



JILL LEPORE

THE  
MANSION  
*of*  
HAPPINESS

A History *of* Life and Death

"A trenchant and fascinating intellectual  
history of life and death . . . elegant."

—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW

# THE MANSION OF HAPPINESS

*A History of Life and Death*

藏書章

JILL LEPORE



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Praise for Jill Lepore's

## THE MANSION OF HAPPINESS

"[Lepore] manages to spin a larger narrative that both fascinates and informs, showing that our taken-for-granted ideas about every stage of life are culturally specific, very much a product of our times."

—*The Washington Post*

"Lepore has mastered the neat trick of writing imaginatively and often humorously for a general audience without checking her scholarly swing . . . she gets you thinking like she does, and you can ask no more from a historian."

—*The Daily Beast*

"One of the pleasures of Lepore's work is the way she uses a single, deftly chosen artifact to crack open a much wider cultural vista. . . . If the bonds between the disparate subjects and motifs in *The Mansion of Happiness* sometimes seem to be sustained by Lepore's own personal version of extraordinary measures, there are plenty that hold firm. They can't be disputed or endorsed like traditional theories, but they can dazzle and illuminate and inspire. And that's just what they do."

—*Salon*

"Lepore has a brilliant way of selecting just the right historical detail to illuminate a larger point. . . . The most valuable lesson here is that of impermanence. Everything changes. And although, as Lepore writes, 'it's best to have a plan,' as her multifaceted, sometimes dizzying joyride of a book reveals, the next roll of dice could, in fact, change everything."

—*The Boston Globe*

"This fascinating book explores a few centuries' worth of ideas about life and death—you know, just a light beach read. But for all its analysis of Darwin and Aristotle, *The Mansion of Happiness* is a lot of fun. . . . [Lepore] is always engaging, even surprising."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

"A series of engaging and wonderfully perceptive essays on how individuals caught in time made sense of life and death. Jill Lepore is one of America's most accomplished and imaginative historians."

—Linda Colley, author of *The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh*

"A stunning meditation on three questions that have dominated serious reflection about human nature and cultures for centuries: How does life begin? What does it mean? What happens when we die? . . . Lepore's refreshing and often humorous insights breathe fresh air into these everlasting matters."

—BookPage

"A breezy, informative, wide-ranging book . . . singular, always stimulating."

—*The American Scholar*

"Lepore's prose is thoroughly engaging and witty. . . . Covers enough of mankind's earnest curiosity about life and death to both entertain and provoke thought."

—Booklist

"Lepore chooses quirky, though always revealing, lenses through which to examine the changing definitions of conception, infancy, childhood, puberty, marriage, middle age, parenthood, old age, death, and immortality. . . . Through sheer force of charisma, Lepore keeps her readers on track: this book, with all its detours and winding turns, is a journey worth taking."

—Library Journal

"Engaging. . . . Lepore writes about our striving to understand our existence. *The Mansion of Happiness* is an important addition to the effort."

—San Francisco Chronicle

"This is why Jill Lepore is becoming my favorite historian: wise, witty, wide in scope and deep in spirit."

—James Gleick, author of *The Information*

"Equip a profound scholar with H. L. Mencken's instinct for running down charlatans and chuckleheads, and you get this book. It will amuse and embarrass those of us ever befuddled by the rogues in her gallery."

—Garry Wills, author of *Lincoln at Gettysburg*

"Written with sardonic wit and penetrating intelligence, *The Mansion of Happiness* is a fascinating and startlingly original guide to the ways in which the human life cycle has been imagined, manipulated, managed, marketed, and debased in modern times."

—Stephen Greenblatt,  
author of *The Swerve: How The World Became Modern*



JILL LEPORE

## THE MANSION OF HAPPINESS

Jill Lepore is the David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History at Harvard University and a staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Her books include *The Story of America*; *The Whites of Their Eyes*; *New York Burning*, a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize; and *The Name of War*, winner of the Bancroft Prize. She lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

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THE MANSION OF  
HAPPINESS





*To John Demos*



At this amusement each will find  
A moral fit t'improve the mind.

—THE MANSION OF HAPPINESS

## Preface

This book is a history of ideas about life and death from before the cradle to beyond the grave. It starts with a seventeenth-century Englishman named William Harvey, who had the idea that life begins with an egg, and it ends with an American named Robert Ettinger, who, in the 1970s, began freezing the dead. If Victor Frankenstein were in this book, he'd fit right in, halfway between the egg man and the iceman. But Frankenstein's not here. In a history of life and death—which, really, could include just about anything—you have to leave rather a lot out.

To write history is to make an argument by telling a story. This is, above all, a book of stories. Each story here stands alone, but each makes an argument about the past, and, taken together, they offer an interpretation of the present. The tales I have to tell range over centuries and circle around a bit, but pause, for a goodish while, in the seventeenth and the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and, again, at the 1960s and '70s, because my argument is that the age of discovery, Darwin, and the space age turned ideas about life on earth topsy-turvy. New worlds were found; old paradises were lost. Many of these ideas were ideas about America.

