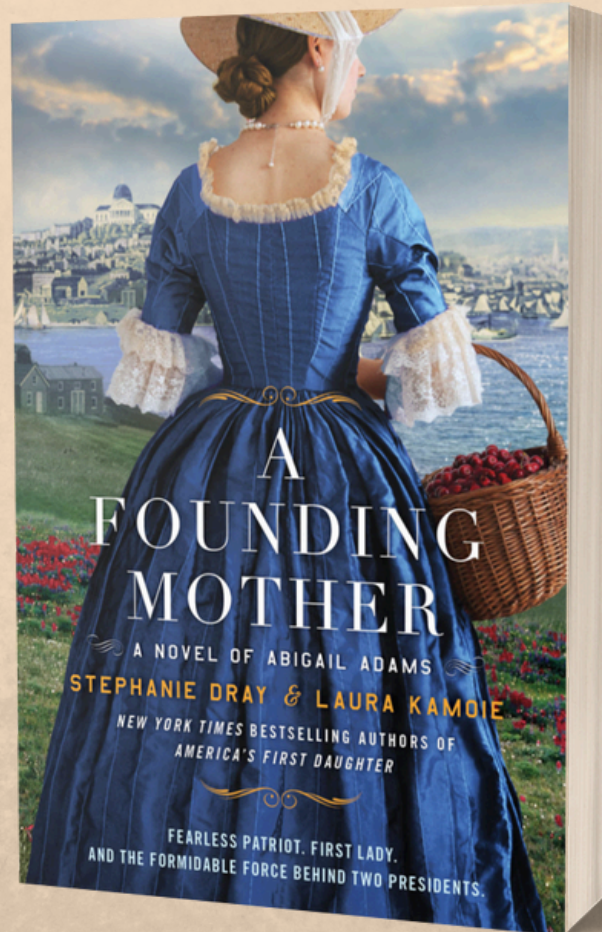


# Official Book Club & Discussion Guide



*A Founding Mother:*  
*A Novel of Abigail Adams*  
by Stephanie Dray & Laura Kamoie





*“In the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember, all men would be tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation.”*

Abigail Adams to John Adams  
March 31, 1776





## DEAR READER

Abigail Adams is most famously remembered for a single line: “Remember the Ladies.” That is no small legacy, but we believe that she ought to be remembered for so much more. For her sharp intellect, for her noble heart, for all that she endured, for all that she sacrificed, and for all she contributed to the American Experiment.

We have written about founding mothers before, including the secretive Martha “Patsy” Jefferson Randolph and the supposedly saintly Eliza Schuyler Hamilton. Abigail Adams was neither secretive nor saintly. She was open and honest to a fault, never shy of asserting herself. In fact, she said, “I am not apt to be intimidated.”

Which may be why she was far more influential than any other founding mother.

Her sage advice was sought by women and public men alike. And she delighted in matching wits with the luminaries of her age, including Thomas Jefferson. She was a woman who could be judgemental and hold a grudge. She also held the capacity for the forgiveness and generosity her faith commanded.

In short, she was a fascinatingly complicated woman--one whose sharp intellect and tart tongue still speaks to us with resonance. Trying to slip under her skin and into her thoughts was as inspirational as it was challenging. Writing about her was an honor and we hope that it will challenge you and inspire conversations and reflection. And we hope this guide will help facilitate that.





## ABOUT ABIGAIL ADAMS

Born Abigail Smith in Weymouth, Massachusetts, in November of 1744, she was related on her mother's side to the wealthy and influential Quincy family. Her father was a parson of the Congregationalist faith.

She was one of four children including her older sister Mary, her younger sister Elizabeth, and her wayward brother William. Though she received no formal education, she would go on to be one of the best-read and knowledgeable First Ladies in US history.

She left behind more than 1200 letters, digitized and safeguarded by the National Archives at their Founders Online site. Her extensive correspondence with important figures of the revolutionary era, as well as her more intimate letters to her husband, offer historians the best window into the daily lives and lived experiences of early Americans. As both a religious woman and a New Englander, her financial and social instincts could be conservative but her political instincts were often quite radical.

It is interesting to note that as acerbic of temper as her husband could be, John Adams was demonstrably more measured and cautious in politics than his wife. But he not only valued her input; he was highly influenced by it. And though she died before her son John Quincy was elected to the presidency, he, too, was shaped by her counsel. "All that I am, my mother made me," is a quote often attributed to him. There is no historical verification for that quote, but it seemed authentic enough in sentiment that we included it in our novel.





