MELANIE STETSON FREEMAN/STAFF

Megan Marshall, a writer, scholar, and biographer, poses in her home on May 30, 2022, in Belmont, Massachusetts.

FROM THE EDITORS

This biographer's mantra: 'Every life is a gift'

As an avid people watcher, I try to imagine the lives of those whose paths cross mine. I devour biographies with a similar desire to know the details of someone's life: what shaped their thinking, how they became who they are, and especially how they overcame obstacles. I relish nonfiction books that take an unexpected tack on a well-known figure (see "Benjamin Franklin's Last Bet," reviewed on page 36).

Earlier this spring, I had an opportunity to chat with Megan Marshall, this year's winner of the Biography International Organization Award for her body of work, which includes three biographies, all of extraordinary women. Her 2013 book, "Margaret Fuller: A New American Life," won the Pulitzer Prize. She spoke about the role of a biographer as "helping readers bridge the gap between their experience and a life from the past."

BY APRIL AUSTIN
DEPUTY WEEKLY EDITION EDITOR

Good biographies can serve as inspiration, giving readers a front-row seat on another person's struggles. In the case of Fuller, a 19th-century journalist, feminist, and colleague of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "she had a vision for herself that really didn't exist [in society]," Ms. Marshall says. "She speaks to readers today because she ... developed this theory of 'no wholly masculine man, no purely feminine woman.' They're all sliding into each other. Nobody else was writing like that."

When readers see themselves and their times reflected in a biography, it can give them perspective, Ms. Marshall says. "There is so much to be worried about and so much that seems hopeless. But if you go back and look at other times when there seemed to be no hope ... you'll see how people rose up anyway," she says. "That is one of the most important things a biographer can do."

She continues, "Just seeing how people renewed their hope, what right do we have to give up when people in extremely dire situations used whatever tools were available to them to try to make a difference?"

Readers may wonder how one person can change the trajectory of a society. Ms. Marshall explains the concept of a "trim tab," a favorite idea of inventor Buckminster Fuller, who incidentally was a grandnephew of Margaret Fuller. "A huge steamship or an airplane will have a trim tab, and just moving it the slightest bit can alter the direction," she says. "I like to think that someone like Margaret Fuller or Buckminster Fuller could just make a little difference in the huge stream of life.

"We can take those messages of those who didn't give up," she says. "Alternatively, you can learn from people who didn't make it. Everyone is worthy of remembrance and ... every life is a gift. And what you do with that gift is up to you."

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