After he was hanged, John Hughson’s lifeless body was hung in chains, next to Caesar’s rotting corpse, on the island in the midst of the Little Collect.

But the executioner’s work was far from done. Before the sun went down, Albany, Curacoa, Dick, and Francis were burned to death, denying their guilt to the last. Smoke and the smell of burning flesh wafted over the city. Back at City Hall, two prisoners awaiting trial confessed, named names. Nine more men were arrested. The cascade of confessions had begun.

This was New York City, 1741, and the victims were primarily slaves. A series of fires in March and April, at first thought to have started accidentally, were soon blamed on the city’s black population. One evening, an angry mob of bucket brigadiers, having just doused another fire, rounded up all “the negroes” that could be found on the streets, including some fresh from fighting the flames. An inquisition ensued, and before it ended months later, many slaves were themselves consumed by fire—burned alive.

“It was an atrocious way to die,” writes professor of history Jill Lepore in her most recent book, New York Burning: Liberty, Slavery, and Conspiracy in Eighteenth-Century Manhattan, “but, by contemporary standards, it was a grisly kind of restraint.” The crueler alternatives for rebellious slaves, described in the book, included hanging in chains to die by slow starvation; breaking on the wheel; and slow roasting, “over a closely tended fire, to be tormented for eight to ten hours” until the body “was consumed to ashes.”

Lepore describes her research into such episodes of bloodletting as by turns “sickening” and “fascinating.” Though she has become well known for her ability to find meaning in the violence of the American past, tracing its influence in contemporary life, in person she is nothing but friendly and cheerful. She is a wife and the mother of three young children, for whom she enjoys making quilts from “stuff that was used for something else,” she says. “They’re meditations on the personalities of the kids—I’m very sentimental.” She enjoys biking and local history, and turning up objects—such as old home-brew beer jugs—while gardening in the backyard of her Cambridge Victorian. Altogether, she seems an unlikely person to be reading the entrails of colonial American history.

But her focus is not in violence alone. “As a graduate student,” she says, “I became really interested in how people justify cruelty,” particularly through their use of language. She’d been in the Air Force ROTC for a year as an undergraduate at Tufts University, graduating in 1987, and during the buildup to the Gulf War, she realized that friends would soon be fighting there. With both “a personal and political stake in that conflict,” she says, “I spent a lot of time paying attention to how the justifications for the war were elaborated.” At the same time, in her studies, she was “fascinated with the daily experience of gruesomeness and bloodshed in the colonial world—the twisting of the chicken’s neck in the barnyard and what that daily bloodiness would mean to how people then understood warfare and physical conflict of other sorts.”

Her first book, The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity, arose directly from that interest. In an evocative exploration, she traces the widening rift between the New England colonists and Native Americans of the seventeenth century, a divide that erupted into violent conflict in 1675—a “war” whose very name, as Lepore writes, became “a contest for meaning” that the colonists ultimately won.

We now know that episode in American history as King Philip’s War, though the Indian sachem was not a king, as Lepore explains, nor was his name Philip, nor was the conflict really a war. The colonists characterized their enemies’ attacks as mindless, while
simultaneously elevating their own aggression by describing it as a religious struggle against heathens. They frequently justified the war by describing the savagery of the Indians, who scalped settlers and burned their property, though English soldiers engaged in a ruthless hunt for “King Philip” and after his death quartered his body, decapitated it, and mounted his head on a pole. Lepore follows the colonists’ growing sense that Indians were inferior, comparing the first thanksgiving, which Massasoit, father of Philip, attended as an honored guest and valued friend, to the thanksgiving held after the war, with Philip’s head on a pike for the feast at Plymouth, at once a trophy and a warning.

And what of the next generation, Philip’s son? After high-minded debate that was “riddled with contradictions” among some of the leading theologians of the day, the nine-year-old was sold into slavery. Those who decided his fate chose not to make an official record of their final decision. We know what happened to the boy (whose name does not survive) only from a casual postscript in a personal letter. To the victors go the spoils of justifying language—and the right to selective silence.