## CAST OF CHARACTERS

### The Adamses

- Abigail Smith Adams -- America's second First Lady
- John Adams -- Abigail's husband, Founding Father and the Second President of the United States.
- Abigail Amelia Adams -- Affectionately known as "Nabby" she was the only daughter of Abigail and John Adams to survive infancy.
- John Quincy Adams -- Often called "Johnny" by his parents, he was the oldest son of Abigail and John. He would go on to become the sixth President of the United States.
- Charles Adams -- The sensitive middle son of John and Abigail; he would go on to become a lawyer in New York.
- Thomas Boylston Adams -- The youngest son of John and Abigail who would go on to become a lawyer and judge in Massachusetts.
- Samuel Adams -- Fiery patriot, former maltster, and cousin of John Adams.

### Abigail's Relations

- Reverend William Smith -- Abigail's father; a Congregationalist Reverend of Weymouth.
- Elizabeth Quincy Smith -- Abigail's mother, who dedicated herself to the service of the community as a parson's wife.
- Mary Smith Cranch -- Abigail's responsible older sister and her most steadfast confidante.
- Richard Cranch -- Mary's husband was a highly educated watchmaker and judge who frequently suffered money troubles that forced them to take in boarders.
- Elizabeth Smith Shaw Peabody -- Abigail's younger sister, a precocious aspiring poet who went on to marry first the





## CAST OF CHARACTERS (cont.)

### Abigail's Relations (cont.)

- Calvinist Reverend Shaw, and then the Congregationalist minister Reverend Peabody, living her married life in New Hampshire.
- Reverend Shaw -- The stern Calvinist clergyman against whom Abigail repeatedly warned her younger sister to no avail.
- Captain William Smith -- Abigail's brother who, despite fighting addiction to alcohol, served honorably in the Revolutionary War, leading his company of "Minute Men" in the battles of Lexington and Concord and the siege of Boston.
- Phoebe Abdee -- The woman enslaved by Reverend Smith with whom Abigail enjoyed a lifelong close relationship, even after Phoebe was freed. Abigail likened Phoebe to a second mother.
- Doctor Cotton Tufts -- Abigail's cousin by marriage, Dr. Tufts would go on to be her most trusted business partner and a second father-figure.
- Colonel Josiah Quincy -- Patriot and revolutionary war hero, Abigail's uncle.
- Samuel Quincy -- Abigail's cousin, a lawyer and loyalist exile who left his patriot wife behind in the United States.

### Friends, Founders, and Neighbors

- Henry Knox -- Boston book clerk turned revolutionary war hero, and eventually the US Secretary of War
- Lucy Knox -- As wife of the Secretary of War, Lucy was a stalwart mistress of propriety in Federalist circles where she and Abigail Adams frequently socialized together.
- Mercy Otis Warren -- Originally a mentor to Abigail Adams, this fierce female patriot and first historian of the American Revolution would become a nemesis.
- Thomas Jefferson -- The primary drafter of the Declaration of Independence would become a close friend of the Adams family, only to become a bitter political foe.





## **CAST OF CHARACTERS (cont.)**

### **Friends, Founders, and Neighbors (cont.)**

- Benjamin Franklin -- The famed Dr. Franklin was a colleague of John Adams in both the Continental Congress and as a diplomat overseas, where they were often at loggerheads.
- George Washington -- It was John Adams who first nominated Washington to lead the defense of the new nation during the Revolutionary War. Washington would go on to become our first president with John Adams as his vice president.
- Martha Washington -- Our first First Lady was a friend and mentor to Abigail Adams.
- The Marquis de Lafayette -- America's Favorite Fighting Frenchman (according to *Hamilton: An American Musical*). He was a young revolutionary hero who donated much of his fortune to winning the war and was injured in our cause.
- Adrienne Lafayette -- The young wife of the revolutionary hero was one of the first in France to impress and befriend Abigail Adams.
- Alexander Hamilton -- Though the Adamses respected Hamilton's genius, they despised his scheming nature and soon became locked in political combat that sank the presidency of John Adams and destroyed the Federalist Party.
- Eliza Schuyler Hamilton -- Abigail was fond of Alexander Hamilton's wife, but their friendship could not survive the political combat between their husbands.
- Angelica Schuyler Church -- Abigail befriended Eliza Hamilton's sister, Angelica Church when they met in Paris.





## Q&A WITH THE AUTHORS

**Q: It's been ten years since you two first started writing about Founding Mothers together. Why write a novel about Abigail Adams, and why now?**

**A:** For all of those ten years, readers have been asking us to write about Abigail Adams, but we always shied away. To begin with, Abigail is our most beloved and influential founding mother--a formidable figure with a much documented life. More than 1200 of her letters survive and there are numerous biographies that have been written about her. Moreover, we are both fans of the HBO Special on John Adams in which Laura Linney plays Abigail to perfection. How were we to compete with that?

