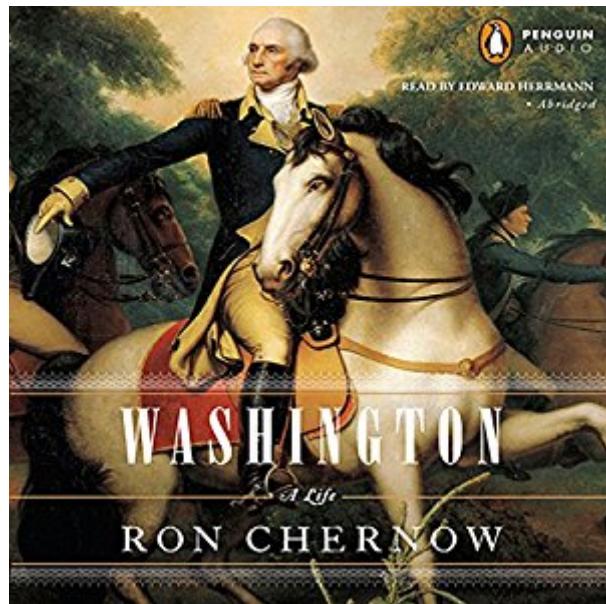


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Washington: A Life



Synopsis

Pulitzer Prize, Biography/Autobiography, 2011 From National Book Award winner Ron Chernow, a landmark biography of George Washington. In Washington: A Life celebrated biographer Ron Chernow provides a richly nuanced portrait of the father of our nation. With a breadth and depth matched by no other one-volume life of Washington, this crisply paced narrative carries the listener through his troubled boyhood, his precocious feats in the French and Indian War, his creation of Mount Vernon, his heroic exploits with the Continental Army, his presiding over the Constitutional Convention, and his magnificent performance as America's first president. Despite the reverence his name inspires, Washington remains a lifeless waxwork for many Americans, worthy but dull. A laconic man of granite self-control, he often arouses more respect than affection. In this groundbreaking work, based on massive research, Chernow dashes forever the stereotype of a stolid, unemotional man. A strapping six feet, Washington was a celebrated horseman, elegant dancer, and tireless hunter, with a fiercely guarded emotional life. Chernow brings to vivid life a dashing, passionate man of fiery opinions and many moods. Probing his private life, he explores his fraught relationship with his crusty mother, his youthful infatuation with the married Sally Fairfax, and his often conflicted feelings toward his adopted children and grandchildren. He also provides a lavishly detailed portrait of his marriage to Martha and his complex behavior as a slave master. At the same time, Washington is an astute and surprising portrait of a canny political genius who knew how to inspire people. Not only did Washington gather around himself the foremost figures of the age, including James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson, but he also brilliantly orchestrated their actions to shape the new federal government, define the separation of powers, and establish the office of the presidency.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Why do we need another biography of George Washington? The four volume Flexner biography was published 40 years ago, and since then 60 newly edited volumes of Washington letters and diaries have been published, which Chernow has read closely. He has combed the important multi-volume biographies and reviewed the shorter more recent books. The bibliography is many pages, the text meticulously footnoted. Chernow brings keen psychological insight to this magisterial work. His preamble sets forth his purpose: to bring Washington to life, to get behind the grave, somber image so the reader will have a true appreciation of the man. Moreover, Chernow's writing is superb. The book - over 800 pages of text alone - never drags and one's interest never flags. You can open it anywhere and receive enlightenment. On Washington's leadership in the Revolutionary War: "His fortitude in keeping the impoverished Continental Army intact was a major historic accomplishment... He was that rare general who was great between battles and not just during them." On Washington's early charisma: "Long before he achieved great fame or renown, something about Washington's bearing and presence bedazzled people." It is a tribute to Chernow that he "remembers the ladies", with colorful descriptions of Martha Washington and her circle: "It is a testimony to Martha's social versatility that she won over women who were far more intellectual than she." On celebrity: "For all of Washington's professions of modesty, the thought of his high destined niche in history was never far from his mind." On religious tolerance, Chernow quotes a letter from Washington to a Jewish congregation in Newport: "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship..."

I liked Chernow's other biographies; particularly his one on Alexander Hamilton, so much that I advanced ordered this book. I am happy to say that I was not disappointed. If I had to describe this book in one sentence I would say that it shows why Washington was a great leader and a great man. Below is further information about the book, how it compares to other Washington biographies, and some caveats (mentioned at the end of this review) that I think a potential reader should be aware of. Why should you read this book when you think that you know all you need to about George Washington? I think that you should because this book is wonderful, both in the writing and in the level of detail. Chernow is a wonderful writer. As with his other biographies, Chernow gives us a picture that goes beyond a stiff formal portrait. He gives us, what I consider to be, a fair picture of

Washington, with his faults clearly delineated as well as his positive attributes. Here is not the Washington promoted to a saint-like status, rather a man who made the most of all the opportunities that came his way. A man who was not above ordering gold braid and a red sash for his uniform, and a man who took offense at slights (although when necessary held his anger to himself) and a man who bristled when he was appointed to a military rank that he felt was too low. However, he was also a man who learned by his mistakes (and Chernow points out a lot of them) and was above all; courageous, conscientious, honest, and hard working. He shows Washington the man - a man who felt handicapped by his lack of a college education, a man with a volatile temperament that he kept tightly under control, a man who could lead men but found himself leading untrained and undisciplined ones.

Washington, A Life by Ron Chernow should be required reading by all of us, including our children. For most of us, the images we have in our heads of the founding fathers were formed a lifetime ago when we were children. Today our children are forming those same images in their minds, based on boring textbooks and teachers that have only a borderline knowledge of Washington, or that matter an interest. Had I been fortunate enough to have had a book like this several decades ago, my understanding and interest in Washington would have been remarkably different than the lifeless, waxwork image that most of us have. Chernow makes George Washington come alive, and how grateful we should be for this. Every few years a new book comes out on our country's first President, each one is pronounced the definitive one, and yet next year there is another one. What differentiates Chernow from all of the rest is his capacity to convey a living human being with an emotional life, something no other author has been able to do so far. First, let's discuss the mechanics of the book. Without the footnotes and index, we are looking at 817 pages printed with a small font. It's a big heavy book, but remember that many Washington biographies encompass several volumes, usually 3 or 4. Chernow was very reliant on the papers of the George Washington Project at the University of Virginia. This involves more than 130,000 relevant documents. First composed by John C. Fitzpatrick in the 1930's and 1940's, the papers occupy 39 volumes of letters written by George Washington. In recent years, this work has been expanded to 60 volumes, which now includes letters addressed to Washington as well as writings of his friends, family, and others who lived during his lifetime.

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