



Golden Gate: The Life and Times of America's Greatest Bridge?

Kevin Starr

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The Golden Gate Bridge links the urbanity of San Francisco with the wild headlands of Marin County, as if to suggest the paradox of California and America itself—the place that Fitzgerald saw as the last spot commensurate with the human capacity for wonder. The bridge, completed in 1937, also announced to the world America's engineering prowess and full assumption of its destined continental dominance. The Golden Gate is a counterpart to the Statue of Liberty, pronouncing American achievement in an unmistakable American fashion. The nation's very history is expressed in the bridge's art deco style and stark verticality. Kevin Starr's *Golden Gate* is a brilliant and passionate telling of the history of the bridge, and the rich and peculiar history of the California experience. The Golden Gate is a grand public work, a symbol and a very real bridge, a magnet for both postcard photographs and suicides. In this compact but comprehensive narrative, Starr unfolds the hidden-in-plain-sight meaning of the Golden Gate, putting it in its place among classic works of art.

Golden Gate: The Life and Times of America's Greatest Bridge? Details

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From Reader Review Golden Gate: The Life and Times of America's Greatest Bridge? for online ebook

Paul Dinger says

This is an exhausting and very compelling account of the building of the Golden Gate with all of its local and state politics. It is also the portrait of several very vain individuals involved in its building. Kevin Starr is turning into the chronicler of all things California with these books which leave no stones unturned. This is so good that I won't hold his friendship with our state's worst governor Arnold Schwarzenegger against him.

P says

I purchased this read on a recent trip to California where I renewed my admiration for such a beautiful structure. The book is a review of the Golden Gate Bridge from the European discovery of the strait, through planning and construction, to the seismic upgrades of the 21st Century. I find bridge architecture interesting and love the San Francisco Bay area, so this book was a perfect fit.

Dave Courtney says

Kevin starr has written fairly extensively on the history of California, and here he focuses in on the political and architectural history of the golden gate bridge.

The book, as it stands, is more of an introductory piece rather than an extensive undertaking. Where he spends most of his time is on the political back story and the engineering details. Littered among this though is his traditional passion for the material, both from an artistic and human point of interest. This helps balance the more pragmatic history and dry details of the construction with interesting tidbits of information (such as the Spanish missing the golden gate because of the fog, the initial formation of the tolls as a grand entrance to the new world, and the accidental orange colour of the bridge itself).

The book begins on a lofty philosophical level discussing the symbolism of the bridge as a work of art (something that came out of the great depression and a time of visionary development of architecture that is somewhat foreign in our modern age that develops new buildings more in sync and with a greater pace than ever before). It held great meaning when it was built, and Starr helps us to reimagine this as modern spectators.

Starr's final chapters likewise return us to the very human stories of the bridges suicidal history. This helps anchor the details as something tangible and real to the non scientific minds.

Overall this is an interesting introductory in to the bridge's past as a part of California's development and America's image.

Tim Robinson says

A waffulous volume. History, art, business and politics, but far too little engineering.

Steve says

A fun, short, easy-to-read history of the Golden Gate Bridge. The writing gets more than a little flowery in spots- it is a paean to the Bridge as much as it is a history book - but it flows quickly and entertainingly. This is less of a deep involved history a la McCullough's The Great Bridge and more something to breeze on through - sort of a Golden Gate Bridge 101 rather than an upper-division exploration. It touches on the aspects of the Bridge you'd expect - its background and construction - as well as its role as a suicide magnet and artistic icon.

The writing style would irritate me if the book were longer, but it's so short you really can just polish it off and learn something in the process.

Alan says

A nice overview of the design and building of the Golden Gate Bridge. Starr's writing added a lot of depth to the book and really brought the politics and economics of this iconic structure to life

Christine says

Today was the 75th anniversary of the Golden Gate Bridge and there was a day long celebration to commemorate the event at the bridge and along Chrissy Field and the Marina Green. It was awesome, music, lectures, displays, vintage car and boat shows and the bridge itself. It ended with the most spectacular fireworks show I have ever seen. So now you know why I read this book. So what did I learn.....that I am not the only one in awe of this magnificent structure. Kevin Starr is too. The book could have had more details about the bridge but Starr captured its essence. He gave me just enough info to make me want to dig deeper but not that I had to. The Golden Gate Bridge is art that is functional. It is an icon of American ingenuity. The book tells the reader how all this came to be from the vision of some very creative and committed people to how it has become a destination for so many people from around the world. Its a symbol of so many things to so many people and I am glad it is built where I can look upon it almost every day.

Lisa Vegan says

I won this book from the Goodreads First Reads giveaway program, and I am very grateful that I did. My to-read list is so long that I will read only a fraction of the books on it, and winning this ensured that I read it, and I'm glad that I did.

I live a five minutes drive away from the Golden Gate Bridge, within hiking distance from it. I used to walk

across it regularly; I occasionally drive across it, and at times in the past regularly did so. I've known 4 people who jumped off of it, 3 who died, 1 who survived; luckily, none were close friends. My mother lived here during its construction. One of my very favorite photographs is Ansel Adams' The Golden Gate Before the Bridge. I have my memories of it from very early childhood to the present.