But we were both hyper aware of the coming United States Semiquincentennial--the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence--and Abigail began to call to us. We knew that no one could give a better window into that time period through a woman's eyes than this most erudite First Lady. And while she is often remembered as John Adams's wife and steadfast partner, she has received far less credit for how profoundly she enabled his career—and for the enormous labor of mothering not only their children, but the fragile new nation he helped bring into being. It thrilled us to know we could offer a fresh perspective.

Finally, Abigail Adams speaks to our current political moment better than any other woman of her era. We wanted to help her voice carry through the years and echo in the minds of modern readers. In the end, there was no better woman to write about and no better time than now!





## **Q&A WITH THE AUTHORS (cont.)**

**Q: What delighted or shocked you about Abigail?**

**A:** Abigail could be diplomatic when she chose to be—but she also had a wonderfully tart tongue and did not suffer fools gladly. It was hard not to be delighted when she made an acerbic observation or gently twitted her husband before vanity could overtake him. Abigail is often remembered as wise, resourceful, open-hearted, and self-sacrificing—and her papers could easily have been edited to present her as the very epitome of Christian virtue. Instead, what emerged was a far more fully realized woman: someone with flares of temper, moments of smugness and petty satisfaction, and an awareness that, particularly with her children and daughters-in-law, she could be overbearing and insufferably set in her ways. The fact that complexity survived was surprising—and made her a joy to write.

**Q: What was the greatest challenge in writing this book?**

**A:** As we admit in our acknowledgements, this novel was written under the most extremely trying circumstances of our careers when, after a panoply of health challenges, Laura was diagnosed with breast cancer in the summer of 2024, followed by a double mastectomy that autumn and a stroke that winter. While Laura was fighting for her life, Stephanie suffered a serious and painful accident that left her temporarily bed-bound for several months. As a consequence, much of her work on this novel was completed with her leg in the air and her phone precariously balanced over her face so that she could dictate. Abigail's story of war was born in the fog of personal battles we wouldn't have chosen, so we're deeply grateful for the twin miracles of Laura's survival and the book's completion.





## **A BOOK CLUB HOSTESS' GUIDE**

### **Atmosphere**

Dim the lights and illuminate your home with candles the way Abigail would have done! Have instrumental music playing, preferably violin or harpsichord. Scent your home with cinnamon, orange, and clove.

### **Beverages**

#### **Tea**

The real stuff, like that which got tossed into the harbor—but only if you acquired it through honest smuggling and paid no duties! Black with cream and sugar, or honey and lemon.

#### **Coffee**

Or make the patriotic shift and have a hot cuppa!

#### **Cider**

The hard stuff if you want to make your night interesting!

### **Food**

#### **A Rustic Breadboard with Cheese**

Assemble a charcuterie of snacks Abigail would have enjoyed including the cheeses of France, England, and America. Some cranberries and nuts can never go amiss. And for bread, try Brown Bread, rye, or Johnny cakes.





## A BOOK CLUB HOSTESS' GUIDE

### Food (cont.)

#### **Abigail Adams' Apple Pan Dowdy**

(The Simplified Version from the National Archives--a More Accurate One Can Be Found at Adams National Historical Park, Fort Stanwix National Monument)

##### What You'll Need

- 1 package of 2 ready-made and ready to roll pastry crusts
- 1 8-inch pie baking dish
- 1 medium size mixing bowl
- 3/4 cup white sugar
- 3/4 teaspoon cinnamon
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
- 6 medium green apples "Granny Smith"
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice

##### Directions

1. Pre-heat oven to 400.
2. Place one pastry crust in the pie baking dish as directed by the package.
3. Peel, core, and slice the apples in 1/4 inch slices and place in bowl.
4. Toss apple slices with lemon juice.
5. Add dry ingredients in mixing bowl with apples.
6. Add apple mixture to pie crust.
7. Cover crust and seal with second pie crust.
8. Place pie in oven on the middle rack.
9. Bake at 400 degrees for 10 minutes. Then reduce heat to 325 degrees.
10. Remove pie from oven and make small slices in several parts of the top of the pie shell.
11. Reduce oven temperature to 325 degrees and return pie to oven.
12. Bake for 1 hour
13. Serve hot with ice cream or whipped cream.





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Motherhood

1. Motherhood is a major motif in the novel. When was Abigail at her best as a mother--caregiving, nurturing moral values, setting up her children for success, educating them, helping them in adulthood?
2. Conversely, what were Abigail's weaknesses as a mother to her children--did she make choices that disappointed you?
3. How would we judge her parenting by modern standards, and is it fair?
4. Did her relationships with her children differ? Do you think she had a favorite?
5. What about Abigail as a founding mother? When was she at her best in serving the people and all the children of the new United States? When was she at her worst--perhaps encouraging decisions that did not honor the values of the nation?
6. Did her obligations as a founding mother to the nation ever conflict with her duties as a mother to her own children by blood and birth?
7. How did the times limit or repress Abigail's desires to define herself by more than motherhood? Are any of those forces still at work?