In 1990, when Lepore chose to write about King Philip’s War for her Ph.D. dissertation, she had also considered writing about the New York slave conspiracy. “But the surviving documents seemed so one-sided to me,” she says. “Whereas with King Philip’s War...there had been a generation of scholars who had
worked hard to understand and recover the Indian voice [so that] the sources spoke to me as much more double-edged. The earlier colonial community was also much more divided, because some people spoke out against the war, providing a “greater range of perspectives and rhetorical conflict.”

But she kept thinking about the slave conspiracy. As a graduate student, she says, “I couldn’t figure out a way to get underneath Daniel Horsmanden’s journal.” Horsmanden, in 1741 a justice of the New York Supreme Court, is the author (though he made efforts to hide it) of “A JOURNAL OF THE PROCEEDINGS IN The Detection of the Conspiracy formed by Some White People, in Conjunction with Negro and other Slaves, for Burning the City of NEW-YORK in AMERICA, and Murdering the Inhabitants.” He served as chief investigator, interrogator, and judge during most of the trials, acting largely alone, though he does not acknowledge this in his notably one-sided journal, which is the problematic and primary source of historical evidence for this little-known episode in American history.

Although blacks made up 20 percent of New York City’s population then, there remains no untainted slave narrative from the period to tell us independently about the conspiracy. So when excavations for a federal office building in 1991 uncovered an African burial ground in the heart of Manhattan, Lepore thought excitedly, “This will be the counter-narrative to Daniel Horsmanden’s journal. The physical anthropology will tell me about black life, and all these artifacts will offer a ritual culture reading of slaves in New York.” But the findings were not immediately available, even to scholars (several final reports have appeared only in the last year), so in the meantime, Lepore searched for cracks in the journal’s monolithic presentation of events.

Lepore first discovered her interest in history while at Harvard. An English major at Tufts, she subsequently worked as a staff member at the Bunting Institute for two years and managed to “smuggle” herself, as she says with a quick smile, into a Harvard graduate history seminar. She had no background in history, but she “became quite passionate about it.” She entered the American culture program at the University of Michigan, where she earned her master’s, went to Yale for her doctorate, and revisited Harvard in 1996-1997 as a Warren Center Fellow to revise her dissertation for publication. Then, after a year of teaching at the University of California, San Diego, she became an assistant, and later an associate, professor at Boston University, where she wrote A is for American, an exploration of the origins of the American form of English. She returned to Harvard as a tenured professor two years ago.

She’d been thinking about the New York slave conspiracy in the intervening years, teaching it in both graduate and undergraduate seminars, trying all the time to tackle the problem of Horsmanden, the classic unreliable narrator. She even made a pilgrimage with her graduate-seminar students from BU to see a portrait of Horsmanden at Harvard Law School. “He looks terrible,” she says, “like somebody you would not want to know.”

Unlike most biographers, Lepore didn’t need to worry about liking her subject too much. “Here is this man of the eighteenth century who deeply despised blacks—and also, I think, deeply despised women—and is utterly unselfconscious about this aspect of himself,” she says. “Yet it is so glaring to modern readers that it is almost difficult to listen to anything that he has to say. Even compared to his peers, it is a distraction in his writing.” Yet Lepore knew that in order to understand what happened in the spring of 1741, she would “need to get beyond that and try to get to know him, to get so close to him that I could pull back from him.”

Horsmanden was raised in England, and had an inheritance, but lost it all in the South Sea Bubble. He came to America virtually penniless. He appears to have contracted a venereal disease as a young man while “rogering whores” with a cousin, which perhaps explains his venom toward the pregnant white prostitute Peggy Kerry, still carrying the child of accused slave Caesar when Horsmanden sentenced her to death. Horsmanden himself married his first wife (she was likely in her seventies, he in his fifties) for her money.

New York Burning provides a damning indictment of Horsmanden, and leaves little doubt that many innocent victims died due to his actions. But was there really a conspiracy to burn New York and kill all the white men, thus exposing their women to “the rapacious lust of these villains”? Lepore presents a complex web of informed speculations, centering on a robbery, that drive toward plausible answers, but ultimately, her conclusions about the role the conspiracy and the legal proceedings played in colonial poli-
Lepore marshals a range of evidence for this thesis, employing the tools of a literary critic and a cultural historian to complement the population databases and the layered, digitized, geographic information system (GIS) maps of a social historian. “Researching and writing this was the most fun that I have ever had as an historian,” she says. “The project called for so many different styles of research.” In one chapter, Lepore attempts to uncover the identity of an anonymous writer from Massachusetts who outraged the New York justices by making explicit the parallels between their actions and the Salem witch trials of 1692. Following her detective work as she tries to unmask the provocateur suggests the wide-ranging yet detailed investigations that stand behind the book.

