



Reagan: An American Journey

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From *New York Times* bestselling biographer Bob Spitz, a full and rich biography of an epic American life, capturing what made Ronald Reagan both so beloved and so transformational.

More than five years in the making, based on hundreds of interviews and access to previously unavailable documents, and infused with irresistible storytelling charm, Bob Spitz's *Reagan* stands fair to be the first truly post-partisan biography of our 40th President, and thus a balm for our own bitterly divided times.

It is the quintessential American triumph, brought to life with cinematic vividness: a young man is born into poverty and raised in a series of flyspeck towns in the Midwest by a pious mother and a reckless, alcoholic, largely absent father. Severely near-sighted, the boy lives in his own world, a world of the popular books of the day, and finds his first brush with popularity, even fame, as a young lifeguard. Thanks to his first great love, he imagines a way out, and makes the extraordinary leap to go to college, a modest school by national standards, but an audacious presumption in the context of his family's station. From there, the path is only very dimly lit, but it leads him, thanks to his great charm and greater luck, to a solid career as a radio sportscaster, and then, astonishingly, fatefully, to Hollywood. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Bob Spitz's *Reagan* is an absorbing, richly detailed, even revelatory chronicle of the full arc of Ronald Reagan's epic life - giving full weight to the Hollywood years, his transition to politics and rocky but ultimately successful run as California governor, and ultimately, of course, his iconic presidency, filled with storm and stress but climaxing with his peace talks with the Soviet Union that would serve as his greatest legacy. It is filled with fresh assessments and shrewd judgments, and doesn't flinch from a full reckoning with the man's strengths and limitations. This is no hagiography: Reagan was never a brilliant student, of anything, and his disinterest in hard-nosed political scheming, while admirable, meant that this side of things was left to the other people in his orbit, not least his wife Nancy; sometimes this delegation could lead to chaos, and worse. But what emerges as a powerful signal through all the noise is an honest inherent sweetness, a gentleness of nature and willingness to see the good in people and in this country, that proved to be a tonic for America in his time, and still is in ours. It was famously said that FDR had a first-rate disposition and a second-rate intellect. Perhaps it is no accident that only FDR had as high a public approval rating leaving office as Reagan did, or that in the years since Reagan has been closing in on FDR on rankings of Presidential greatness. Written with love and irony, which in a great biography is arguably the same thing, Bob Spitz's masterpiece will give no comfort to partisans at either extreme; for the rest of us, it is cause for celebration.

Reagan: An American Journey Details

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From Reader Review Reagan: An American Journey for online ebook

Terence says

Unfortunately, it can be hard to find a Reagan biography that is unbiased but this one does a pretty good job of sharing the facts. Both positive and negative.

Reagan clearly had a big heart and that was a great thing but also led him into some poor decisions.

Unlike other biographies that just cover his time as president, this one covers his whole life and is better for it. I'd recommend this book.

Justin says

After reading several biographies of Reagan, this is definitely in the top tier.

Spitz does an excellent job in describing Reagan's rise from small town Illinois to the governorship of California. Spitz's past biographies on the Beatles and Julia Child give him insight into how to cover Reagan's Hollywood career. Spitz also sheds greater light onto Reagan's early life than any biography I've previously read. Spitz's descriptions of the '76 primary and the 1980 election are short but very good.

Unfortunately, Spitz does not cover Reagan's presidency as well. He barely covers much of Reagan's domestic policies, and spends way too much of the 350 pages on the presidency building up Iran-Contra. Also, it is very easy to tell which of Reagan's advisers talked to Spitz based on how favorably they are portrayed in the book (similar to a Bob Woodward book).

I would rate the first half of the book 5 stars and the second half 3 stars. Better than any prior biographer, Spitz shows how Reagan came to be the man who made it to the White House. However, he doesn't fully show how that man had a long lasting impact on America.

Lisa says

Yes, I read another Ronald Reagan biography. This one had a lot of insights I hadn't read before, particularly from Reagan's White House aides, which would have been interesting if I liked reading about office politics and personality conflicts. This biographer stuck to the facts and gave very little opinion, which was okay I guess. But I've read so many of these by now that I like to get the author's opinion. My favorite Reagan biography is still Iwan Morgan's because he wasn't afraid to praise the good and condemn the bad.

