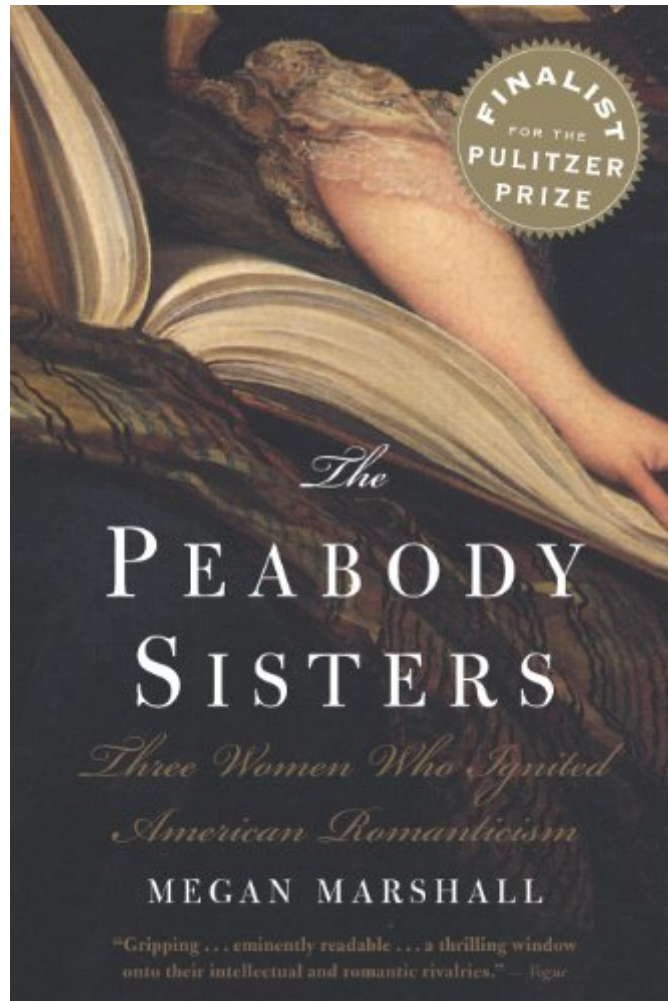


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# The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism



## Synopsis

Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia Peabody were in many ways our American Brontes. The story of these remarkable sisters and their central role in shaping the thinking of their day has never before been fully told. Twenty years in the making, Megan Marshall's monumental biography brings the era of creative ferment known as American Romanticism to new life. Elizabeth, the oldest sister, was a mind-on-fire thinker. A powerful influence on the great writers of the era — Emerson, Hawthorne, and Thoreau among them — she also published some of their earliest works. It was Elizabeth who prodded these newly minted Transcendentalists away from Emerson's individualism and toward a greater connection to others. Mary was a determined and passionate reformer who finally found her soul mate in the great educator Horace Mann. The frail Sophia was a painter who won the admiration of the preeminent society artists of the day. She married Nathaniel Hawthorne — but not before Hawthorne threw the delicate dynamics among the sisters into disarray. Marshall focuses on the moment when the Peabody sisters made their indelible mark on history. Her unprecedented research into these lives uncovered thousands of letters never read before as well as other previously unmined original sources. *The Peabody Sisters* casts new light on a legendary American era. Its publication is destined to become an event in American biography. This book is highly recommended for students and reading groups interested in American history, American literature, and women's studies. It is a wonderful look into 19th-century life.

## Book Information

File Size: 10356 KB

Print Length: 636 pages

Publisher: Mariner Books; Reprint edition (May 11, 2006)

Publication Date: May 11, 2006

Sold by: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Language: English

ASIN: B004H1UONG

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Enabled

Lending: Not Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #183,830 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #45

inÂ Books > Biographies & Memoirs > Regional U.S. > New England #129 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Historical Study > Social History > Gay & Gender Studies #381 inÂ Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > History > Women in History