Life used to be a circle: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Fortune used to be a wheel that turned, and turned again. Aristotle wrote about three ages of man: youth, the prime of life, and old age. Morning, noon, and night. Medieval writers wrote about three, too, or maybe four, like the seasons, from the spring of childhood to the winter of old age, or seven, like the planets. Whatever the number, the metaphor was always drawn from the

natural world, and went round and round. Then life lengthened, and the stages of life multiplied. In 1800, the fertility rate in the United States was over seven births per woman, the average age of the population was sixteen, and life expectancy was under forty. By 2010, the fertility rate had fallen to barely two, the average age of the population had risen to thirty-seven, and the average American could expect to live to nearly eighty. This demographic transition has been going on the world over. Life is no longer a circle.

When life lengthened, all those circles became lines: fortune, a number in a ledger; life, an evolution and, above all, a progression. In the latter part of the twentieth century, talk of progress was replaced by talk of innovation, but, really, it was the same hobbyhorse. Meanwhile, the contemplation of matters of life and death moved from the humanities to the sciences, from the library to the laboratory.

A line, unlike a circle, has an end. Or does it? Linear, scientific narratives of progress promise a different sort of eternity—humanity, undying—right up to the vague and halfhearted notion that one day, when the earth dies, humans will simply move to outer space, as if in the heavens, if not in heaven, will be found, at long last, life everlasting. When thinking about life and death moved from the library to the laboratory, the light of history dimmed. The future trumped the past. Youth vanquished age, and death grew unthinkable. The more secular ideas about immortality have become, the less well anyone, including and maybe especially doctors and scientists, has accepted dying, or even growing old. Freezing the dead, like living forever in another galaxy, is cockamamie, but it's not so far from anti-aging cream as you might suppose.

A word about this book's tone: questions about how life begins, what it means, and what happens when you're dead are so big that when people presume to answer them, or even to ask them, they can get awfully grandiose. "The only source of the true ridiculous," Henry Fielding once observed, "is affectation." Fielding, I like to think, would have found it difficult to read *The Day of a Godly Man's Death Better Than the Day of His Birth*, a frightfully bombastic sermon preached by Thomas Foxcroft in Boston on a bitterly cold February day in 1722, without wondering how far into the sermon Foxcroft had gotten before his parishioners slumped in their pews and nodded off. Sometimes, I wonder about that kind of thing, too.

This, also, must be said: matters of life and death have to do with faith

and knowledge and hope and despair. They are not, inherently, political, though they are quite commonly turned to political ends. Generally, the trouble begins when people who think they've found the answers start bullying other people into agreeing with them. Wars have been fought over far less. In the last few decades, charged and painful debates about what have been termed "culture of life" issues, including abortion, end-of-life medical care, stem cell research, and the right to die, have become battles in what has been called a war for the soul of America. These debates, which are usually understood as having to do with science and religion, have also to do with history. When people do battle over matters of life and death, they often believe, passionately and even devoutly, that their own ideas, and no one else's, are eternal. But even antique ideas have histories—sacred in one era, profane in another—and some seemingly timeless truths, like "the sanctity of life" or "death with dignity," turn out to be of fairly recent vintage. Those histories are worth excavating. Still, the past, while always edifying, is rarely dispositive: people believe and hold dear what they believe and hold dear for more reasons than what happened long ago. This book is a history; it's not a catechism.

The chapters of this book follow the stages of life, or what used to be called the ages of man: they start with life before birth and end with life after death. In between lie chapters on infant care, childhood, growing up, marrying, working, having children, growing old, and dying. But first comes an introduction, about the idea that life is a game, which is where this book gets its title: the Mansion of Happiness used to be the most popular board game around. A book, like life, is a voyage; this one begins with the unborn and ends with the undead. The game board is your map.

# Introduction

## THE MANSION OF HAPPINESS

In 1860, the year Abraham Lincoln was elected president, a lanky, long-nosed, twenty-three-year-old Yankee named Milton Bradley invented his first board game, played on a red-and-ivory checkerboard of sixty-four squares. He called it the Checkered Game of Life. Play starts at the board's lower left corner, on an ivory square labeled Infancy—illustrated by a tiny, black-inked lithograph of a wicker cradle—and ends, usually but not always, at Happy Old Age, at the upper right, although landing on Suicide, inadvertently, helplessly, miserably, and with a noose around your neck, is more common than you might think, and means, inconveniently, that you're dead.

