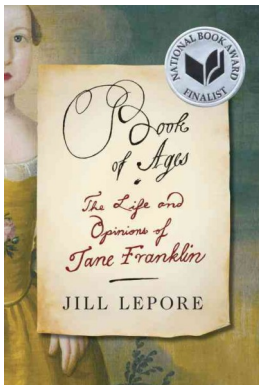


Jane Has Her Say



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I love this new age of biography where not only famous people's lives are examined but also everyman's or in this case everywoman's. Of course, Jane Franklin's life would have faded into history were it not for her very famous older brother. But this compelling biography gives a very interesting account of the life of an ordinary, rather poor Boston woman during the time period of the Thirteen Colonies.

Jane grew up in a big family and Ben was six years her senior, and he taught her to read. They corresponded their whole lives, and were for many years the last two left from their nuclear family. Many of Jane's letters have been lost, but can be somewhat reconstructed from her brother's responses to them. Like her brother, she was very opinionated and thought of Benjamin as her "second self."

At age fifteen, she married a saddler named Mecom, and for the next twenty plus years, she was either pregnant or nursing children. She had twelve children and all but one died before she did. Most, unfortunately, died as adults which was less common at that time. Her husband was not a good provider and eventually went crazy. So Jane and her children boiled and sold soap from home.

Her letters to her brother and his gifts of books, many of which he had printed himself, gave her an intellectual life that she otherwise would not have had. They shared many secrets from the rest of the family, some of them jokes. For example, he gave Jane a spinning wheel for her wedding, not only because it was practical but also because it implied that she still had her virtue. He even asked her which she preferred: a tea table or spinning wheel. According to the author Jill Lepore, "The tea table was a symbol of female vanity." As Proverbs 21 said, "Who can find a virtuous woman? She layeth her hands to the spindle, and her hands hold the distaff."

What made Jane's letters delightful was the fact that she ignored politeness and said exactly what she meant. In one delightful section, Lepore lists the types of letters that were written in America before the Revolution according to *The Young Man's Best Companion* also printed by Ben Franklin. They included letters of *Proffered Assistance, Letters Consolatory, Letters of Thanks, Letters Congratulatory, Ditto of Reproof, Advice, Excuse, Recommendation, Letters of Visit, of Business, of Exhortatory, or Remonstrance*, and many of the type Jane often wrote herself, *Mixed Letters, that is on various Subjects, and different Affairs*.

In *Book of Ages*, it's also fascinating to read about Ben Franklin's inventions, his rise to being a Colonial leader, the beginnings of the Post Office, etc. The book also discusses the common

practice of apprenticeship. Jane learned about it through her brothers and also her sons. The *Book of Ages* from the title was the name of the twelve page book that Jane kept through her life. In it were recorded the births, marriages, and deaths of all those dear to her. When she died, she gave this book to her grandson, Josiah Flagg, and he gave it to the town of Lancaster, Massachusetts's first library that he founded himself.

This book will fascinate you with a deep look at colonial life that is as inspiring as the best fiction. If you want to read what Ben's life was like in Philadelphia during the same era, read his autobiography .

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Posted by Dory L. on Oct 28, 2013



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