The writing style of this author is very poetic.

Each chapter reads like its own essay, and I read it chapter by chapter, slowly, in order to savor it.

This book is about the bridge and issues related to it: the culture, art, history, geology, geography, weather, engineering, architecture, personalities, etc.

There are some photographs, but I would have liked many more, including the Ansel Adams before the bridge photos; I found out there is a series of photos, not just the one photo I've seen and loved. It helped that while I read this book I read a book of photographs of San Francisco, old and new, that had many photos of the Golden Gate, before, during and after bridge construction. (San Francisco: Views of the Past & Present)

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I did catch at least one irritating major error: the San Andreas fault is to the west of the Golden Gate Bridge, not to the east.

So, I learned quite a bit from this book. Recently a Goodreads friend of mine, who lives in another country and has never been to San Francisco, was surprised at the International Orange color of the Golden Gate Bridge; she'd expected it to be golden colored. I was able to explain to her that Golden Gate was the name of the place, the spot between San Francisco to the south and Marin country to the north where to the west of it is the Pacific Ocean and to the east of it is San Francisco Bay, that the bridge spanned the Golden Gate. But, I did not know that it was Frémont, in 1846, who named the site Chrysopylae, Golden Gate, was in reference to the Golden Horn of Constantinople.

I'm very disappointed that one of the books mentioned in the art chapter, a book published in 1978, The Golden Gate Bridge Troll by Jean Fitzgerald, is not in the Goodreads database, and that the only copy my library has is for library use only. I may see if they'll let me read it on site, or I may try to purchase a used copy. There are so many other books (and other media) mentioned that I'm tempted to pile more onto my to-

read shelf.

This is an erudite look at an object that fascinates me. Aside from not having enough photos, I can't imagine it being done much better than it was done in this book.

Daniel says

I thought it was solid. I liked reading about the fight to get the bridge built and the people involved in designing the bridge.

David Lynch says

After watching Ken Burns fascinating documentary about the Brooklyn Bridge on PBS, I jumped at the chance to review Golden Gate by Ken Starr. The author, a history professor, and published historian included many facts unknown to me such as how the bridge got its name. It's named after the Golden Horn of the Bosphorus in Turkey. You will find scattered throughout the book many instances of factual information that can surprise you pleasantly. But something is whispered in my ear that asks the question why would Starr have taken a non-chronological approach? Why would the material presented in a historian's chapter jump from one era to another and back again?

Starr's, remarkable ode of sorts to the bridge, presented me with intellectual hiccups as I struggled to keep up with his changing time table. The best of the best dealt with the obvious admiration he has for this iconic structure. And, of course, the terrific amount of research he performed. You have to be struck by his adept telling of how overwhelmingly crowded the ferries were before the bridge as fifty thousand commuters in their automobile waited as long as three hours to cross during weekends. It's also clear that he reviewed a lot of material to produce his chapter on Suicide. But again, did this subject require a whole chapter?

A different more coherent structure could have added a lot to the readability of the book. And would have enabled Starr to better showcase what appears to be an object of his great affection. Structure aside there's still much to be learned and enjoyed from this epic story.

Lisa says

I was lucky to receive this book in a Goodread's book giveaway:) It's a subject that both my husband (a civil engineer) and I are interested in. We both found it to be a good comprehensive starting-point for anyone interested in the bridge's construction and its over-all role in the development of SF and Bay area. Interesting back story without being too wordy, though it did occasionally have the tendency to become a little poetic, but that was okay. I enjoyed the pictures that the author included. I would have loved more maps. This is our first time reading Kevin Starr. His love of California and the bridge itself is tangible in this book, and I can understand this. Both my husband and I would read more by Starr, definitely. His love of California shines through in his writing, and this I appreciate :)

Frances says

A good quick overview of the history of the bridge, one I'd happily recommend to others who are new to the Bay Area. It is hard not to compare it to the David McCullough book, *The Great Bridge*, about the Brooklyn Bridge, though the author's intent is clearly not the same.

Spiros says

I first "experienced" the Bridge when I was three days old, being taken home from the hospital (those were different times). Since then, I have walked across it, ridden across it, flown over it, and sailed under it. For ten years, I had a view of the south tower from my kitchen windows; for the past five years, I see the north tower whenever I am walking down to Polk Street to buy bread. I have seen it from every angle, in every degree of fog-laden obscurity. I have never managed to be indifferent to it: it is my Mount Fuji.

Starr does a bang-up job here of outlining the history of the Bridge, up to and including the seismic retrofit currently turning Doyle Drive into a shambolic sandbox (it is going to take longer to reconstruct the southern approach to the Bridge than it took to build the Bridge in the first place). Much of the information here is contained in his earlier writings; the only parts I hadn't come across were the account of the local political jockeying, and the byzantine financial machinations, most of which went right over my head anyway. Yes, Joseph Strauss was a megalomaniac; megalomania is a pre-requisite of a project such as this.

