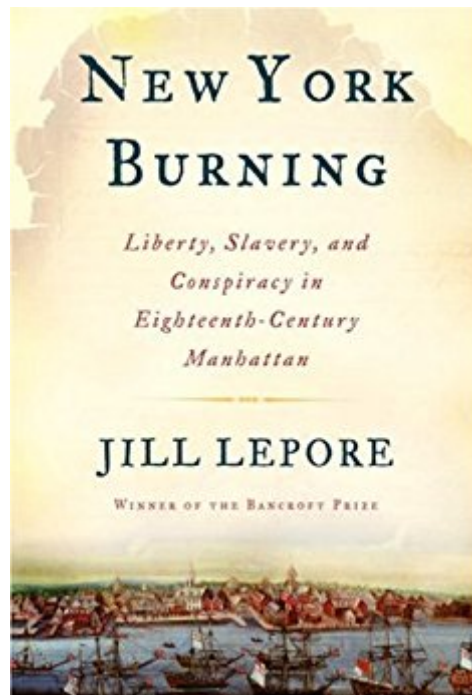


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# New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, And Conspiracy In Eighteenth-Century Manhattan



## Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize Finalist Anisfield-Wolf Award Winner Over a frigid few weeks in the winter of 1741, ten fires blazed across Manhattan. With each new fire, panicked whites saw more evidence of a slave uprising. In the end, thirteen black men were burned at the stake, seventeen were hanged and more than one hundred black men and women were thrown into a dungeon beneath City Hall. In *New York Burning*, Bancroft Prize-winning historian Jill Lepore recounts these dramatic events, re-creating, with path-breaking research, the nascent New York of the seventeenth century. Even then, the city was a rich mosaic of cultures, communities and colors, with slaves making up a full one-fifth of the population. Exploring the political and social climate of the times, Lepore dramatically shows how, in a city rife with state intrigue and terror, the threat of black rebellion united the white political pluralities in a frenzy of racial fear and violence. From the Trade Paperback edition.

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## Customer Reviews

Jill Lepore's "New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan" is a valuable and admirable examination of one of the darkest episodes in New York's history: the so-called slave rebellion of 1741 and the brutal vengeance that was extracted. Professor Lepore's

painstaking research confronts the reader with a terrible conclusion: even the most respectable of people in society will consent to the deaths of human beings, based on even the tiniest shreds of evidence. Focusing primarily on the actions of Daniel Horsmanden, the City's Recorder, Lepore provides the reader with a background on the attitudes of New York's whites toward their slaves. She makes clear that Gotham was neither the first nor only city to have witnessed slave uprisings. (It had suffered a similar uprising a couple of decades earlier.) But the events of 1741 were unique for several reasons:--the shifting finger-pointing at various groups;--the inconsistency of Mary Burton's testimony, which essentially was the case against several slaves; and--Horsmanden's bizarre behavior toward Mary Burton. Admittedly, I've only superficially studied this dark time in New York's history, so I was shocked to learn that there were actually several "conspiracies": the Negro Plot, Hughson's Plot, the Spanish Plot, the Roman Plot, etc. Each plot was hatched depending on who confessed to what. Worst of all, the white population of New York--fueled by racism, xenophobia, paranoia, and, not the least of all, bloodlust--went right along with it. And, with the exception of an intriguing anonymous letter from Massachusetts, it seems the rest of the colonies went along with it, too.

The subject of American slavery presents numerous challenges to the modern historian, not the least of which is its heterogeneous nature. The experience of a slave on a rice plantation in the Carolinas certainly would have contrasted that of a slave on a tobacco plantation in Maryland. Temporal, geographic, and other less grounded factors might have influenced the condition of human servitude in colonial and post-Revolution America. The distinction of urban slavery in the eighteenth century, particularly in the north, is relatively understudied. In *New York Burning*, Jill Lepore recreates early eighteenth century Manhattan, recounting the decisions of the court, the common talk on the streets, the comings and goings of sloops of trade and war, the livelihoods of its people, the menace of slavery, and a conspiracy that threatened to burn the city to the ground. The book is truly a great read, but objectivity and fact are sometimes brought out of focus making for interesting but questionable conclusions. Though the use of literary license, which is scattered between summary of the conspiracy trial and its proceedings, helps to contextualize events and enliven eighteenth century New York in the mind of the reader, it sometimes borders on fictive. The summer of 1741 is characterized in an imagined description: "The wind blew hot. In the streets, hogs sweated and dogs panted, seeking the shade of doorways and market awnings and the smooth coolness of the marble steps of fashionable houses." (Lepore, 171) The language animates the New York heat, working to contrast with the previous winter which was described in stylistically

similar prose, however as hogs cannot sweat, some of the magic is lost.

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