Review: 'Story of America' by Jill Lepore

BY GLENN C. ALTSCHULER Special to the Tulsa World

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Shortly before he died, Kit Carson was shown a dime novel featuring his exploits as a mountain man and an Indian fighter. According to a biographer, the old man fiddled with his glasses and declared, "That there may have happened, but I ain't got no recollection of it."

History, Jill Lepore reminds us, "is the art of making an argument about the past by telling a story accountable to evidence ... a story without an argument fades into antiquarianism; an argument without a story risks pedantry."

In "The Story of America," a collection of 20 articles previously published in The New Yorker magazine, Lepore, a professor of history at Harvard University, demonstrates that democracy is best understood through an examination of the conflicted, contradictory and contested narratives we construct about our past.

Elegant, enlightening and engaging, her essays (including assessments of Capt. John Smith, George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Edgar Allan Poe, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Clarence Darrow and Charlie Chan and accounts of campaign biographies, presidential inaugural addresses, American dictionaries, paper ballots, I.O.U.s, and murder rates) give the lie to the proposition that contemporary America lacks public intellectuals.

Along with a keen eye for the telling detail, Lepore is not afraid to be funny. Arguing that Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac" was composed, in equal parts, of parody and pretense, she notes that some scholars suggest that the proverb on delusion ("He that lives upon Hope, dies farting") is the result of a printer's error (which should have read "fasting"), only to ask us to remember that Franklin was the printer. And, after reading into the record one of Charlie Chan's memorable sayings ("Role of dead man require very little acting"), Lepore opines: "Don't ask me what that means. Aphorisms, like tiger in zoo, all roar, no claw."

Most important, Lepore's analysis is smart, sharp and sassy. The philosophy of "originalism" (the obligation of courts to make sure that laws adhere to the intent of the drafters of the Constitution), she points out, has no adherents anywhere but the United States, views change as decay, and mandates rote obedience to the prescriptions of men two centuries distant from us.

Lepore concludes provocatively and persuasively that the Constitution - 4,400 words set in ink on parchment - is the rule of law "and the noise all of us make when we disagree."

If the document is a fiddle, she writes, "it's also all the music that's ever been played on it. Some of that music is beautiful; much of it is humdrum; some of it sounds like hell."

To attract readers, Lepore recognizes, narrative non-fiction "has to be grabby, telling and true." And that getting at the truth isn't easy.

"The time has come to choose our better history," President Obama declared in his first inaugural address. It is not entirely clear what he meant, but if we are committed, as we should be, to learning about and learning from our terrific, tangled, and terrible past, "The Story of America" is a splendid place to start.
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Associated Images:

Lepore