My latest hero is Charles Anton Ellis, the man whose mathematical genius made the Bridge possible, and whom Strauss fired for taking too long with his calculations. When asked to describe his brief for designing the 4200' suspension, Ellis replied, "Mr. Strauss gave me some pencils".

Phillip Gonzales says

An interesting look at the history of building the iconic bridge.

John McDonald says

Kevin Starr first came to my attention in 2009 when my son entered school in Santa Barbara, and I became enamored of the history of the founding of California by Spanish missionaries led by St. Junipero Serra, particularly, his founding of the Mission Santa Barbara. It seemed that everywhere I looked for information involving the history of California to understand the quest for Alta California in what is now the U.S. State of California, Dr. Starr's name appeared.

A few weeks ago, Kevin Starr died, and, in a sense, I wanted to honor his contribution to the history of California by reading a short historical perspective for which he was so well known and, indeed, honored by the State of California and other historical societies and professional associations.

Did you know that prior to the construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, El Camino Real--the King's Road or the Royal Road--which transgresses the entire North to South coastline of California was disrupted at the headways of the Golden Gate, basically cutting off Del Norte County and the northern reaches of the State which border Oregon and the rest of the Pacific Northwest, disrupting commerce and growth in this

important region of the State? And that when the Bridge was completed, Californians south of San Francisco could visit the Redwoods?

Or, that the founder of the Bank of America, Amadeo Peter Giannini promoted and helped finance the construction of the Bridge, seeing in its building a means to prosperity for small businesses and ordinary citizens? That its distinctive "International Orange" color, intended as a primer coat only, was chosen to be the Bridge's color virtually by default, as artists, designers, government officials, and bureaucracies saw problems with or learned to dislike other more popular choices; that every day of every year except when high winds, blinding fog, and drenching rains don't prevent, a segment of the Bridge is repainted and touched up until the entire Bridge is painted; and that the anchorages for the bridges weigh 270 Million pounds each made from "heroic amounts of concrete"?

Some of the statistics Starr presents are mindboggling. Twice a day, one-sixth of the San Francisco Bay is emptied into the Pacific Ocean, an amount of water equivalent to 3.5 times the volume of water that flows from the Mississippi River into the Gulf of Mexico, so that only undersea divers with worldwide reputations could be employed to perform underwater siting and foundation preparation for the Bridge. Until the last few months of construction, only 1 worker had died over the decade it took to build the Bridge, largely because of the concern Joseph Strauss had for worker safety, but at the very end of completion, more than a dozen workers died in one incident, where safety netting (a construct designed by Strauss and his engineers) gave way when a combination of factors caused workers on high beams to fall at once.

Starr even covers the issue of suicide. He discusses the drama associated with jumping from the Golden Gate, almost as though he is trying to understand why people would take their lives this way. He tells us that

"a human body plunging 220 feet to the waters (of the Golden Gate headways) below reaches 75 to 80 miles per hour across a four-second fall and hits the water with an impact of fifteen thousand (15,000) pounds per square inch sufficient in most cases to puncture spleen, lungs, and heart with broken ribs; to sever the heart from the aorta; to snap vertebrae, rupture livers, and bring on a violent and instantaneous death; or failing that, to plunge a maimed and unconscious jumper into the 350-foot-deep channel to drown; or, in even fewer instances, to be pulled broken and unconscious from the waters by the Coast Guard and die shortly thereafter."

This is an historian who must understand the slightest details even as he grapples with painting the whole picture, as he researches beginnings and roots. He describes how art--paintings, advertising promotions, films, and books--are influenced by the Bridge. But, what I enjoyed reading the most in this short tract are the history of California and the contribution the Golden Gate Bridge made to economic development and the melding of two distinct regions of the State of California into an integrated empire that thrived because of the foresight of those who wanted the Bridge built.

At the end, I found myself, though, coming back to one fact that I still cannot imagine, picture, or get my brain to accept. Here is how Starr describes the Golden Gate before the Bridge is built:

"Today, the Golden Gate Bridge is caressed by the same fogs that obscured the [Golden] Gate for centuries. The same river of fresh water, draining the same 40 percent of the land mass of the interior, still rushed westward through the Gate, at a rate of more than half a million cubic feet per second in winter months, a greater flow than that of the Colorado River; and the same Pacific still, twice a day, pours its 2.3 million cubic feet of saltwater per second through the channel; and for the same twenty minutes, twice in a 24-hour cycle, the strait remains calm in the same way [while] overhead, the same prevailing westerlies continue to blow at speeds ranging from twenty to sixty miles per hour. . . ."

All I can say is Wow to those with the courage and vision to build the bridge and to Kevin Starr who not only provides us with good history but shows us how easy it is to love the subject he's researched, studied and written about. If his epitaph does not read, "He loved California and its many varieties of peoples above all else," all I can say is, it should.

Footnote: Kevin Starr was the brother of Kenneth Starr who spent four or five years and more than \$100 Million investigating President Bill Clinton, an effort that was a complete waste of tax revenue in my opinion. Yet, here was his brother, both of them orphaned as children, who marvelled at the scoundrels and corrupt politicians who forced the building of the Bridge.