Dave says

Spitz has provided us with really the definitive biography of Reagan, the man. The book is carefully

researched, thorough, and painstakingly filled with detail. Especially of note are the chapters about Reagan's early formative years in the small prairie towns, working as a lifeguard, struggling to pay his own way through college, reinventing himself as a sports commentator on the radio, and on to his years in Hollywood where he was thought to be the next great leading man, his storybook marriage to Jane Wyman which ended in divorce, his years in the Screen Actors Guild, etc. It's always interesting to hear about an important figure's formative years and what made them grow into who they eventually became. If there is any fault with this book, it's that there is so much detail about everything, that it is not light easy reading.

Many thanks to the publisher for providing a copy for review.

Ben says

I enjoy reading biographies and this is one of my least favorites that I've read.

First, Bob Spitz rarely gives you dates in his narrative, so you'll be going along and have no idea if Reagan is 22 or 82. This is probably more of a pet peeve, but it was annoying.

Second, I feel that he does a good job of presenting facts, but then after presenting the facts he gives his personal opinion, but then doesn't support his opinion with any sort of fact.

Thirdly, he claims Reagan's financial policy was a failure...but then doesn't present any data to support that opinion. He is more than happy to give economic data from Reagan's first couple of years as president, but then conveniently forgets to present any data from the last 6 years.

To sum it up, I was not impressed and don't think I would read another book by this author. To be fair, if you dislike Reagan you might be more inclined to like this book.

Chad King says

Love him or hate him, Reagan left an indelible mark on America and his legacy continues to reverberate nearly 40 years after he won the US Presidency. Spitz digs deep for this biography, and does an exceptional job of describing Reagan the boy, Reagan the actor, Reagan the husband, Reagan the politician, and Reagan the declining octogenarian. Above all, Reagan was a great communicator, and Spitz describes how that skill served him throughout his life.

The book is neither a hit piece nor a fawning work of fanboy fiction. Instead, Spitz seeks to show Reagan as he really was -- a man gifted with a magnetic personality but not with particularly keen intellect or organizational skills. Reagan was a big-picture person who loved people and relished the spotlight, but he sometimes stumbled because he couldn't (or wouldn't) grasp the details. This weakness is what was often behind his largest failures -- his failed marriage to Jane Wyman (he couldn't understand that he talked too much), his scandal-plagued Cabinet (he was loyal to a fault, and overlooked misconduct), his failure to treat AIDS as a serious disease (he didn't even try to understand the disease until after his presidency ended), and his most memorable albatross: the Iran-Contra Affair.

Overall this is a well-researched and superbly-written biography of a fascinating man. Regardless of your

political viewpoint, this book will help you better understand a leader who had a deep and lasting impact on the American political landscape and culture.

5 out of 5 stars.

Vheissu says

It's difficult for me to be objective about Ronald Reagan the man, much less a good biography of him, which this certainly is. I've read several biographies of the Gipper, most memorably Edmund Morris's *Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan*, and I find it impossible to reconcile the man with the politician. Ronald Reagan was a decent, honorable person who had a gift for "retail politics," but was a barely competent public official. Comparisons of Reagan with Donald Trump are unavoidable (see below), and Reagan--for all his foul-ups (and there were many)--still compares favorably with the current occupant of the White House. As Spitz quotes George Shultz, Reagan "appealed to people's best hopes, not their fears, to their confidence, rather than their doubts" (p. 760). Point taken.

Reagan's life has been recalled many times, and Spitz' really doesn't offer any new, startling information about it. Spitz' coverage of Reagan's 1976 and 1980 presidential races is perhaps the best I've read on those runs, and offers many useful insights into political campaigns and the bureaucratic infighting that characterize them.

There were a few surprises along the way, including Reagan's lukewarm relationship with Israel. After the Israeli-condoned massacres at the Sabra and Shtila refugee camps in Lebanon in 1982 (thanks, Ariel Sharon), Reagan was "livid" and read the riot act to Prime Minister Menachem Begin, going so far as to threaten a halt to all American support to the Jewish State (pp. 533-4). Later, Reagan would attempt to blame Israel for the whole Iran-Contra fiasco as a way to deflect his own responsibility (p. 679).

