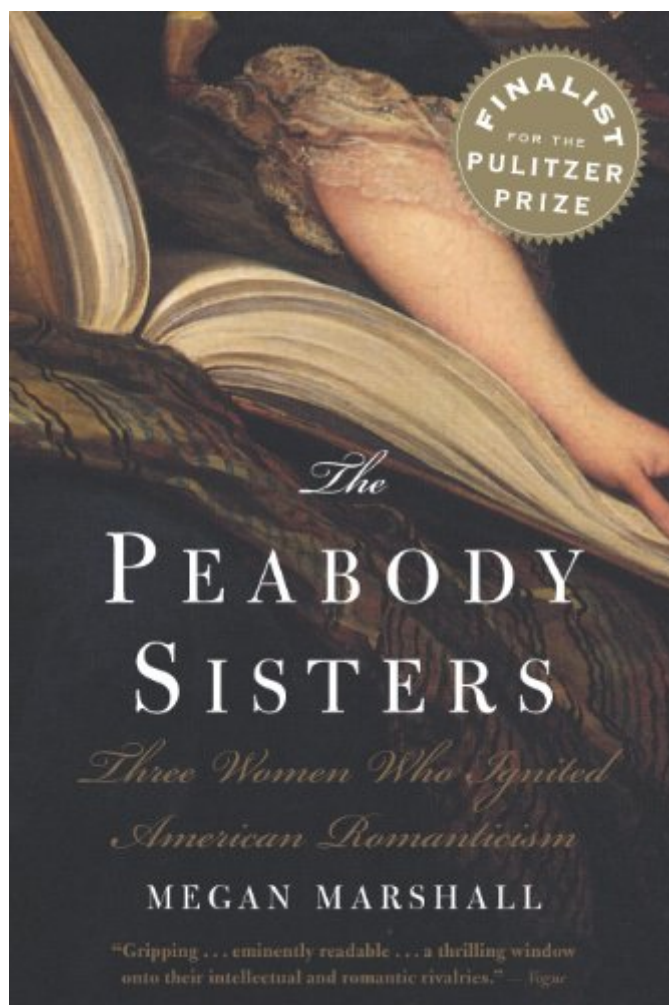


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# The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

I thoroughly enjoyed reading Marshall's biography based on the lives of Elizabeth, Mary and Sophia Peabody. While the book contains an impressive amount of detailed research on the lives of these exceptional women, it reads like a novel. One of the aspects that I found most enjoyable was exploring both "the facts" about their lives as well as their relationships with one another. The other aspect that I applaud Marshall for is shedding light on the contributions of women during this time period as well as the myriad of constraints placed upon them. The cast of characters in this book includes some of the more prominent and widely written about figures of the era including William Ellery Channing, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Mann, Bronson Alcott, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Washington Allston, Theodore Parker and Margaret Fuller. Once again, Marshall adeptly broadens the reader's perspective of the time period by using her research to develop the Peabody sisters' relationships to these notables. The length of this book did not deter me; in fact, it left me wanting more. It is imperative to acknowledge and learn from these movers and thinkers of the day who challenged the status quo and left their mark in the areas of philosophy, religion, education and art. Perhaps Marshall will follow up with a book that covers the sister's later years. In the meantime, I look forward to reading her account of Margaret Fuller.

Lucky for me my book group chose Megan Marshall's "The Peabody Sisters: Three Women Who Ignited American Romanticism," because otherwise I might never have read it. And that would have been a shame. I vaguely knew that the sisters were reformers in education and that two of them were better known for marrying famous men: Mary to Horace Mann and Sophia to Nathaniel Hawthorne; but having little interest in 19th century American literature, I had less inclination to read about three sisters who dabbled in reform. The more fool I. These women are fascinating. And Elizabeth Peabody--the one I knew least about--is the most amazing of all. I felt like such a slacker after reading that Elizabeth taught herself Hebrew and Greek, read through the New Testament three times the summer she was 13, independently anticipating the theology of the Unitarian-Universalists. It was Elizabeth who, as a very young woman, named the

Transcendentalists long before they knew they were the Transcendentalists. Her sisters were almost as amazing as she was. They deserve to be remembered. Marshall does the biographer's turn by giving a chapter each to the sister's mother and grandmother, setting the tone for what would follow. She is to be applauded for writing in a lively manner. I'm not much for biographies, but this one kept my interest to the end. Marshall has a readable, enjoyable style, and she incorporates her subjects' words as often as possible. I recommend this book to anyone who likes biographies, American history, and especially women's history. And anyone who just likes a good read.

I can't resist books about sisters, I've read more by and about the Mitford sisters than I'd care to admit, and this thoroughly researched book about the Peabody sisters has all the charms that the best of such books can offer--fascinating personalities, in-depth observations of their family dynamics, and an intimate window into the history of their time. It's just as informative and moving as author Megan Marshall's more recent book on Margaret Fuller. Those two books complement each other since they are both about women who were leading thinkers and influential players during the pre-Civil War era when American Romanticism and Transcendentalism were flowering, a time mainly dominated by men. Money was always an issue for the Peabody family, but that seemed to push each of the sisters to excel. Elizabeth had a voracious intellect and her ideas helped inspire the likes of Emerson, Thoreau, and Bronson Alcott. She published their early works, urged them to curb their individualistic philosophies to connect more with others, and has had a lasting impact by promoting the benefits of kindergarten. Mary was a compassionate reformer who married statesman and educator Horace Mann. Sophia, though sickly, was recognized as a talented artist and she married novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne. The book's tone is sympathetic, but honest, and the sisters come to life on the page to such an extent that it made me feel like I know them.

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