One of the hallmarks of Lepore’s vibrant writing is its accessibility to popular audiences. New York Burning continues that happy trait, but with a much larger and less familiar cast of characters than The Name of War, as well as a more complex story line and argument. At times, the web of accusations in the trial can be challenging to untangle, and Lepore’s admirable unwillingness to favor a single interpretation of the evidence can leave the reader feeling abandoned. But then one is reassured by her own wistfulness regarding those things in history which are unknowable.

“On a clear, windy day in October 2003,” she writes at the end of New York Burning, “408 sets of remains and artifacts, boxed in tiny wooden coffins made in Africa, arrived by boat at the Wall Street pier, near where arriving Africans were once auctioned.” Lepore was there for the ceremonial reburial of the remains unearthed in 1991. The hoped-for anthropological counterpoint to Horsmanden hadn’t materialized. (“Researchers [at Howard University] refused to grant access to the remains and artifacts to outside scholars and scientists and would not publish their own findings,” she writes.) Now the evidence would be reburied, with music and political speeches. Then…

...the tiny coffins were loaded on horsedrawn wagons… Black New Yorkers—toddlers, grandmothers, businessmen—approached, tentatively, to touch the coffins, to caress them, reaching into their own past, mourning the dead and the horror of slavery. But those still moments of intimacy, of prayer and reckoning, were drowned in a sea of flickering flashbulbs, jostling camera crews, and the calculated chaos of what quickly became a political rally…[On reaching the burial ground,] the wagons came to a halt. The coffins were unloaded, one by one. The crowd grew restless. An older black woman wearing a purple headaddress, who had perched silently on top of one of the wagons during the procession, suddenly shouted: “They will not rest, they will not rest, until we are repaid!” All eyes turned to her. “They owe us!” she called. “They owe us! They owe us!” And the crowd hollered back: “Reparations!”… “Reparations NOW!”

Lepore ends the book with an historian’s incantation to secrets kept and buried, a sort of rain dance to the unwritten life stories of New York’s slaves. In a meditation on “Burial 340,” an African-born woman with filed teeth, who was buried with a girdle of beads around her waist, she writes:

Most of the beads found with Burial 340 were made of glass, chiefly blue and green and turquoise, the color of the ocean over which she had traveled and of the river she must cross. Glass beads like these were manufactured in Venice and Amsterdam and traded, for slaves, on the African coast. Two of the beads were cowrie shells, from Africa. One was amber. Another, a large black bead, was manufactured by the Iroquois, sometime between 1682 and 1750.

The beads’ meanings varied from culture to culture. “Because beads, like ideas, are heirloomed, passed along from one generation to another, they aggravate archaeologists; they evade analysis,” she continues. “And because beads, like ideas, are strung together, a strand is more than the sum of its beads, just as a plot is more than the sum of its elements.

“Even if bead scholars could trace every single bead on the strand...to its place of manufacture, they wouldn’t know what those beads meant to the woman who wore them even after death. In this,” she laments, “those beads are much like the details of the 1741 slave confessions...

Oh, but those beads, some of them are centuries old, and they come from all over the world. Who knows how they came into this woman’s hands, or how she carried them, across the Atlantic, on that miserable Middle Passage? But still I strain to hear, over the calls for reparations, over the rumble of barrels being pushed over cobblestones, the rattling of that long string of blue beads, wound around the waist of a woman of middle age, hidden, jangling under her clothes, as she walks down Maiden Lane.

Jonathan S. Shaw ’89, managing editor of this magazine, lives in a house built by a soldier in “King Philip’s War.”

An official memorial—designed by Rodney Léon based on Congolese cosmology—will be built on the site of the African Burial Ground, now a National Historic Landmark, in New York City.