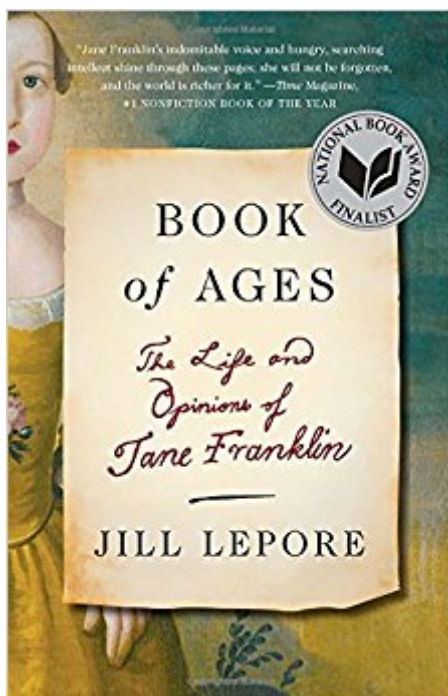


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Book Of Ages: The Life And Opinions Of Jane Franklin



Synopsis

NATIONAL BOOK AWARD FINALIST ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR NPR [★](#) [★](#) Time Magazine [★](#) [★](#) The Washington Post [★](#) [★](#) Entertainment Weekly [★](#) [★](#) The Boston Globe A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK From one of our most accomplished and widely admired historians—a revelatory portrait of Benjamin Franklin’s youngest sister, Jane, whose obscurity and poverty were matched only by her brother’s fame and wealth but who, like him, was a passionate reader, a gifted writer, and an astonishingly shrewd political commentator. Making use of an astonishing 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 extraordinary woman but an entire world. [★](#) [★](#)

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Starred Review Award-winning historian, Harvard professor, and New Yorker staff writer Lepore, whose *The Mansion of Happiness* (2012) was a Carnegie Medal for Excellence in Nonfiction finalist, was intrigued to learn that Benjamin Franklin and his youngest sister, Jane, were so close they were called Benny and Jenny. Renowned, world-traveling brother and obscure, homebound sister exchanged loving, newsy, bantering letters for more than 60 years. Most of his were preserved, while three decades’ worth of hers disappeared. This near-erasure, along with the gender bias that determined the vast differences in the siblings’ education, opportunities, and experiences, become as much a focus in this zestfully rigorous portrait as Jane herself. The most

poignant artifact Lepore unearthed was Jane's handmade "Book of Ages," recording the birth of her 12 children and, excruciatingly, the eventual deaths of all but one of them. In spite of the tragedies she endured, Jane's surviving letters are "gabby, frank, and vexed," the correspondence of a smart, witty, hardworking woman who "loved best books about ideas," reveled in gossip, expressed "impolite" opinions on religion and politics, and shared piquant observations of the struggle for American independence. By restoring Jane so vividly to the historical record, Lepore also provides a fresh, personal perspective on Benjamin. And so extraordinarily demanding was her research, even the appendixes in Lepore's vibrantly enlightening biography are dramatic. **HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY:** Lepore's stature grows with each book, and this first telling of a remarkable American story, supported by a national tour and generous print run, is destined for an even greater readership. --Donna Seaman --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Jane's story becomes every bit as gripping and, in its own way, important as Big Ben's public triumphs. Maureen Corrigan, NPR "In this beautifully written double biography, Lepore brings into focus not just the life of Jane Franklin Mecom, alongside that of her brother, but illuminates the dynamic era through which they lived and gives us a bird's-eye view of history from the vantage point of a powerless woman who grew up in a Boston family alongside one of the 18th century's greatest authors, entrepreneurs, scientists and statesmen. Remarkably, in the end Jane's story comes to life; we know her or at least about her. But, in fact, we know her because her life is one that we recognize, perhaps better than that of her familiar brother. That is the brilliance of this book. . . . This lyrical and meditative book ranks familiarly as a history or biography, but is more than either. . . . It descends historiographically from Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale* as a classic and enduring tribute to an obscure woman, only this one also had a famous brother. Edith B. Gelles, San Francisco Chronicle "Ms. Lepore is a fantastic historian, and meticulous research brings this portrait to life. . . . In the hands of a less accomplished writer, Jane Franklin might have appeared merely a pale shadow in contrast to her brother's accomplishments. But the portrait that emerges here is both frank and astute, an observant witness to the time. Madeleine Schwartz, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette "To stare at these siblings is to stare at sun and moon. But in Jill Lepore's meticulously constructed biography, *Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin*, recently placed on the long list of nominees for the National Book Award in nonfiction, this moon casts a beguiling glow. Consistently first rate. Dwight Garner, The New York Times "This book is a tour de force that can only evoke admiration. Priscilla S. Taylor, The Washington Times "Go read Jill Lepore's *Book of Ages*. A biography of Jane Franklin, Benjamin's sister, it is simultaneously a fascinating look at early America, a meditation on one remarkable mind by another, and, implicitly, a biography of all the other Janes in history's anonymous and overlooked women. Kathryn Schulz, New York Magazine "It is uncanny how vividly personal, how vibrantly colored, Jane's voice sounds from these pages . . . let's call it genius. Melissa H. Pierson, The Barnes & Noble Review "Book of Ages is an artful, serious, marvelous book. Lepore brings to it focus, intensity, and proud delight in her subject. Bob Blaisdell, The Christian Science Monitor "Eloquent . . . deeply sensitive to language. Susan Dunn, The New York Review of Books "Astonishing. . . . This is a work of meticulous reconstruction and high

