Given that history is in many ways the story of a nation and its people, what better way to look on American history than through its story-tellers.

**The Beginnings**

We could date modern America’s origins back to the 1500s when Spanish and Portuguese explorers began landing in places that are now Florida or Texas. Later, English explorers started sending colonists further north to places like North Carolina and Virginia. In 1607, one of the first colonies, Jamestown, was founded. Its population was booming: In 1630, only about 3,000 people lived there, but in the next ten years, 16,000 more colonists arrived.

The colonists weren’t the first people to live on this land. The Native Americans farmed and hunted all over the US long before them. While they didn’t have much written work, their stories and beliefs were handed down generation by generation.

**Colonisation and Independence**

During the 1700s, the immigrant population expanded westwards, resulting in conflicts with Native Americans as the colonists were taking their land. James Fennimore Cooper (The Last of the Mohicans) is known for his books about Native Americans and the pioneers (they are set in this period although they were written in the following century). In 1732 Benjamin Franklin began producing Poor Richard’s Almanac. Almanacs were popular for their weather forecasts, calendars, household hints, puzzles and games. Franklin’s was especially popular because of his writing style, which included proverbs like “Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy and wise.”

In the late 1700s the colonists started to resent British rule. Revolts began, like the Boston Tea Party in 1773, and clashes between British soldiers and colonists. On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence, written primarily by Thomas Jefferson, was adopted. The Revolutionary War, which ended...
in America being declared an independent country, lasted from 1775-1783.

19TH CENTURY
In the 1800s the country continued to expand westwards, with the historic Louisiana Purchase doubling the amount of land in America. The famous explorers Lewis and Clark made their expedition to the Pacific Ocean. In 1860s, the country went through the Civil War, ending with the abolition of slavery.

A variety of writers were busy during this period. Washington Irving wrote humorous short stories and folk tales about Dutch settlers like Rip van Winkle and The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. Edgar Allan Poe could be considered the father of horror and crime fiction thanks to stories like The Fall of the House of Usher. Herman Melville, on the other hand, used his real life experiences as a sailor to write novels like Moby Dick, about an obsessive hunt for a white whale. Mark Twain, an entertaining writer, introduced Americans to what life was like along the Mississippi River with stories like The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

A philosophical movement known as Transcendentalism also arose during this period. It was inspired by the works of the essayist and poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, who emphasized the individual and the natural world. His follower Henry David Thoreau was even more radical – he didn’t believe in organized society and lived alone in a cabin for two years.

America’s two greatest 19th-century poets were Walt Whitman, who used free verse and celebrated nature and human-self, and Emily Dickinson, who rarely left her home and wrote short poems about love, death and God.

In the beginning of the new century, Jack London became popular with his adventurous books, sometimes based on his experiences from the Klondike gold rush (such as White Fang).

BETWEEN THE WORLD WARS
With the arrival of the 20th century, the construction of the Panama Canal started and the US began to introduce many new laws, like ones dealing with child labor and regulation of the food industry. Many writers at the time were writing about social problems. In 1917, the US joined World War I in Europe. Two important laws were adopted in 1920: Prohibition, which meant alcohol was banned (until 1933), and women received the right to vote.

Books by Francis Scott Fitzgerald, like The Great Gatsby, were being read, which described people trying to follow the “American dream” to become wealthy and respected in society. William Faulkner wrote books about the American South such as The Sound and the Fury, which examined how the past, especially the era of slavery, influenced the present. He often used long chaotic sentences to show the thoughts and feelings of his characters. The term “The Lost Generation” is used for authors influenced by World War I. Nobel Prize winner Ernest Hemingway served as a war correspondent in WWI and wrote novels and short stories about soldiers and other men of action. A Farewell to Arms and The Old Man and the Sea are some of his best-known. His plain writing style became so famous that it was frequently parodied.

In the 1930s America was suffering from the Great Depression. One writer who captured this time period very well was John Steinbeck (Grapes of Wrath, Of Mice And Men). He often wrote about poor working-class people and their struggle to lead a decent life during the Depression. President Roosevelt’s New Deal plan created many new government institutions that gave Americans jobs and helped the economy.

In 1941, the US joined World War II when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. During this time, the life in the US changed dramatically. A lot of women began working outside the home because many men were off fighting in the war. The atomic bomb was brought to life, and the end of the war saw the beginning of the nuclear arms race. Some authors used their war experiences in their novels. Joseph Heller was a bombardier and used his experiences in his satirical novel Catch-22, a black comedy about military life. William Styron described the devastating impact of war in Sophie’s Choice, a novel about a Polish woman who, while imprisoned in a concentration camp was forced to make a cruel choice – which of her two children would survive and which would be killed.