## Customer Reviews

Not since 1950 and Louise Hall Tharp's book "The Peabody Sisters of Salem" has any author tackled the daunting task of writing a collective biography of these women. It's almost difficult to believe that Tharp and Marshall used some of the same personal letters as source material. For this new offering is the masterpiece, a Rolls Royce to Tharp's tricycle. No wonder it took decades to assemble and complete. Though the sisters had three younger brothers, the accomplishments of the men pale in comparison with those of the women. Elizabeth (1804-1887) was a teacher, writer, publisher, and encouraging friend (and never more than that) to many of the Transcendentalists and their crew. Mary (1806-1887) was the beautiful one, another teacher, who set her sights early on snagging Horace Mann as a spouse (and eventually succeeded). Sophia (1809-1871) was the invalid artist who found her creative dream partner in husband Nathaniel Hawthorne. All were inspired by the example set by their mother, Elizabeth Palmer Peabody (1778-1853), whose liberal and feminist ideals are in retrospect more suggestive of the late 20th century, and not of her own time. The Peabodys were not among the financially elite Bay-Staters, but they seemed to have their fingers on the pulse of the commonwealth and on the trends of the country. Framed at beginning and end by Sophia and Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1842 wedding, this volume is one of the most detailed narrative chronicles of familial correspondence you're apt to read in your lifetime. It's never tedious, simply all-encompassing. The very words of the individuals themselves are so revealing, so personal. We can tap into their emotions of the moment: their joys, sorrows, angers, jealousies, misunderstandings, and hopes.

Oxen-like in size, this is a delight of a historical biography. The Peabody sisters are three extraordinary women well worth getting to know, which you will, intimately, in Megan Marshall's fantastic portrait of Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia. Particularly with Elizabeth, the eldest and most influential, Marshall goes into such detail that it's as if the two were best friends. Innumerable letters and journal entries are quoted tirelessly (it inspires one to keep better record of one's own life), and you will be amazed at how thoughtful and brilliant Elizabeth was. The company she kept is a who's who of Boston's elite: tutored by Ralph Waldo Emerson, befriended by a famous Boston minister who used their discussions faithfully as the basis for his popular sermons, and personal friend of a

Harvard University president who allowed her to peruse his bookshelf whenever she wanted--and all this before age twenty! Next is beautiful Mary, who learned early on to use her looks to her advantage, though unable to penetrate her older sister's shadow; and Sophia, the youngest, a notable artist who was crippled by headaches for much of her life, but was stronger than anyone gave her credit for. Mary eventually married Horace Mann, Sophia became Mrs. Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Elizabeth never married, though it was she who befriended Mann and Hawthorne before either of her sisters knew the men. The book focuses mainly on the sisters' lives pre-marriages and their academic achievements and contributions to the Romantic Movement, not the family drama, though there is a decent enough helping of the latter that no one will feel cheated out of a good story.

When you think of that somewhat hazy designation "The New England Transcendentalists," I'll bet the first legendary figure that automatically springs to mind is Ralph Waldo Emerson. It could just as easily be Thoreau, Hawthorne, Alcott, or another half dozen men of the time and place. Do the names Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia Peabody resonate with you, as well? They didn't for me until I read Megan Marshall's 2005 biography *The Peabody Sisters*. Marshall's narrative is the result of a monumental undertaking: spanning two decades and a continent, her tireless search for primary sources unearthed thousands of pages of journals and letters cached across the country in small-town libraries, universities, and private homes. She set out to read every word written by the sisters, and also studied the papers of their associates and pored over the many books the Peabodys say influenced them in their formative years. From this morass of material, Marshall marshaled (I couldn't resist) a group biography which not only discloses the early lives of the sisters in intimate detail, but paints a picture of the events, beliefs, prejudices, and social mores of that turbulent time in American history. This is not the typical biography that follows its subjects to the grave. Marshall tells a coming-of-age story that ties the girls' spiritual struggles, attempts to define themselves, and strivings for self-development to those of the young nation. For the most part resisting the present-day temptation to posit all sorts of unconscious motivations, Marshall allows the sisters to speak directly for themselves. With a graceful economy of phrasing, she weaves together disparate threads from journal entries and correspondences to craft an intensely personal biography.

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