*“What is it that affectionate parents require of their Children for all their care, anxiety, and toil on their accounts? Only that they would be wise and virtuous, Benevolent and kind.”*

Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, November 20, 1783





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Abigail Herself

1. How did you feel about Abigail Adams as you read the book? Did you relate to her? Did your feelings about her change by the end of the novel?
2. Which of Abigail's struggles touched your heart, made you emotional, or lingered after you finished the book?
3. What interested you about Abigail's friendships with Mercy Otis Warren, Thomas Jefferson, Adrienne Lafayette, and others?
4. What did you think about her relationship with Phoebe Abdee?
5. Were there times you were frustrated or angry with Abigail?
6. What questions would you ask her if you could?
7. Does she deserve to be remembered as our most influential Founding Mother?

*"Justice, humanity and Benevolence are the duties you owe to society in general."*

Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, March 20, 1780





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Marriage

1. Why do you think Abigail and John fell in love and decided to marry? Which qualities attracted each other? And how did these qualities sometimes cause trouble in their marriage?
2. Abigail and John's marriage was relatively egalitarian for the time period, but what were the limits of equality in their partnership?
3. Did John ever fully appreciate Abigail's sacrifices? Was he a good husband? If so, in what ways? And were there ever times in which he fell short?
4. John and Abigail spent more than a decade apart over the course of their marriage. How did that shape their relationship, their children, and Abigail herself?
5. What are we to make of Abigail's scandalous correspondence with James Lovell?
6. Did Abigail fully appreciate John's sacrifices or the pressures under which he was operating? Was she a good wife? If so, in what ways. And were there ever times in which she fell short?
7. How did their relationship turn into a political partnership?

*"Great difficulties may be surmounted, by patience and perseverance."*

Abigail Adams to John Adams, November 27, 1775





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### The American Experiment

1. The letters between John and Abigail are a gift to historians in being the most complete and informative correspondence of early America. Did the inclusion of snippets from these letters in the novel advance your understanding or appreciation of this fragile time in our history?
2. What influence did Abigail have over John and in the early development of the country?
3. How did Abigail and the other women in the novel participate in the Revolution? Was their patriotism different from that of the men?
4. How did the novel redefine what it means to participate in the founding of a nation? Which work or sacrifices are often overlooked or minimized?
5. Abigail implored John to make sure Congress “remember[ed] the ladies.” Why did she ask that? What did you think of his response? And did the new nation do as she asked?
6. Did the novel change your thoughts, feelings, or understanding of the Revolution itself? If so, how?

*“Learning is not attained by chance, it must be sought for  
with ardour and attended to with diligence.”*

Abigail Adams to John Quincy Adams, March 20, 1780





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Novel Choices

1. What surprised you most to learn in this book?
2. How did the ending make you feel? Would you have preferred it showed Abigail's death?
3. What benefits were there for you in reading a novel about Abigail's life instead of a biography?
4. Did you read the note from the authors at the end of the novel, and if so, how did it contribute to your enjoyment of the story?

*"If we mean to have Heroes, Statesmen and Philosophers, we should have learned women."*

Abigail Adams to John Adams, August 14, 1776





## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Modern Resonance

1. Because the novel is written from Abigail's point of view, many perspectives from the revolutionary era are presented with her internalized biases. As a modern reader, what aspects of our history do you wish she had cared more about?
2. How does Abigail speak to us today? How was this book relevant to our modern moment?
3. In what ways do the themes of building a nation and the rights and responsibilities of the people within that nation resonate today?
4. What might Abigail Adams think about how the role of women in America has evolved? What might delight and surprise her? What might frustrate her?

*"To be Good, and do Good, is the whole Duty of Man,  
comprised in a few words."*

Abigail Adams to Elizabeth Smith Shaw, January 11,  
1785





*“Possessing, at every period of life, the unlimited confidence, as well as affection of her husband, she was admitted, at all times, to share largely of his thoughts. ... she was a friend, whom it was his delight to consult in every perplexity of public affairs; and whose councils never failed to partake of that happy harmony, which prevailed in her character; in which intuitive judgment was blended with consummate prudence; the spirit of conciliation, with the spirit of her station, and the refinement of her sex. In the storm, as well as on the smooth sea of life, her virtues were ever the object of his trust and veneration.”*

Abigail Adams Obituary,  
October 28, 1818