other young male relatives, they always emphasized the paramount importance of serious study.

But when writing to daughters and young female relatives, they encouraged other talents—good letter-writing, drawing, music, and especially virtue. They were more worried about the vulnerability of girls to seduction than they were interested in furthering their education. "The passions of your sex are easier raised than allayed," George Washington cautioned his step-granddaughter, Nellie Custis. "In the composition of the human frame there is a good deal of inflammable matter...[and] when the torch is put to it, *that* which is *within you* may burst into a blaze."

An exception to this line of thought was Jefferson's vice-president, the remarkable and turbulent Aaron Burr, who took a radically different tack with his daughter Theodosia. An enthusiastic member of the feminist avant-garde, Burr read Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* with "avidity," he told his wife. "Be assured that your sex has in *her* an able advocate."

"I have a thousand questions to ask, my dear Theo," Burr affectionately wrote in 1793, when Theodosia was ten. "Every hour of *your* day is interesting to *me*." He oversaw Theo's education in mathematics, the classical languages, as well as English composition. He taught her how to make elegant and effective use of language. "Never use a word which does not fully express your thoughts," he instructed. "Arrange a whole sentence in your mind before you write a word of it." When she was eighteen, he insisted that she read newspapers every day, "not to become a partisan in politics, God forbid"; but to master the "standing topics of conversation."

It was an unusual education for a young woman of her place and time; but even more unusual were the intimacy and candor that colored the correspondence between father and daughter. Not only did he share with Theo the details of his life—his drinking habits and his fondness for dining out in New York—but after his wife died in 1795, he also shared with her the details of his sexual liaisons and strategies for seducing young women, often with running accounts of the successes and setbacks of his campaigns. “On Friday I saw the inamorata,” he wrote to Theo in 1803. “My attentions were pointed, and met a cheerful return.... I am now meditating whether to take the fatal step to-morrow. I falter and hesitate, which you know is not the way. I tremble at the success I desire.”

A month after Vice President Burr killed former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton in their famous duel in New Jersey in 1804, Burr suggested to his daughter, with disturbing aplomb, that “if any male friend of yours should be dying of ennui, recommend him to engage in a duel and a courtship at the same time.” Burr performed the unusual feat of combining a superior education in arts and letters for his beloved daughter with an advanced-level course in cynicism and predatory lessons in the art of seduction.*

Theodosia would marry a wealthy South Carolina planter and politician. In the winter of 1812, she sailed from South Carolina to New York aboard the schooner *Patriot* to see her father, but the schooner disappeared at sea, its wreckage never found. Legends surrounded the death of a woman of such extraordinary promise. Who would have considered Jane Franklin Mecom so? Not Jane herself, who understood her intellectual limitations in the light of her brother’s genius.

Benjamin Franklin’s own remarkable intellect was formed by his impassioned self-education as a youth, and it blossomed in his commitment to public education and to a lively intellectual and scientific culture. In 1731 he founded the first lending library in America, the Library Company of Philadelphia. Twelve years later, he proposed establishing the American Philosophical Society, the first learned society in the colonies that would offer men interested in science and philosophy the opportunity to share their knowledge and discoveries. And in 1749, he published a plan for public education in Pennsylvania, emphasizing that “the good Education of Youth has been esteemed by wise Men in all Ages, as the surest Foundation of the Happiness both of private Families and of Common-wealths.”

Franklin’s Enlightenment was communicative; it belonged not to an intellectual elite but thrived by its dissemination to people of all classes. Still, it was a mostly male exercise—and his sister Jane served as a model of its limitations. “I have such a Poor Faculty at making Letters,” she lamented in 1786. She frequently apologized for her “Bad writing” and her “Blundering way of Expressing my self.” Her brother kindly teased her, suggesting that she was “rather fishing for Commendation. You write better, in my Opinion, than most American Women.” Miserably true, Lepore interjects.

Yet in that radiant Enlightenment spirit, voices were being raised against the oppressively inferior education that women received. In 1790, the *Massachusetts Magazine* contained an essay “On the Equality of the Sexes” by Judith Sargent Murray, which traced women’s subordinate role to the difference in the education provided to girls and boys. “What partiality!” Murray exclaimed. “The one is taught to aspire, and the other is early confined and limited. As

their years increase, the sister must be wholly domesticated, while the brother is led by the hand through all the flowery paths of science.” The uncultivated sister, Murray concluded, is forced to live out her life in a “void.”

Two years later, the *Massachusetts Magazine* published excerpts from Wollstonecraft’s radical *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. Deprived of a real education, Wollstonecraft argued, women were restricted to private life, unable to comprehend public affairs or have any interest in politics or history.

A rudimentary education had indeed imprisoned Jane Franklin in that domestic sphere. Her brother had taught her how to write, but when he left home, those lessons ended. And although the times Jane lived in were intellectually electrifying and politically transformational, her scant education and the burden of her personal hardships overwhelmed what most historians regard as the most consequential landscape in American history. It is striking how little understanding she showed of those revolutionary events and how poorly she grasped the groundbreaking Enlightenment ideas that shaped them. The Stamp Act in 1765 was eclipsed by her husband’s death that year. Did she know about Thomas Paine’s passionate call for independence ten years later? “She likely read *Common Sense*,” Lepore surmises. “Everyone read it.” Perhaps. But as late as 1781 Jane felt unqualified to pronounce an opinion “about publick Affairs,” and she admitted knowing “but litle how the world goes Except seeing a Newspaper some times which contains Enough to give Pain but litle Satisfaction while we are in Armes aganst Each other.” War and revolution drowned in Jane’s sea of desolation. “Something constantly Passes that keeps alive my sorrow,” she wrote in 1782.

Still, she remained hungry for knowledge and understanding all her life. In 1767, she asked Benjamin to send her “all the Pamphlets & Papers that have been Printed of yr writing.... Do Gratifie me.” His works opened a window into the life of the mind that had been denied to her. “I keep your books of Philosophy, and Politics,” she wrote to him in 1786, “and it seems as tho I were conversing with you.”

A very sad touch, since, despite their mutual efforts, Jane was so far from a real conversation with her brilliant, famous brother. As for his books, the Yale University Press edition of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin* has now reached the year 1783 in forty volumes, with an estimated seven more volumes to come, bringing us to his end in 1790. How rich was his mind, how fortunate he was, Jane Franklin Mecom knew. She wrote him that she was happy that he had the pleasure of his own mind and that his “Intellets...suply you with a Source of Entertainment beyond what comon mortals can Expearance.” Hers was a different fate.

1. In 1929, Mark Van Doren edited *The Correspondence of Aaron Burr and His Daughter Theodosia*. In 1938, his brother Carl Van Doren published his Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of Benjamin Franklin. Twelve years later, Carl Van Doren published *Jane Mecom, The Favorite Sister of Benjamin Franklin: Her Life here first fully narrated from their entire surviving Correspondence*.