

Reading Guide  
*These Truths: A History of the United States*, Part 1, pages 1-149  
By Jill Lepore

“Most of what existed is gone. Flesh decays. Wood rots, walls fall, books burn. Nature takes one toll, malice another. History is the story of what remains...and it is maddeningly uneven, asymmetrical, and unfair.” –p. 4

“Are all peoples one? And if they are, by what right can one people take the land of another or their labor, or even their lives?” –p. 16

Dear Juniors,

This is a very important book for you for a couple reasons. First, it is your primary text for United States History, as well as a secondary text for a substantial number of other courses you will take in the next two years. American Literature, Government & Politics (senior year), Economics, American Social History, Senior Literature, and Latin American History are just a few. Second, the history Jill Lepore presents here is qualitatively different from the traditional textbooks you have encountered. It is new, it is written by a single author—significantly, a woman—and not a committee, and it introduces key concepts and essential questions about history in general and American History in particular that most high-school history courses do not.

*To state it another way, everyone—including the flag-wavers and the flag-burners--needs to chill out and look with new eyes as they (re)consider the history of the United States. Jill Lepore’s book is a critical, fresh, expansive, contemporary look.*

This reading guide will not so much point out facts you need as it will provide context that will deepen your understanding of the reading. This is, in other words, grown-up time. You are being treated like a developing scholar, not a high-school student told to read a book. This book is easy to read and full of enormously important ideas about American History. Your attention to the reading must therefore be focused and serious. If you do that, this reading experience will pay off richly for you. Those who do this can consider themselves college-bound students.

Make sure you annotate the book as you read.

Enjoy.

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### Chapter 1, “The Nature of the Past”

Reconsider the quote that began this reading guide: “Most of what existed is gone. Flesh decays. Wood rots, walls fall, books burn. Nature takes one toll, malice another. History is the story of what remains...and it is maddeningly uneven, asymmetrical, and unfair.” –p. 4

Lepore is telling you that **history is not the story of what happened**. It’s the story of what various people **think** happened, and their points of view—their positionality—colors their narrative and their analysis. This is important to remember about history. It is not set in stone. It changes as new evidence is found, and it changes as we humans change, as we interpret events differently.

It is important to read history as if the outcome was not already known, because the outcome was not known to the players making history. Historians often ask, “What if?” What if

p. 3-7 The Dominican priest **Bartolome de las Casas** plays a very important role in the history of the Americas. In protecting the Taino and other indigenous peoples from Spanish slavery, he played a role in the subsequent enslavement of African peoples in the Americas. (see also p. 23-25)

Lepore places Columbus in the context of the late 1400s...

p. 7 Where the meaning of “**pack rat**” comes from.

p. 9 “After 1492, the vast wealth carried to Europe from the Americas and extracted by the forced labor of Africans granted governments new powers that contributed to the rise of nation-states.” *This sentence is worthy of heavy reflection.*

p. 10 Why U.S. History begins with 1492, at least in the American mind? See **George Bancroft**. Because one influential historian said so...

p. 12: “To write something down doesn’t make it true. But the history of truth is lashed to the history of writing like a mast to a sail.”

“Columbus widened the world, Gutemberg made it spin faster.” Coincidence matters a lot in history. Columbus made his voyages—and he made four (4!) to the Americas, not one—were made famous because they occurred just as Johannes Gutenberg’s **printing press** was invented. The printing press made his discoveries famous.

p. 10 “The nation’s founding truths were forged in a crucible of violence, the products of staggering cruelty, conquest, and slaughter, the assassination of worlds.”

p. 11 Prince Henry of Portugal and the slave trade...

p. 14 Amerigo Vespucci and his book *Mundus Novus*, and somehow the “new world” was named **America**.

p. 15-16 **The Treaty of Tordesillas** leads Lepore to ask –  
“Are all peoples one? And if they are, by what right can one people take the land of another or their labor, or even their lives?”

p. 16-17 “Between 1500 and 1800, roughly two and a half million Europeans moved to the Americas; they carried twelve million Africans there by force; and as many as fifty million Native Americans died, chiefly of disease.”

“The European extraction of the wealth of the Americas made possible the rise of capitalism: new forms of trade, investment, and profit....nearly two hundred tons of gold and sixteen thousand tons of silver.” But it was the forced labor of Africans—**slavery**—that enabled that wealth to flow from the Americas to Europe.

p. 17-18 An important explanation of the role of slavery in history.

p. 18-19 A brief explanation of some key effects of **the Columbian Exchange** of animals, plants, people, and disease on the Americas.

p. 19-20 Mass death, mainly by disease, also by forced labor.

p. 20 European justifications for their conquests and for slavery.

p.22 **The Requerimiento** – Spanish justification for their conquests... leading to **Hernan Cortes'** conquest of the Aztec capital of **Tenochtitlan**.

p. 23 The Spanish...did not travel to the New World in families, or even with women: they came as armies of men.” Subsequently, “an intricate caste system marked gradations of skin color...Later, the English would recognize only black and white...a culture of mixing or a culture of not mixing...*Are all peoples one?*”

p. 23-24 **Bartolome de las Casas**

p. 25-27 The English come to the Americas, partly to harass the rivals Spanish.

p. 28-30 The story of Queen Elizabeth's favorite **Sir Walter Raleigh** and the English colony at Roanoke – “The Lost Colony.”

*“In America, everything became a beginning.”*