

Another Legitimate Voice

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"I can't possibly count the number of people I have met over the years who've said, 'You write like an old man,'" Jill Lepore says with a slight laugh. Those awkward exchanges suggest how gravitas in historical writing is typically associated with a "deeply analytical and rigorous prose style," according to Lepore, a professor of American history at Harvard University. "I love that persona, but there is another legitimate voice with which to write about the past."

That voice is fiction. *Blindspot: By a Gentleman in Exile and a Lady in Disguise* (Spiegel & Grau) is an entertaining new novel by Lepore and Jane Kamensky, a professor of American history at Brandeis University. Set in 1760s Boston, *Blindspot* evokes the rollicking bawdiness, humor, and wit of that turbulent era. The story concerns Stewart Jameson, a Scottish portrait painter who flees to Boston to escape debts at home. Seeking an apprentice, he takes on Fanny Easton, a disowned daughter from a prominent Boston family who is masquerading as a boy - a ruse that makes for some hilarious scenes. The narrative is propelled forward by a budding romance and a murder mystery, which plays out as the first stirrings of the looming revolution grip colonial Boston.

Kamensky, author of *The Exchange Artist: A Tale of High-Flying Speculation and America's First Banking Collapse* (Viking, 2008), and Lepore, author of the prize-winning *Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* (Knopf, 1998), have been friends since graduate school at Yale University. *Blindspot*, which was largely written through e-mail messages, is not their first collaboration. In 2000 they launched the online magazine *Commonplace*, described by Lepore as an attempt to bridge the gap between scholarly and popular history. "Historians are pretty solitary creatures. So it was nice to be mad women in the attic together," says Kamensky. "We laughed more in the writing of this book than I have ever done or will ever do writing nonfiction."

"We tend to think that the seriousness of dramatic moments in the past means that everything was serious all the time, which is manifestly not true," she says. Lepore traces some of the piety in historical writing to the 19th century, when much of America's history was rewritten to conform to Victorian standards. Consider Benjamin Franklin, the subject - along with his sister Jane Mecom - of Lepore's forthcoming book. In Franklin's papers, he comes across as "very funny and very bawdy," the historian says. But over the course of the 19th century, biographies of Franklin became, decade by decade, "tamer and tamer, and blander and blander." A major part of *Blindspot's* appeal is that it encapsulates what Lepore calls the "not always well-advised 10-penny wit" that characterized the culture of 18th-century America.

Both authors came to the novel steeped in the distinct rhythms and archaic words of the era. Fearing that a story written in that style would be unreadable, they adopted what Kamensky calls a "plausible simulacrum of 18th-century prose for a 21st-century ear." For six months during the writing of the novel, Lepore walked to the Harvard campus each morning listening to an audio version of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* on her iPod. She says, "It got to a point that every e-mail I sent to Jane I wrote as Jameson."

Lepore, who calls *Blindspot* a "wacky and unconventional thing to do," points to a rich tradition of 18th-century writers - Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, Voltaire, Mary Wollstonecraft - who used fiction as a way to get inside the lives of people on the margins of society. "They could write history about great men and great figures who left big trails of documents, but if they wanted to capture the experience of ordinary people - especially women - they needed to write fiction, which to them was another kind of history," she says. Kamensky agrees. "Like any historian of the distant past, we have each had the experience many times of coming up against the limits of our evidence," she says. "There are categories of humanity for whom it is hard to recover names, and impossible to recover consciousness. Writing *Blindspot*, the limits of the possible were not about the archive but about our imaginations."