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Book Review: Kiss This Paper

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BOOK REVIEW

Kiss This Paper

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Jill Lepore, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin* (New York: Random House, 2013).

In the 1630s or 40s, pregnant with one of her eight children, Anne Bradstreet addressed a poem to her husband Simon. In it, she grappled with the possibility that she might die in childbirth. While Bradstreet's Puritan faith demanded that she wean her affections from the things of this life (husband and children included), the poet was bereft at the prospect of leaving no earthly trace after her death. The poem asks her husband to remember her in the faces of her children: "Look to my little babes, my dear remains." For most women in the seventeenth century, the only trace they could imagine leaving behind was children. But Anne Bradstreet was also a poet. She was fortunate in having been born into a family that taught her to write and valued her literary gifts, and then married a man who appears – remarkably – to have enjoyed and encouraged her writing. And so she could claim more:

*And if chance to thine eyes shall bring
this verse,*

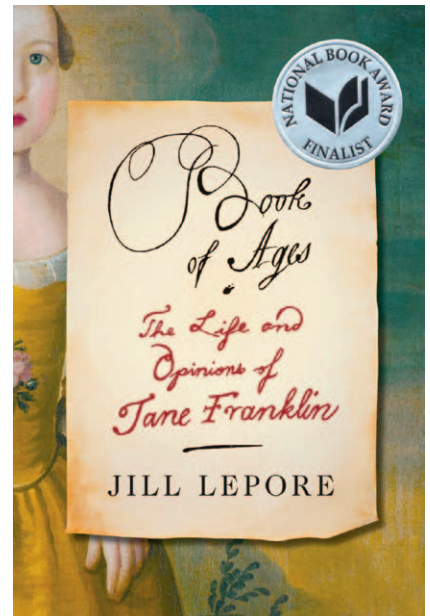
*With some sad sighs honour my absent
Hers;*

*And kiss this paper for thy loves dear
sake,*

*Who with salt tears this last Farewel
did take.*

Bradstreet had the solace of knowing her poetry would leave her mark on the world and stand in her stead, a physical reminder to those who loved her that she thought and dreamed, and that her imaginative life flew beyond the boundaries of childbearing and house-keeping. Bradstreet remains present

to audiences into the current century with greater force than the men in her family, two of whom were governors of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. But she is very nearly the only one; we have documentation of the inner lives of almost no other women of her generation. In *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*, Harvard historian Jill Lepore reminds us how easy it was for women's lives to ride out on the tide of history. Unrecorded, unnoticed, without recourse to the full protection of the law, even the youngest and most beloved sister of Ben Franklin, arguably the most famous American of the eighteenth century, is at risk of being forgotten and slipping into oblivion.



Jane Franklin was not a poet. Unlike Anne Bradstreet, she was born into a poor and obscure family, her education snatched here and there. She knew that her only "remains" would be her children, but she sought something more. And so, as Lepore tells us, "she did once write a book. She stitched four sheets of foolscap between two covers to make sixteen pages. On its first page, she wrote, 'Jane Franklin Born on March 27 1712.' She called it her Book of Ages. It is a record of the births and deaths of her children, a litany of grief." (xii) Like Anne Bradstreet, whose poems record and make immortal the smallest and greatest moments of her life, Jane Franklin's *Book of Ages* serves, in Lepore's words, as her archive.

In *Book of Ages* we see Jane in stark comparison to her brilliant brother: while he was sent to grammar school, Jane learned to write only because he taught her. While Ben ran away from home to make his fortune in the wide world, Jane married (badly) at 15 and bore 12 children, 11 of whom predeceased her. And every American schoolchild knows Ben Franklin's story: printer, writer, diplomat, inventor, scientist. Jane, for her part, rarely left Boston (seldom, in fact, left her own house), and spent her days caring for babies and husband, making soap and

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candles in the family business, mending, washing and cooking, and, when the tide of childbearing subsided, stealing time to scratch off letters to her brother and beloved friends. She read whenever possible, and made for herself the best life she could. The brilliance of Lepore's book is that it makes us realize, if we did not before, that Jane's life is every bit as remarkable and meaningful, and worth understanding as that of her brother. In *Book of Ages*, Lepore moves the goalposts of history and decenters the traditional narrative, putting the story of ordinary women center stage. Lepore is a professional historian, and the book is meticulously researched, but it is nonetheless a gripping read for both scholars and non-specialists. Lepore is a gifted storyteller who weaves together the historical

record and imagined recreations of key moments in Jane Franklin's life with intelligence, beauty, and feeling.

I have been teaching and reading Benjamin Franklin's words for 17 years, but I have never been moved by him in the way that I was when reading about his relationship with Jane. Franklin wrote to Jane and received more letters from her than any other person. He loved her. He valued her opinions. He rescued her son from bankruptcy (a constant threat), bought Jane a house, sympathized with her when she mourned, gave her his share of the money he inherited from his father. She was his confidante, his dear sister, his other self. In Franklin's relationship with his sister Jane, Lepore shows us a warmer, more generous, and more fully human figure than we find through study of any of his other

writings. Writing about the sister of someone as remarkable and well known as Ben Franklin, Lepore runs the danger (which she acknowledges) of being pulled into the orbit of Ben Franklin's life and out of Jane's. It is possible to imagine Lepore's book solely this way: in knowing Jane we know Ben. And yet, that is not at all the case here. Rather, Lepore's argument is more this: if we do not know Jane, we do not know Ben. This book raises an important challenge to all of us who think about how our knowledge of past lives gets preserved and written, discarded and forgotten, remembered and memorialized. Whose lives do we privilege? "What would it mean," Lepore asks herself and the reader, "to write the history of an age not only from what has been saved but also from what has been lost? What would it mean to write a history concerned not only with the lives of the famous but also with the lives of the obscure?" The answer is this book. From this slimmest of files the author builds the compelling portrait of a life and an age.



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READERS RESPOND

"It's a cold, 0° morning here in Vermont, so, trapped by the temp. I sat down to skim the *BR*. Skim went to peruse. The Nov. [20]13 issue is quite a piece of work! It is not a dog's breakfast at all but a smorgasbord of good grub. I read the whole thing, in violation of the Miss Piggy diet rule of never eating at one time something bigger than your own head. So with a cerebral belch I thank you and your fellow faculty authors for an appreciated repast. BSC (now BSU) is a good place to go out from – unpretentious, solid but still rich and varied. Like your publication."

Paul F. Rump '68