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Still, the coauthors distinguish between creativity in writing a novel and the creative aspects of their nonfiction books. "Writing early American history always requires a fair amount of hunch-playing and intuition," explains Kamensky, author of *The Exchange Artist: A Tale of High-Flying Speculation and America's First Banking Collapse*. "While modernists have the problem of throwing stuff away, for biographers and even social historians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, only rarely is the historical record comprehensive and complete enough to write a life history."

Lepore agrees. "We can know what the American Revolution was like for poor widows in Boston as a group, because we know how many of them went on the poor rolls or how many of them sold their breast milk for cash in the *Boston Gazette*, but you can't really get a life story," says the Kemper professor of American history, who is also chair of the history and literature program and author of *New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan* (see "Witness to Violence," September-October 2005, page 42). "In my own work, [the point] where I find the limits of social history are awfully frustrating is in the anonymity of the people that you are writing about." Eighteenth-century fiction, of which Lepore is "a very big fan," brings a "degree of drama and human depth that...social history just can't do."

"In part," says Kamensky, "what the novel does for us is segregate this play of imagination, so that rather than creeping close to the line between history and fiction in our work as Ph.D.-carrying historians, we jumped the fence and tried something else."

The pair worked mostly by e-mail, "pinging back and forth like a tennis game" the two interwoven first-person narratives: a chapter, then a letter, and another chapter. The first hundred pages flew by. There was no preplanned plot. Lepore likens it to the game families play on long car trips, where each person gets to add a sentence to a story going around and around, except that theirs was set within a contained imagined world: Boston in the 1760s, a period they both know well.

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

Reputation: Portraits in Power, by Marjorie Williams '79 (PublicAffairs, $26.95). No matter who is elected, the president must contend with those permanently in power. No one ever portrayed such people better than the late Marjorie Williams, as this second collection of her work, edited by her husband, Timothy Noah '80, vividly shows. The profiles—of the likes of Clark Clifford, James Baker, Lee Atwater, and Colin Powell—get at a Washington where, Noah notes, "the worst thing they can call you is a human being." Williams showed why.

George, Being George, edited by Nelson W. Aldrich Jr. '57 (Random House, $30). Two hundred ways, more or less, of looking at George Plimpton '48, of the *Paris Review* and other ventures. We learn that his graduation, delayed by World War II service, was further postponed because the irate professor in his final-semester gut geography course (taken to fulfill a science requirement) flunked Plimpton for skipping every class.

Your Child's Strengths, by Jenifer Fox, Ed.M. '95 (Viking, $24.95). How to discover, develop, and use same, rather than dwelling on weaknesses, by the head of the Purnell School, in Pottersville, New Jersey.

Home Girl, by Judith Matloff '80 (Random House, $25). Back from reporting in Moscow, the author buys a fixer-upper in West Harlem. This is the chronicle of what it means to build a "dream house on a lawless block."

Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell, edited by Thomas Travisano with Saskia Hamilton, RF '01 (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $40). The exchanges between the poetic giants, linking Lowell '39, Litt.D. '66, and Bishop for 30 years and spanning 458 letters. The period covered includes Lowell's time teaching at Harvard, 1963-1977.

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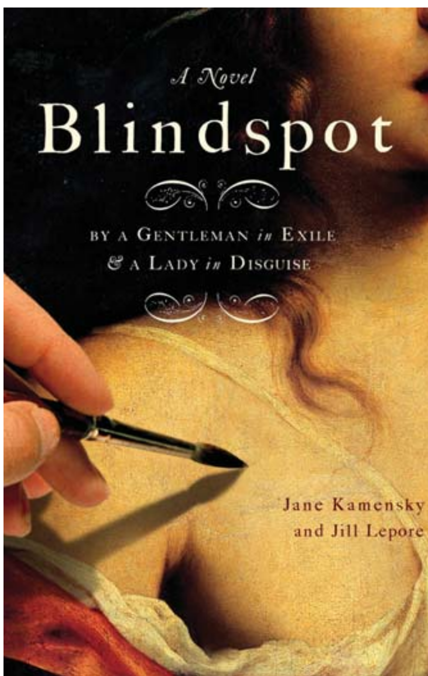

"These characters were in some way more real to us than other people we have written about…"

When they realized that the sketch would become a book, they sat down to do some storyboarding and began revising what they had already written. As they worked, Lepore read colonial artist John Singleton Copley's letters. Her portrayal of the fictional painter Jameson, which may leave male readers squirming, also drew on her familiarity with Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and the works of Henry Fielding, just as Kamensky drew on sources such as Samuel Richardson's epistolary novels *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. Always, in trying to imagine what people's lives were really like, they strove to be faithful to the past, Kamensky says, but "in a way completely different from the work of history, one that was wonderfully liberating."

To imagine their characters standing or sitting in space, they visited an eighteenth-century house in downtown Boston that became the setting for the home where their two characters lived. Lepore had made many such field trips for history research, but found this particular experience unique. Writing the novel "was worth doing fully" because "these characters were in some way more real to us than other people we have written about—about whom we just couldn't know enough to have that realness. I think," she adds, "that will make me work harder" as a historian—and as a teacher.

Blindspot is full of learning and literary allusions, as well as historical documents that Lepore says she and Kamensky introduced into the text. But writing it, she emphasizes, was a "privileging of the emotional, the delightful, the playful, and the imaginative: writing about things that we really care about by giving vent to different faculties than we usually draw on."

Physicists on Wall Street, by Jeremy Bernstein '51, Ph.D. '55 (Springer, $34.95). Somewhat accessible essays on options pricing and on why Wall Street has become a home for the physicists and other "quants" not employed at CERN's Large Hadron Collider, plus "other essays on science and society."

Patronizing the Arts, by Marjorie Garber, Kenan professor of English and of visual and environmental studies (Springer, $34.95). A meditation on the dual attitudes toward art in modern culture—patronage and condescension—and universities' role in sustaining support for the artistic enterprise.

The Gridlock Economy, by Michael Heller '84 (Basic Books, $26). The author, Wien professor of real-estate law at Columbia, explores how "too much ownership" complicates development and deployment of drug discoveries and new technologies, urban renewal, and more.

The Global Achievement Gap, by Tony Wagner, M.A.T. '71, Ed.D. '92 (Basic Books, $26.95). The codirector of the Change Leadership Group at the Graduate School of Education laments that American schools are obsolete, and focuses on how to retool them for the global information economy by emphasizing such core skills as critical thinking and collaboration.

A Great Idea at the Time, by Alex Beam (PublicAffairs, $24.95). Beam, a *Boston Globe* columnist, writes vividly about the Great Books program of the 1950s, tracing its formation in part to Harvard president Charles William Eliot's "five-foot shelf" of Harvard Classics (reconsidered in this magazine's November-December 2001 issue by Adam Kirsch).

Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers through the Cumberland Gap, **by George Caleb Bingham (American, 1811-1879)**

Frontiersman: Daniel Boone and the Making of America, by Meredith Mason Brown '61, J.D. '65 (Louisiana State University Press, $34.95). The author's father, John Mason Brown '23, wrote a Landmark (for teenagers) biography of Boone in 1952. From the late 1700s on, the Brown family had interacted with Boone in Kentucky. Now comes this clear, well-illustrated modern biography of an icon who helped bring about America's "birth and transformation."

Courtesy of the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, Washington University in St. Louis

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