

Book Recommendations from a Historian in a Happy Place

Posted on November 30, 2012 by Michelle Bourdon

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I am armed and ready with great recommendations for your holiday reading list!

A copy of the Declaration of Independence. The Constitution in progress. A continental soldier's uniform. An eighteenth-century tea box. Buttons from Lincoln's campaign.

These items may sound boring to some, but when I heard they were going to be here at the Skirball, on view in the exhibition *Creating the United States*, I jumped for joy. I love history! I spent five years in graduate school, while working full time, to complete my degree in history. I am an American generalist, a California specialist, a women's movement enthusiast, a Cold War culture buff, and an archivist. I view history not as a chore, a list of dates and names, but as the story of people. Technologies develop, ideologies ebb and flow, personalities change, but human needs and passions are universal. Knowing about these people and their struggles and successes is a great way to learn about yourself and the world around you. Thousands of voices from the centuries make up a chorus of stories waiting to be heard, and many historians are giving those voices value in the endless array of books available to the general public.

Choosing the exhibition-related books to sell at [Audrey's Museum Store](#) is typically a job for our Operations Manager, Susan, but I was delighted to help her review titles as we prepared for *Creating the United States* and the companion "Democracy Matters" exhibitions, *Decades of Dissent*, *Free to be U.S.*, and *Lincoln Spotlight*. Selecting books relies on the old adage of judging a book by its cover. Is it interesting enough to catch someone's attention? Is it too scholarly for a casual reader? Is it a good price? Over the course of three months, we reviewed hundreds of books to compile our final book list of more than 100 titles for adults and children. Each book somehow relates thematically with the exhibitions specifically or broadly reflects the [Skirball mission](#). To make this bibliography a little less daunting, here are six choices to get you in the spirit of *Creating the United States*.

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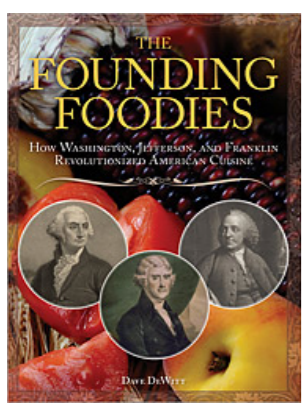
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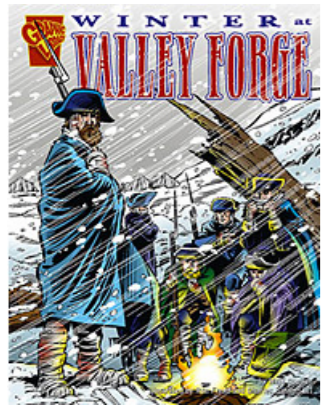
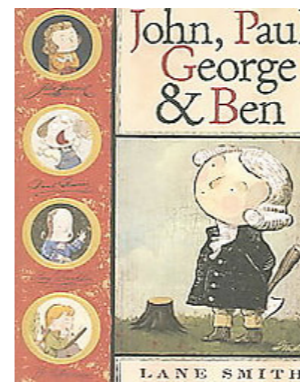
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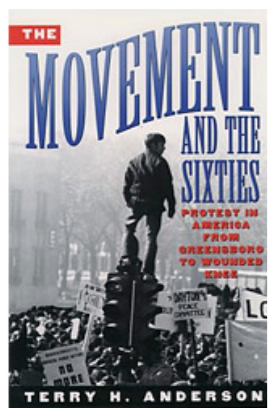
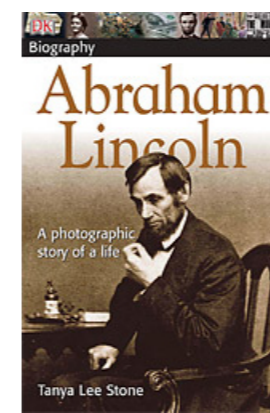
1) If the early republic and the Founding Fathers seem out of touch, hopefully a good book in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition will help. *Founding Foodies* by Dave DeWitt (\$16.99) makes George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin more approachable. DeWitt presents the agrarian practices of these gentlemen, something in which they had great pride. I especially like the brewing recipes from Mount Vernon and Monticello because my husband is a master brewer. Written in short sections with wit and insight, this is a great book for an epicurean.

2) Though it's recommended for children age six and up, I think Lane Smith's *John, Paul, George and Ben* (\$16.99) is great for readers of any age. The beautifully illustrated book pokes gentle fun at the legends of John Hancock, Paul Revere, George Washington, and Ben Franklin. Depicted as children creating mischief for authority figures, these larger-than-life individuals are recast as silly and clever caricatures.



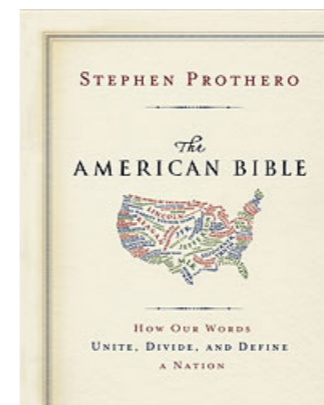
3) As you walk through *Creating the United States*, you will find a letter from John Buss, a soldier of the Revolutionary War camped at Valley Forge in 1777. The rare document reveals a great deal about the hardships endured. From an archival perspective, I love looking at the folds and the wrinkles of the letter as it aged through the centuries. To bring Valley Forge to life in bold color and clever language, read the graphic novel *Winter at Valley Forge* by Matt Doeden (\$7.95). Recommended for ages nine and up.

4) For young historians excited by their visit to the galleries, I like to recommend biographies. In stock now are several biographies from DK Publishing, which produces visually interesting and detailed narratives, including the DK biography of *Abraham Lincoln* (\$5.99). It's a perfect pair to our Lincoln Spotlight. I can imagine Lincoln tucking his leather satchel (currently on display) under his arm to take the Emancipation Proclamation to the Congress. A take-home copy of the *Emancipation Proclamation* (\$3.50) is also available for the budding historian.



5) As a child of hippies, I am drawn to the social and cultural activism of the 1960s, which is expressed graphically in the protest posters on view in *Decades of Dissent*. Covering a wide range of protests, Terry Anderson's *The Movement and the Sixties* (\$24.95) examines the social, political, and cultural developments of Greensboro, the Freedom Riders, the Summer of Love, the Chicago Convention, and so much more. Anderson is thorough and frank without being sentimental.

6) Stephen Prothero's *American Bible: How Our Words Unite, Divide, and Define a Nation* (\$29.99) is a great review of the ideals presented in the four exhibitions. This historiography examines various documents, speeches, and literature of the nation as discussed and evaluated over time. Prothero covers the Declaration of Independence, Supreme Court Cases, even Mark Twain. I want this book; I think you will, too.



Come into Audrey's Museum Store when you visit "Democracy Matters" and I will show you all the other wonderful titles available for purchase. Stay a while and we can have a discussion about the American Revolution, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Dorothea Lange, or the Stonewall Riots. Your choice!



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About Michelle Bourdon

While working for Audrey's Museum store over the last five years, Michelle Bourdon finished her master's degree, interned in the Museum department preserving photographs, and volunteered for the Braun Research Library. Besides reading historical works, she enjoys authors Ken Follett, John Fante, and Anya Seton. In the last year, Michelle and her husband toured Belgium's finest breweries in preparation for owning a brewery of their own someday, and after years of long locks, she cut her hair and donated an eleven-inch ponytail to Locks of Love. Coming up for Michelle are trips to San Diego and Oregon to spend time with her family as well as some quiet time at home with her husband and their black cat, Ham Sandwich.

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