

Facts and Fictions in Revolutionary Boston



Jane Kamensky and Jill Lepore

Common-place asks its founding editors about their collaboratively written novel, set in Revolutionary-era Boston—*Blindspot, a Novel, by a Gentleman in Exile and a Lady in Disguise* (2008)—and about relationships between history and fiction in general. For more on the novel, see its [official site](#).

A lot in Blindspot draws on topics in your previous books—slavery, paper money,

gender, and the politics of speech and print. But the 1760s seem to be a halfway point between your most recent projects. Was this “neutral ground”? How much research did you have to do—especially in areas that seem newer to you as historians, such as art history or the history of sexuality?

Kamensky: *Blindspot* takes place in a relatively tight time frame, from June to November of 1764. We chose that moment less as “neutral ground” in our own lives as historians than as a hinge between past worlds. *Blindspot*’s moment is a liminal one—not yet American, not happily colonial—and our characters find themselves caught up in rushing currents of change. Their economy is reeling from the depression following the Seven Years’ War. Their ways of thinking are unsettled—and enriched—by various streams of Enlightenment thought and homegrown radicalism. In other words, their world is poised between the early modern world of, say, 1620 and the more recognizably modern one of two centuries later, the approximate bookends of Jill’s and my scholarly work. *Blindspot* helped us think about that trajectory in new ways.

There was a lot of research involved in the writing. But for the most part, it wasn’t the sort that took us into journal literatures and monographs. Yes, the novel’s reader will find traces of what we’ve been up to in our scholarly lives: my own recent immersion in art history and Jill’s in Revolutionary-era social and political history. The novel owes big debts to what we’ve learned from the rich history of women, gender, and sexuality—the very fields in which both Jill and I started out, now decades ago.

But *Blindspot* is a different kind of enterprise than the important scholarship that theorizes the early American body. Much of our research involved a kind of imaginative transportation: trying to make those bodies real and sensory and three dimensional, in our own minds and on the page. We found ourselves asking a lot of *what-was-it-like* questions: what did it feel like, taste like, smell like? We had a breakthrough moment in a visit to the [Pierce-Hichborn House](#), a modest, vernacular, brick home, built by artisans in the 1710s, which survives today because of its proximity to Paul Revere’s house. Pacing about those cramped rooms, experiencing the light, the press of the ceiling, the tight turn of the stairs; walking the narrow streets of the North End; sitting in Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts among the Copley portraits and trying, in our minds’ eyes, to animate Copley’s sitters and their world—that was the most important new research we did for the novel. If this sounds more like attending a séance than taking a trip to the municipal archives, that’s about right.

Is the Revolutionary-era Boston in Blindspot an alternate universe, a possible past, or something in between? Would anything here have been impossible in 1760s Boston?

Kamensky: In most ways, *Blindspot*’s past is a probable past, even a known past. The narrative is interleaved with documents, from laws to newspaper editorials, many of which are lightly edited versions of the things themselves. Themes of masquerade and deception and self-invention suffuse the plot. These are

eighteenth-century concerns, as historians from Steven C. Bullock to Al Young have demonstrated so vividly. The novel's debate about the connection of slavery to Revolutionary liberty is, of course, Edmund Morgan's famous paradox. It's also very much History's debate and Boston's debate; our Samuel Bradstreet often speaks the words of James Otis Jr. The cosmopolitanism of the African genius Ignatius Alexander likewise pays homage to what Ira Berlin and others have taught us of the world of Atlantic creoles, and it borrows, more particularly, from the lives and letters of Francis Williams and Ignatius Sancho.

This is not to suggest that everything in *Blindspot* is true in the world outside its pages. Boston had a less fully elaborated club life than the novel creates. Our Red Hens might better fit Franklin's Philadelphia or Alexander Hamilton's Annapolis than post-Puritan Boston. There's a big public art exhibition at the climax of the novel's mystery. This is possible and necessary in *Blindspot's* city of painters and patrons. In Boston proper, a shared, public visual culture came a generation later, in the early nineteenth century. Historian readers will also find one glaring—and deliberate—elision of time. In *Blindspot*, British regulars sail into the port of Boston and take over the Town House in 1764, four years sooner than actually happened. *Blindspot's* work required us to compress the first and second phases of the imperial crisis. When we're doing History's work, we keep them separate.

Have you used novels in your history courses? Did writing the book give you new perspectives on the relationships between literary writing and other forms of historical evidence?

Kamensky: Jill and I have both used period fiction as an integral part of courses on early American history and culture. *Charlotte Temple* is the text I've assigned most often, and Fanny Easton's voice—and plight—owes a great deal to Susanna Rowson's woebegone Charlotte.