ambition. In *Book of Ages*, Lepore has lovingly resurrected [Jane Franklin].

• Julia M. Klein, *The Boston Globe* “A thoughtful and illuminating biography.

• *O Magazine*, “Ten Titles to Pick Up Now” “By restoring Jane so vividly to the historical record, Lepore provides a fresh, personal perspective on Benjamin. And so extraordinarily demanding was her research, even the appendixes in Lepore’s vibrantly enlightening biography are dramatic. . . . Lepore’s stature grows with each book, and this first telling of a remarkable American story, supported by a national tour and generous print run, is destined for an even greater readership.

• Donna Seaman, *Booklist* (starred review) “New Yorker writer Lepore masterfully formulates the story of Benjamin Franklin’s youngest sister, who will be virtually unknown to many readers, using only a few of her letters and a small archive of births and deaths. Jane Franklin was an amazing woman who raised her children and grandchildren while still having the time to read and think for herself. We can only see into her mind because her correspondent was famous and because a vastly talented biographer reassembled her for us.

• *Kirkus* (starred review) “This book is an important, inspiring portrait of a determined and faith-filled woman who just happened to be the sister of a big shot. It will be enjoyed by all.

• *Library Journal* (starred review) “This is a brilliant and delightful book! By weaving together the tales of Benjamin Franklin and his beloved little sister, Jill Lepore creates a richly-textured tapestry of life in early America. Deeply researched and passionately written, it brings us inside a poignant relationship between two lovable people who seemed so different but were also so connected. I devoured this book and will treasure it.

• Walter Isaacson, author of *Steve Jobs* “*Book of Ages* is an ardently told life story, brimming with love and loss against a background of political strife and war. Jill Lepore opens a smeared casement on the life of Jane, Benjamin Franklin’s gifted sister, confidante and life-long correspondent. While Benjamin was able to forge a path to greatness from his obscure beginnings, Jane, trapped by gender, starved of education, was not. The contrast between the two destinies is by turns captivating, enraging and profoundly moving. As Lepore sheds light on this one, unsung life, she brilliantly illuminates an entire era.

• Geraldine Brooks, author of *March* “From scraps and whispers, Jill Lepore has resurrected Ben Franklin’s youngest sister, the only relative who could truthfully say, “Every line from him was a pleasure.” The subject is tailor-made for Lepore, as artful a writer as she is exact a scholar. She delivers two marvels at once: An authentic 18th century female voice, cheerful, inquisitive, and saucy, as well as an intimate portrait of Jane Franklin’s revered brother himself.

