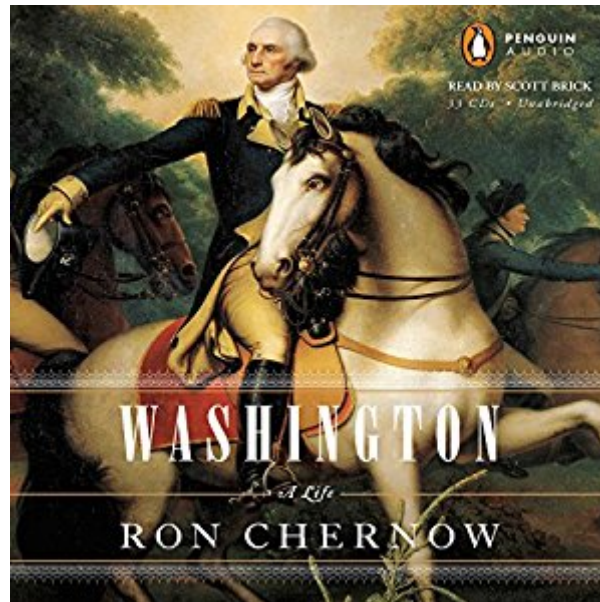




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Washington: A Life



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 approached this book with some trepidation - so long, so detailed, another Washington biography? Why read it? To find out how Washington did it. To study his character. To be inspired. To understand the virtue in moderation and self control. To feel, far beyond the cliché, proud to be an American.

Almost 1000 pages on Washington would be dull if written by anyone other than Ron Chernow. If I hadn't read his fascinating book on Hamilton, I probably wouldn't have bothered. Washington guarded his image so closely I doubted the real man would ever emerge, but once again Chernow's exhaustive research and talented pen brings to life an inscrutable figure from the past, warts and all. Things I didn't know about Washington: In addition to being Father of the country, he's also

considered Father of the American Mule, presumably by those in the mule business. Before his wedding, George added 4 ounces of an aphrodisiac called Spanish Fly to his London shopping list. There was no two-day shipping then but he did receive the package, and we can assume put it to good use. Many people who met him commented on how graceful he was, especially for a large man. In the saddle or on a dance floor, the ease and fluidity of his body movements was striking. His mother was a real piece of work. During the war she mortified him by appealing to the Virginia Legislature for monetary relief, as if George had left her a pauper. Her letters to her son immediately after he'd been voted the first President don't even acknowledge the election. She's thought by some to have been a Tory and annoyed by her radical son. He was always respectful and saw to her needs, but there never was any love lost between them. The impact on George's perspective appears to have been minimal, however. He never complained to Martha that his mom didn't hug him enough, and actually preferred female company... just not his mother's. Shortly before his wedding to Martha he wrote a letter to Sally Fairfax finally declaring his love and breaking it off at the same time. Revealing this to her after his marriage would be inappropriate. His obsession with his good friend's wife was okay, I guess, but it had to end out of decency and fairness to Martha. I can't help but wonder if Georgie-boy would have thrown Martha under the bus had Sally thrown caution to the wind for fear of losing him. If so, he was bitterly disappointed when Sally refused to bite, as his terse reply to her lack of response hints. Nevertheless, the two couples remained good friends and put the past behind them in a very mature manner. He was nothing if not efficient and well organized.

Although this book was a fairly lengthy read, I enjoyed Chernow's treatment of all aspects of Washington's life. I get the impression that Washington was a real human being with some strengths and opportunities that thrust him forward at a time in history to be the man of his time. He wasn't super human as some might think but was active when he should have been, quiet when he should have been and was loyal to his country. His greatest strength was not his leadership skills (although he had some), but more his undying persistence to stay the course through a long and difficult war against a nation of much greater strength and resources. Then, his reluctant acceptance to lead the country he helped form was again led with patience and persistence culminating in a life well-led and sacrificed for the country he loved. After reading this book, I feel as if I lived it along side this great and inspiring man.

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