

Wednesday 18 January (11.00am)

Professor Jill Lepore (DLitt)

The eyes of the world have always been on America. But have they ever viewed the United States with the intensity it does today? Has November the 8th's election result altered the way we view the leading nation of the free world?

If this elevated scrutiny alone wasn't enough, this view of America is further skewed by the prevalence of fake news, and by a President-Elect willingly manipulating the truth to influence others.

To coin a phrase from someone standing to my right: "It's a very yucky present in many ways."

Now, more than ever, it's important to hail the voices that accurately chronicle what has happened, and what is really happening, in America.

Today, we are joined by one of the foremost chroniclers of the state of the United States. I'd like to welcome Professor Jill Lepore to our University.

Jill was born and raised just outside of Worcester, Massachusetts. She headed into academia, but a stellar career as a writer/historian seemed unlikely – although she entered college via a scholarship, the maths major she studied failed to inflame her passions.

She then encountered an historic correspondence. A letter from the past. A letter from herself. One of Jill's high school teachers had previously asked pupils to write a letter to themselves in five years' time. Jill's mum forwarded the letter to her daughter. The 14-year-old Jill made it abundantly clear to the 19-year-old Jill she should stop "pretending to do things you care about."

"Get on with your life," she said. "Do what you're supposed to be doing."

The content of the letter jolted Jill into action.

She switched from maths to English, earning a BA from Tufts University in 1987. Three years later, she completed a Master's in American Studies from the University of Michigan, and followed that with a PhD from Yale University, where she specialised in early America. Writing, and the history of the United States, had become Jill's life.

She has been prolific ever since. From 2005, her essays for *The New Yorker* have covered an enormous range of topics – from slavery to democracy...from television to terrorism. Her scholarly books include 1998's *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* and 2005's *New York Burning: Liberty and Slavery in an Eighteenth-Century City*. Both these books demonstrate Jill's mastery of microhistory, where she scrutinises events often ignored by textbooks.

In 2014, she brought her investigative eye to the world of super-heroism in *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*. She even wrote a novel with fellow historian Jane Kamensky, which gently poked fun at 18th century popular fiction. It's hard to believe Jill has time to do anything apart from write – however, she *does* squeeze in a role as David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History at Harvard University.

Her abilities as an academic have been frequently recognised, including an award of Harvard College Professor for the quality of her undergraduate teaching. She's been elected to both the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society. Her books have earned similar acclaim, and her opinions have been sought way outside the sphere of academia: let's just say very few historians get invited onto TV shows broadcast on Comedy Central.

That's because there are few historians like Jill. Someone whose commitment and enthusiasm for what interests *her*...enthuses many, many more.

There's an online article that's titled 'Jill Lepore is an Inspirational Badass'. Let's remember that Jill isn't the lead singer of the Red Hot Chili Peppers. She's not the leader of an insurrectionist militia.

She's a historian. A badass one, at that. Which makes her somewhat unique in her field.

Mr Vice-Chancellor, in the name of the Senate, I present to you for admission to the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*, Professor Jill Lepore.