

History Access Reading Group

Meet with PROFESSOR RICHARD JOHNSON
to discuss

A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard Based on Her
Diary, 1785-1812, by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990)

Tuesday, January 22, 2008
2:00–3:30, Smith 306

Paperback widely available new and used

This already classic study, that won its author numerous book prizes, including the Pulitzer, takes as its text the diary left by Mrs. Martha Ballard who lived on the Kennebec River in late 18th-century Maine. From the raw fabric of the diary's entries, Laurel Ulrich weaves a remarkable and often moving chronicle of Martha's lifework as midwife, healer, housewife, employer of young women artisans, and active participant in the life (and scandals) of a frontier community. Through the life of an extraordinary woman, the book illuminates the lives of "ordinary" people in post-revolutionary America. But it also shows a skillful historian at work, drawing analysis out of intractable materials and revealing lost substructures of American society by showing how what women write, then and now, uncovers the history of women. We might consider both what the book adds to our knowledge of the past and how Ulrich has contrived to do this.

Study Questions on Reverse

Please sign up for this group by contacting History Undergraduate Advising:

Phone: 543-5691 or Email: histadv@u.washington.edu

Or visit our website and click on the RSVP button at:

<http://depts.washington.edu/history/studying/access/reading.html>

You will find much information about the book and its making on the web. In particular, see:

- http://dohistory.org/book/100_aboutBook.html
that includes an interview with Laurel Ulrich and her acceptance speech on receiving the Bancroft Prize
- <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/mwt/filmmore/fd.html>
that gives details of the film first screened by PBS in 1998 that presents scenes re-creating Martha Ballard's life and others where Ulrich speaks of her crafting of the book. Includes film script, study guide, short essays on aspects of late 18th-century society, and further readings
- <http://dohistory.org/diary/>
The raw material: Martha Ballard's diary in its manuscript form, online, to be read.

Study Questions

1. What would you identify as Ulrich's literary and historical strategies in building upon the diary to produce a book?
2. What balance does she strike – and how successfully – between writing women's history and one woman's history?
3. What emerge as the main concerns shaping the life of inhabitants of early 19th-century Maine?
4. What would you see as the themes – and metaphors – governing the relationships between family, the sexes, and society at this time?
5. And finally, if you were assigning this book to a class, what would you hope it would contribute to an understanding of post-revolutionary America, and what could it not be expected to contribute?