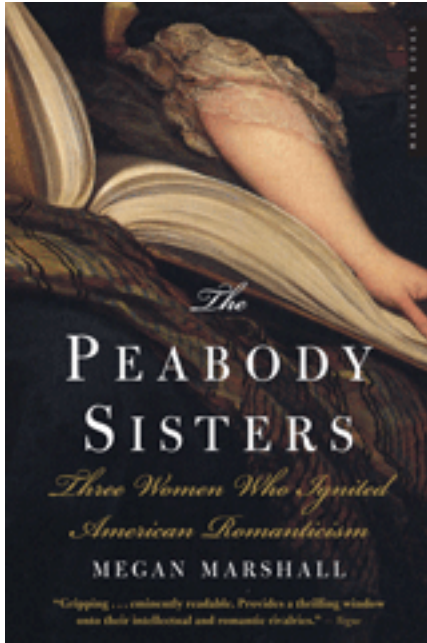


## A Reader's Guide



# The Peabody Sisters

by Megan Marshall

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- Finalist, Pulitzer Prize for Biography
- Winner, Francis Parkman Prize awarded by The Society of American Historians
- Winner, Mark Lynton History Prize

## About the Book

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Fascinating, insightful, and wholly engrossing, *The Peabody Sisters* is a landmark biography of three women who made American intellectual history. Though theirs may not be household names, Elizabeth, Mary, and Sophia Peabody had an extraordinary influence on the thought of their day, the movement of intense creative ferment known as American Romanticism. Megan Marshall adeptly brings to life the sisters and the men they loved and inspired, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Mann, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. In a work filled with startling revelations, Marshall presents a vivid and nuanced psychological portrait of a sisterhood rife with shifting loyalties yet founded on enduring affection.

"A stunning work of biography and intellectual history." — *New York Times*

"This portrait of New England between the Revolution and Civil War brings its characters to vivid life. There's a vibrant history inside this thick volume." — *People*, Critic's Choice, Four Stars

## About the Author

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**Megan Marshall's** work on *The Peabody Sisters* has been supported by the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Marshall has published numerous articles on women's history and literature and New England subjects in *The New Yorker*, *Slate.com*, the *New York Times*, and *The New Republic*. She has been awarded a year's fellowship at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study for work on her next book, a biography of Nathaniel Hawthorne's brilliant and reclusive older sister Elizabeth. She resides in Newton, Massachusetts.

## Questions for Discussion

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We hope the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *The Peabody Sisters* for every reader.

1. Many prominent women of the nineteenth century were raised by strong-willed fathers who gave their daughters a "boy's education." The Peabody sisters were different: it was their mother who was their most profound intellectual influence. Discuss the relationship between Eliza Palmer Peabody and her daughters, the strengths she offered as a mother, as well as areas of conflict. What might have been the effects of having a strong mother as a role model, rather than a father who insisted that a talented girl was "exceptional" or had a "man's mind"?
2. The Peabody sisters were women of ambition and talent living in a time of restricted opportunity for women. They could not go to college, and teaching was the only profession easily available. Discuss the ways each of the sisters coped with restrictions and did or did not make use of her own personal power.
3. The three Peabody sisters were "linked in heart, in opinions, and in talents," according to their mother, yet as in all threesomes there were periods of stress when alliances formed or shifted. Identify several key moments when alliances among the sisters shifted and discuss the meaning of those times for each sister.
4. Birth order has a significant impact on personal development. How did birth order affect all six Peabody children? Were the Peabody brothers fated to live lives of relative insignificance, or were other, more significant factors at work, such as the era of economic turmoil in which they came of age?
5. Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller both held classes, or "conversations," for women in which members studied world history or Greek mythology, among other academic subjects. These classes provided significant opportunities for women to discuss larger issues as well. Fuller asked in class, "What were women born to do?" Elizabeth Peabody's class deliberated over "the meaning of life," and concluded that women must cultivate an innate spirituality, but also find ways to act for the betterment of society. These are large questions, and no less relevant today. What important questions would you want to pose in your group?

**6.** The Peabody sisters' circle included some of the most talented and powerful men of their time and place, including Reverend William Ellery Channing, Horace Mann, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Theodore Parker. Remarkably, these were men of quite different dispositions and intellectual styles, and yet the sisters appealed to and influenced all of them. Discuss the different styles of manhood represented by these key figures who might be called, in Emerson's famous phrase, "Representative Men."

**7.** Consider the classroom that Elizabeth Peabody and Bronson Alcott created for the Temple School. Which of their progressive methods have been adopted by the mainstream? What would be the elements of your ideal classroom?

**8.** Transcendentalism has been notoriously hard to define, perhaps because it was essentially a movement that empowered individuals to seek their own answers to fundamental questions. Discuss the three strands of transcendentalism that emerge in the book: the cultivation of an inner life and a personal spirituality; the "social principle" that Elizabeth Peabody defined as an impulse to do good for others; and nature as revelation of an overarching spirit alive in the world. Were all three sisters transcendentalists? Were Nathaniel Hawthorne and Horace Mann transcendentalists, even though they sometimes disparaged their idealistic peers?

**9.** There are several triangular relationships in the book besides that of the three Peabody sisters. How would you sort out the romantic entanglements of Horace Mann with Mary and Elizabeth Peabody, and Nathaniel Hawthorne with Elizabeth and Sophia? What did Elizabeth want from her relationships with these men, and was she really the loser when her sisters married them?

**10.** The Channing brothers, Rev. William Ellery Channing and Dr. Walter Channing, played powerful roles in the lives of Elizabeth and Sophia Peabody. Was Elizabeth's relationship with Rev. Channing one of mentorship or mutual influence, or both? Compare Sophia's relationship with Dr. Walter Channing to a psychotherapeutic relationship today.

## **A Conversation with Megan Marshall**

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People used to ask me, when they found out how long I'd been working on the book, Why don't you just write about just one of the Peabody sisters? I could have done that. Each sister's story was equally fascinating.

But I realized I could read a thousand letters by one sister and never really know her until I read all the letters her sisters wrote back to her. The shifting alliances and rivalries these letters revealed became the heart of the book. The sisters' struggle to define themselves as individuals while remaining true to the deep affection they felt for one another became the plot. Hard as it was to decipher so many handwritten letters, decoding what was almost a foreign language of early-nineteenth-century references and phrases, I felt tremendously privileged to be doing this work.

The Peabody sisters were inseparable — "linked in heart, opinions, and talents," their mother said of them. The trick was to capture all this in one narrative: the direction and complexity of each life along with the interplay among the "sisterhood," as they sometimes referred to themselves. That's what took me twenty years to figure out.

## For Further Reading

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The following titles may be of interest to readers of *The Peabody Sisters*:

[February House](#), [Sherill Tippins](#)

*Selected Works*, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller

*The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne

[Walden](#), [Henry David Thoreau](#)