POST WWII PERIOD
Social changes continued through the ’50s and ’60s. Family life was important, so many people had children and settled in the suburbs. Writers however looked at it a bit differently. The 1950s gave birth to a literary movement known as the “Beat Generation”. Authors rejected traditional society and looked for new experiences through drugs, jazz music and Eastern mysticism. Jack Kerouac celebrated the lifestyle in his book On the Road, describing his road trip across America. No one can forget the experimental ’60s when drugs and rock and roll inspired a generation of youth. The Vietnam War and civil rights also played an important role in many people’s lives. Vietnam continued to dominate the 1970s as did the Cold War and an oil crisis.
Ronald Reagan was president during much of the ‘80s. Many credit him with helping to end Communism in Europe. J. D. Salinger made a name for himself with *The Catcher in the Rye*, a story of a troubled, sensitive teenager who runs away from his school. Norman Mailer wrote fiction (*An American Dream*) as well as books based on real events (*Of a Fire On the Moon*). Ken Kesey gained fame with his first book, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, a story of a man who pretends to be mad in order to escape imprisonment and is shocked by the inhuman conditions in a mental hospital. It was made into an Oscar-winning movie directed by Miloš Forman. The novels of John Irving (such as *The World According to Garp*) are characterized by colorful plots, eccentric characters and humor. Toni Morrison (*Beloved*) is an African American author exploring the themes of racism, child abuse and slavery.

There is also a strong tradition of literature written by Jewish immigrants (Isaac Bashevis Singer, Chaim Potok), exploring the conflicting relationship between modern society and the Jewish tradition.

The beginning of the ’90s saw America involved in the Gulf War in the Middle East. It was an unprecedented time as the internet came into widespread use. Bill Clinton’s presidency dominated the era. John Grisham, known for his legal novels like *The Firm*, became extremely wealthy in the ’90s.

**THE PRESENT**

And now it’s the 21st century. It started out badly for the US with the attacks in New York and Washington DC in September 2001. Writers kept writing though and new genres were created. Famous CEOs, like Jack Welch of General Electric, wrote books about their experiences. Anything about management or leadership was popular, like *Leadership* by the former New York City mayor Rudy Giuliani. Fiction continued to be popular too, with authors like Dean Koontz, who wrote about scary supernatural stuff, or James Patterson, writer of thrillers. Technology took off even quicker than in the ’90s with goody like iPods and PlayStations. On the political front, George W. Bush was president through most of this time and the US was involved in fighting in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2008 US history was made when the nation elected its first African-American president, Barack Obama.

Jacy Meyer (USA), *Zuzana Pernicová (CR)*

Benjamin Franklin and Mark Twain were masters of aphorisms – short clever sayings which are intended to express a general truth, often in a witty or humorous way. Look at a selection of their aphorisms. Do you agree with them?

**BENJAMIN FRANKLIN**

*Failure to prepare is preparing to fail.*

*Three may keep a secret, if two of them are dead.*

*Eat to live, and not live to eat.*

*Keep your eyes wide open before marriage, half shut afterwards.*

*Fish and visitors stink after three days.*

**MARK TWAIN**

*A classic is something that everybody wants to have read and nobody has read.*

*Always tell the truth. That way, you don’t have to remember what you said.*

*If you pick up a starving dog and make him prosperous, he will not bite you. This is the principal difference between a dog and a man.*

*An Englishman is a person who does things because they have been done before. An American is a person who does things because they haven’t been done before.*

*Be careful about reading health books. You may die of a misprint.*

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**VOCABULARY**

- to boom - prudce narůstá
- to be handed down - se předávaly
- to pretend - zřejmě najít
- to pretend sth - aby
- to pretend - představit
- to pretend - představit
- to vote - volbu
- to vote - volby
- to be mad - zrušení
- to be mad - mnozí
- to be mad - něčemu
- to be mad - cítit odpor vůči
- to be mad - byla
- to pretend - mluvit
- to pretend - zahybnout
- to pretend - to pretend
- to pretend - to pretend
- to pretend - to pretend
- to pretend - to pretend
- to pretend - to pretend

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**LANGUAGE POINT**

The verb *to see* can be used when describing what happened at a certain time: *The beginning of the ’90s saw America involved in the Gulf War.*

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**CULTURE POINTS**

Louisaiana Purchase was a huge territory bought from France in 1803; it extends from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains and from the Gulf of Mexico to Canada. *Inauguration* is the ceremony when somebody is put into an official position. American presidents are always inaugurated on January 20.