"The game represents, as indicated by the name, the checkered journey of life," Bradley explained. There are good patches and bad, in roughly equal number. On the one hand: Honesty, Bravery, Success. On the other: Poverty, Idleness, Disgrace. The wise player will strive "to gain on his journey that which shall make him the most prosperous, and to shun that which will retard him in his progress." But even when you're heading for Happiness, you can end up at Ruin, passed out, drunk and drooling, on the floor of a seedy-looking tavern where Death darkens the door disguised as a debt collector straight out of *Bleak House*: the bulky black overcoat, the strangely sinister stovepipe hat.<sup>1</sup>

The history of games of life contains within it a history of ideas about life itself. The Checkered Game of Life made Milton Bradley a brand name. His company, founded in 1860, survived his death in 1911, the Depression,

and two world wars. In 1960, to celebrate its centennial, the Milton Bradley Company released a commemorative Game of Life. It bears almost no resemblance to its checkered nineteenth-century namesake. Instead, Milton Bradley's antebellum game about vice, virtue, and the pursuit of happiness was reinvented as a lesson in consumer conformity, a two-dimensional Levittown, complete with paychecks and retirement homes and medical bills. In Life, players fill teensy plastic station wagons with even teensier pink and blue plastic Mommies and Daddies, spin the Wheel of Fate, and ride along the Highway of Life, earning money, buying furniture, having pink and blue plastic babies, and retiring, if they're lucky, at Millionaire Acres. Along the way, there are good patches: "Adopt a Girl and Boy! Collect Presents!" And bad: "Jury Duty! Lose Turn." Whoever earns the most money wins. (The game's motto: "That's Life!") Inside the game box are piles and piles of paper: fake automobile insurance, phony stock certificates, pretend promissory notes, and play money, \$7.5 million of it, including a heap of mint-green fifty-thousand-dollar bills, each featuring a portrait of Bradley, near the end of his days: bearded, aged, antique.<sup>2</sup>

As the years passed, Life came to look more and more like that portrait of old man Bradley. Only a handful of games have had as long a shelf life. After all, not for long did anyone play Park and Shop, another game sold by the Milton Bradley Company in 1960, whose object was "to outsmart the other players by parking your car in a strategic place, completing your shopping quickly, and being the first to return home."<sup>3</sup> In the 1990s, Hasbro, which bought the Milton Bradley Company in 1984, revised Life to market it to the baby boomer parents who had grown up with it: the station wagons swelled into minivans and it became possible, a few miles down life's highway, to have a midlife crisis. The update was a disappointment. And so, in 2006, in an attempt to Botox the shiny, puffy nowness of youth into a gray-whiskered game, Hasbro decided to start again, to design a new game of life, by asking, What would Life be like if it were invented today? That's a question about the present. If you turn it around, though, you can make it into a question about the past: Why did Milton Bradley invent the Checkered Game, the way he did, when he did? How, in short, did Life begin?

A great many questions about life and death have no answers, including, notably, these three: How does life begin? What does it mean? What hap-



pens when you're dead? These questions are ancient; they riddle myths and legends; they lie at the heart of every religion; they animate a great deal of scientific research. No one has ever answered them and no one ever will, but everyone tries; trying is the human condition. All anyone can do is ask. That's why any history of ideas about life and death has to be, like this book, a history of curiosity.

"How did the *game* of life begin?," though, isn't an existential question; it's a historical one, and you can find answers to historical questions in libraries, museums, and archives, like the U.S. Patent Office. "I, MILTON BRADLEY, . . . have invented a new Social Game," Bradley wrote on his patent application. "In addition to the amusement and excitement of the game, it is intended to forcibly impress upon the minds of youth the great moral principles of virtue and vice."<sup>4</sup> It was a new game, but the genealogy of the Checkered Game of Life stretches back centuries and across oceans. Bradley's invention is descended from a family of ancient Southeast Asian games—members of a genus called "square board race games"—whose common ancestor is probably over a thousand years old. Nepal has the "game of karma"; Tibet has the "game of liberation." In India, Jñána Chaupár, the game of knowledge, is played much like the Checkered Game of Life: land on a virtue and you get to climb a ladder toward the god Vishnu; land on a vice and you're swallowed by a snake. Life has its ups and it has its downs. Then you die, the snake spits you out, and you start again.

In the nineteenth century, games from the farthest reaches of the British Empire and beyond found their way into middle-class Victorian parlors. A Persian game of life was collected, probably about 1810, by a British major general serving in northern India. The American firm of Selchow & Righter packaged pachisi as the Game of India at least as early as 1867. The New York-based McLoughlin Brothers sold the ancient Japanese game of Go as Go-Bang in 1887. Beginning in 1892, Jñána Chaupár was available in Britain as Snakes and Ladders; in the United States it was sold, entirely unhinged from its Indian origins, and decidedly karma-free, as Chutes and Ladders.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, although Milton Bradley kept a diary all his life, he never put his papers in an archive, and most of them have been lost, which, notwithstanding his patent application, makes it something of a challenge to know exactly how a young New Englander came, on the eve of the Civil War, to adapt an ancient Southeast Asian game to a red-and-ivory check-board featuring an American vision of the good life.<sup>6</sup> He certainly never