

John Adams Institute

New York Burning/New York in Brand - Jill Lepore

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Introduction

Thank you Tracy, thank you Fulbright Commission. Thank you all for being here, and of course, thank you Jill Lepore for being here again.

Jill Lepore is the David Woods Kemper Professor of American History at Harvard University, a staff writer at the New Yorker, podcaster, and a true public intellectual. She has authored 14 books, including one novel, and won numerous awards for them over the years. I won't mention all the books and awards, because I have only 5 minutes. You know Jill Lepore, that's why you're here. You are probably here because you know her for her fusion of rigorous academic research with an unparalleled narrative style; historical story telling with a mountain of historical evidence at its finest. You are also probably here, because Jill Lepore has succeeded in telling untold stories from American history. I would consider her one of the symbols of contemporary historical writing that demystifies American history to further the reckoning that America so desperately needs. And as I said, she does this not only through books, but also through her tremendous production for the New Yorker magazine in which she tackles in the same beautiful literary style (hey, it's the New Yorker after all), many, many different topics with a historical perspective, recently covering, for instance, seed catalogues, and deeply personal and beautiful pieces, such as an article called *The Deadline or The Lingering of Loss*, from 2019.

Professor Lepore was here three years ago talking about her book *These Truths - A history of the United States*, that is now a staple, a textbook, a guide for anyone studying any aspect of the United States. I have it on my desk and lies around the house all the time, as I am sure it is in yours. But I am honored to speak with Jill in a few minutes about one of her earlier books, *New York Burning - Liberty, Slavery*

and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan, a finalist for the coveted Pulitzer Prize. And the Dutch translation by the Arbeiderspers publishing house that we celebrate today is important as we in the Netherlands are only now in the midst of a reckoning of our own history of slavery and big role in the slave trade. The book, about the fallout of a series of fires within a few weeks that raged in Manhattan in 1741, paints a picture in graphic detail and in graphic, yet, original language, of the reality of the enslaved and the mindset of the enslavers in New York, and its relation to party politics in pre-Revolutionary America.

When I lived in New York with my wife, and later with our kids, I used to remind everyone that New York used to be, quote unquote, ours. I admit, a bit of an arrogant and ignorant notion. I would give a tour of our immediate surroundings in Lower Manhattan and point out the Dutch sites as well as the Dutch origins of street names throughout the city. But while I desperately love New York, I never did discuss the fact, the obvious fact, that it was the Dutch who introduced enslaved Africans in what would become New York, while the evidence in the form of persistent inequality was all around me.

John Adams, who never owned enslaved people, abhorred slavery. James Madison, slaveholder, Founding Father and 4th president of the United States, could, like most Founding Fathers already, see the problems induced by the institution of slavery. "All these perplexities", Madison wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette in 1820, "All these perplexities develop more and more the dreadful fruitfulness of the original sin of the African trade." Slavery is considered America's original sin, and Dutch traders and settlers had a significant role in it.

I quoted earlier the full title of the book. *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery and Conspiracy in Eighteenth Century Manhattan*. And these two other concepts, conspiracy and liberty, denote - at least for me - the effect of slavery on New York and the country. In one way, the book reads like a multi-episode, multi-season *Law and Order* like television show, with twists and turns, different suspects and conspiratorial paranoia all around. I'll ask Professor Lepore later whether she believes that she cracked the case.

What the story in this book means or illustrates for liberty, or the self-perception of liberty, in America, I can perhaps leave to it Professor Lepore in a minute or in our conversation, because I am a lawyer and not a historian, although sometimes I wish I was. And I guess that, according to the US Supreme Court, I also need to be a historian, as the Court has put a premium on historical tradition and analysis in constitutional interpretation. However, I wish they would leave historical research and analyses to people like Jill Lepore.

So, in that spirit, again with thanks to the John Adams Institute, the Fulbright Commission and the Arbeiterspers, please join me in welcoming Professor Jill Lepore.