The fact that Reagan's first and second terms in office were often disastrous has been largely forgotten in the nostalgic haze of history. This is perfectly understandable, as Republicans in particular had precious few presidential heroes in the 20th century. Theodore Roosevelt made it to Mount Rushmore, but he divided the GOP in 1912, allowing only the second Democrat to become president since the Civil War. Eisenhower was a nominal Republican at best, and even ignoring Richard Nixon's ignominious resignation, many conservatives consider Dick to be the last liberal president. Harding was a disgrace, Coolidge was a non-entity, and Herbert Hoover will forever be the foil for the Great Depression. That leaves George H.W. "Read My Lips" Bush as the only other Republican president, a one-terminer. So, who else is there to celebrate on the Republican side? You got it: Ronald Reagan.

Spitz neatly summarizes the Reagan-as-saint perspective:

"As the president he rebuilt the American military, beat back inflation, appointed the first woman to the Supreme Court, cut the top personal tax rate from 70 to 28 percent, encouraged free trade, oversaw the creation of 16 million new jobs, and eventually produced a nuclear arms agreement with the Soviet Union and effectively ended the Cold War" (p.759).

Even if one generously grants Reagan credit for accomplishing all these things by himself, there still remain a few demerits on his record. Spitz adds:

"[Reagan's] lack of empathy for those in desperate financial straits and for AIDS victims, the

supply-side Reaganomics, the punitive "war on drugs," the reckless spending on the military, stratospheric budget deficits, the implausibility of the Strategic Defense Initiative, Bitburg [Cemetery visit], even Iran-Contra faded from memory as admirers eulogized Reagan in the weeks immediately following his death" (*ibid*).

To that one might add the largest tax increase in U.S. history (p. 535)

As far as I am concerned, Reagan can never be forgiven for trading weapons for hostages held by the same people who murdered 239 Americans at the Beirut Airport in 1983 and then lying about it to the American people. Reagan was fully informed about the illegal arms-for-hostage deal and approved of it (p. 607). George Bush, too, was "in the loop," his subsequent denials notwithstanding, prompting Bud McFarlane to retort, "The hell he wasn't. He was up to his eyebrows in it. He supported it all the way" (p. 669).

Still, Reagan compares favorably to the current president of the United States, who, as promised above, makes a brief appearance in Reagan's life. In an attempt to lure American investors to Russia, Premier Mikhail ("Gorby") Gorbachev met with a group of U.S. businessmen at the White House in 1987. According to Spitz:

"Most members of the business community at the White House joined the Gorby lovefest. Only one holdout claimed he was still suspicious of Gorbachev and hoped Americans were not overly eager to deal with him. 'In the art of deal making,' said real-estate developer Donald Trump, 'you should not want to make the deal too much.' It was only after the Russian told Trump that he loved Trump Tower and invited him to build a hotel in Moscow that the New York real-estate magnate changed his tune" (p. 714).

Hmmmm. Hmmmmmm, indeed.

Lee Woodruff says

The accomplished and talented author of the best-selling Julia Child biography "Dearie," turns his attention to detail and story-telling skills to the subject of Ronald "Dutch" Reagan. Conducting exhaustive interviews over a five-year period and with access to previous unavailable documents, Spitz paints a detailed picture of one of America's most iconic presidents with a writing style that feels more like novel than non-fiction. He deftly moves us through time with detailed descriptions, taking us from "Dutch's" hardscrabble early days with a drunken and often unemployed father to his beginnings as a local radio announcer. Vivid scenes and dialogue move us through Hollywood and his first marriage, to meeting Nancy, Reagan's growing interest in politics and then the ultimate prize-- president of the most powerful nation in the world. Spitz writes movingly about Reagan's courageous announcement of his Alzheimer's diagnosis at the end of his life. At a time in politics where the world feels cleaved into extremes, this poignant and well-written book is a reminder that great statesman can often transcend bi-partisan ship and lead.

Marlan says

Good, thorough book, well written. Only critique was skipping over the positive economic triumphs in the 80s.

Shawn Ryan says

A three-star treatment of a five-star President. I enjoyed the book while finding it uneven in quality. For example, Spitz covers the CA gubernatorial race and the assassination attempt superbly, but his grasp of economics is weak, and it shows. A worthwhile read, but I'll also dig into Lou Cannon's works to seek a better read on my favorite President.