I've sometimes used contemporary novels set in the past as well, especially Brian Moore's *Black Robe*, which is based quite closely on the *Jesuit Relations*. I ask students to read the seventeenth-century documents alongside the novelist's version and to think about what Moore borrowed, what he changed, and why. I also teach a course on the Salem witch trials, where we look at several centuries of representations of 1692 in various genres and media. Arthur Miller's *Crucible* is a key text in that class. Its concerns are purely contemporary, the zeitgeist of 1953 rather than that of 1692. But the voices are marvelous, an unparalleled example of a modern sensibility let loose on a foreign vernacular. Scholars of visual culture have been, of late, concerned with recovering the "period eye" of a given place and time. Miller translates what we might call the period ear. That was one of our goals for the novel: to communicate to a new set of readers something of the music of our work in the archives. Fiction may offer us different avenues—more palpable or visceral paths—for doing that sort of work.

The key models seem to be Sterne's Tristram Shandy, Richardson's Pamela, and William Hill Brown's The Power of Sympathy. Did you have other favorite novels in mind as you wrote?

Lepore: The models for *Blindspot* are as much portraits as novels, actually. Jane's work on Gilbert Stuart and on eighteenth-century visual culture, that "period eye," very much infuses the novel. The book is full of plot twists having to do with sight, all of them allusions to the conventions of British and American literary, artistic, and scientific culture, in the age of Newton's *Optics* and the gentleman's magazine *The Spectator*. The peep hole. The ocular truth. Spectacles. And, of course, the blind spot. We riddled the book with that stuff and with actual paintings, too (Copley's 1765 *Boy with a Squirrel*, for instance, plays a crucial role, as does Sarah Goodrich's 1823 self-portrait, *Beauty Revealed*). But we meant the conceit of the portraitist as both novelist and historian to go deeper, too. If the rise of the eighteenth-century novel is a story of the rise of the self, the portrait is involved in much the same transformation. We wanted to bring faces onto the page. But, yes, the voices we adopted very much borrow from eighteenth-century fiction. Jameson is, quite self-consciously, a lesser Shandy. Okay, much lesser. But his gambit, in straining toward the blustery, swaggering, manly picaresque, is certainly Sterne's, and Fielding's. Fanny Easton styles her own voice after the heroines of sentimental epistolaries—Pamela and Clarissa—and rather a lot after Moll Flanders and Fanny Hill, too.

Blindspot seems to be partly a hilarious send-up of eighteenth-century novels and partly a very serious polemic: an indictment of the Founding Fathers for their blind spot when it came to the question of slavery. Did you feel any tension between these aims?

Lepore: I am a sucker for eighteenth-century fiction. I love its artfulness and its silliness and its bawdiness. I laugh when Fielding wants me to laugh. I cry when Richardson wants me to cry. And when Franklin tells a dirty joke, he's totally got me, no matter how many times I've read it before. I also laugh, always, at Jane's jokes. That's why writing the book was, above all, fun. We didn't write *Blindspot* as a polemic, but, well, we do, of course, have scholarly claims to make about this period. Jane's work on exchange, for instance, is all over the book, as is my work on slavery. Was there a tension between trying to write an entertaining novel and wanting to write fiction with something we might think of as historical honesty? Absolutely. We had to wrestle with very great changes in tone and in the emotional register of the plot. Deciding not to have our convicted murderer burned at the stake—as was the punishment in the actual case on which our murder is based—was a decision we made about what the emotional range of the novel could bear and what it could not. The lives of ordinary people in Boston in the 1760s weren't uniformly a farce or uniformly a tragedy, either. That's why the book's a genre send-up: a mystery, with traces of the gothic; a love story, with an overwrought romantic sensibility; a picaresque, somewhat overblown. But that's all part of *Blindspot*'s gambit, to use the literary forms of the age to tell

the story of the coming of the American Revolution.

Does the book implicitly argue for a specific relationship between fact and fiction—or between history and imagination—either in the eighteenth century or today?

Lepore: We didn't write the book to make an argument, but I think we came out on the other side, each of us, having made a series of different arguments, both in the book itself and in our own minds. The eighteenth century marked a turning point in the writing of history, one that warrants closer inspection and one that has as much to do with the boundaries between realism and romance as between history and fiction. Eighteenth-century novelists were often accused, and not only by historians, of suffering from an excess of imagination. Some novelists admitted as much. A "certain drunkenness of imagination" was what Hugh Mackenzie claimed inspired him to write, in 1771, *The Man of Feeling*. In 1750, Samuel Johnson complained about the "wild strain of imagination" that plagued a class of books "produced without fear of criticism, without the toil of study, without knowledge of nature, or acquaintance with life." Johnson wasn't opposed to fiction; he was opposed to fiction run amok, that is, to romances—tales both gothic and sentimental—in which ordinary men and women are swept away by passions Johnson considered extraordinary. What Johnson preferred were novels that were, as he put it, "engaged in portraits of which every one knows the original." I find Johnson's distinction specious. But *Blindspot* was a very good way to think about portraits and landscapes, about realism and romance, about fictions and histories, and, finally, about the past and the present.

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