• Stacy Schiff, author of *Cleopatra* “This

poetic and powerful diptych takes readers on a fascinating journey. With consummate skill, Lepore moves us beyond the story of a famous brother and his woebegone sister, instead bringing both Benny and Jenny--and the relationship between them--to life. A book to ponder and prose to savor. —Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, author of *A Midwife's Tale* — "With careful and ingenious research, Jill Lepore uncovers the surprising life of the obscure sister to a very famous man. This eloquent book reveals two remarkable siblings and their intertwined and revolutionary lives." —Alan Taylor, author of *The Civil War of 1812*

I enjoy historical books, both fiction and nonfiction. This is a true story, based on the life and times of Ben Franklin and his sister, Jane. Ben became one of the most famous and influential men of his time, as he rose from poverty as the son of a candlemaker, to printer, to educated and informed man of the world. Ben was renowned in North America and Europe, influencing the revolt of the Stamp Act, imposed on New England during a time of economic depression, and growing to advocate for personal and governmental liberty. Just as informed and opinionated as her brother was Jane, who was not given the education or freedom to travel and express her opinions as Ben. They wrote to each other regularly for decades, recording the times -- early to late 1700's -- in Colonial America and its trajectory to the American Revolution. What is unique and engrossing about this book is the personal glimpses into the lives of Ben Franklin and his siblings, and how women lived and were treated, how people suffered through poverty, how they found a little light in their dark lives, and how lively and outspoken some women were. Like Jane. Jane and her brother were the two youngest of a large family. They grew up together and remained close throughout their amazing lives. Read it and travel back in time. You will notice striking similarities between their time and ours, but also, see how much society has changed. No more are debtors, poor people, and poor immigrants thrown in debtors prisons and almshouses to die. Instead, we send them to war. I enjoyed this charming portrait of Jane, painted in sharp contrast to the public life of her brother, Ben.

This is an unique approach to history and biography, and I found it fascinating. Jane's personality shines through her letters. She describes the routines of her day, soap making, sewing, knitting, child care, reading, the historic events passing by her house in Boston, her family's difficulties, mentally, physically, and economically, and her sometimes desperate circumstances. It is surprising how someone who had so little and faced so much could survive, and keep her spirit. But she did. And while she may occasionally complain, for the most part she is a cheerful, and resilient soul. I really liked her, especially when she was bold enough to speak her mind about the politics, or when she

scolded her famous brother. A very interesting and enjoyable read. The one thing that sometimes intruded into the story was the author's asides, or comments. They weren't helpful.

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. Mourning was also a thing to be discouraged and not dwelt on. You were expected to be tough and not sentimental. Funny too how she was discouraged to mourn her children, while her brother in the loss of a son was given much sympathy. Jane's husband had big ideas that never seem to pan out. Mostly it seemed he was lazy. This meant the bulk of the family fell on her shoulders and she did what she could to keep them afloat. At this time her brother was starting to make his way in the world learning and starting businesses. The differences between their two lives was stunning. While Benjamin had relative freedom in the world and often used this freedom to neglect his family. Jane was the cornerstone of her family helping raise not only her children, but her grandchildren and great-grandchildren as well. Jane relied on her brother Benjamin to be her eyes of the world with their correspondence. Being the older brother and a man, he often spoke to her as if she was a child, providing his male (to female) wisdom as well as that of an older brother. Unfortunately in all his writings publicly and in his autobiographies, even though they

corresponded their entire life, he never once mentions her. In a published letter that he wrote to her she was identified as a "friend". I found this book in contrast with that of the Benjamin Franklin one, not unsurprisingly one of vast differences in priorities. At the end of the book a point that was made that often biographies are written of famous people and nothing exists to capture the life of the common folk. Instead it postulated that this is where fiction comes in. Since no one "non-famous" person would have enough information on their life, a composite or fiction maybe the best way to capture this time and sort of life. I like that. One thing that shocked me in the latter part of this book was the comments about the editing of the biographer Jared Sparks. It shocks me that he took such liberties. To me a biography is the unabridged story of the person, not a romanticized or otherwise altered version that the author wants to portray. Additionally his destruction of documents is appalling. How much history has been lost at his discretion. Jane was as unique as her brother. She was the backbone of our nation, as many others like her were. Famous people relied on her and others like her to shape this country. Without their lives and deaths in support and in conflict we would not be the country we are today. My review for the tandemly read Benjamin Franklin book will be posted shortly.

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