



Let the People in: The Life and Times of Ann Richards

Jan Reid

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When Ann Richards delivered the keynote of the 1988 Democratic National Convention and mocked President George H. W. Bush "Poor George, he can't help it. He was born with a silver foot in his mouth" she instantly became a media celebrity and triggered a rivalry that would alter the course of American history. In 1990, Richards won the governorship of Texas, upsetting the GOP's colorful rancher and oilman Clayton Williams. The first ardent feminist elected to high office in America, she opened up public service to women, blacks, Hispanics, Asian Americans, gays, and the disabled. Her progressive achievements and the force of her personality created a lasting legacy that far transcends her rise and fall as governor of Texas.

In *Let the People In*, Jan Reid draws on his long friendship with Richards, interviews with her family and many of her closest associates, her unpublished correspondence with longtime companion Bud Shrake, and extensive research to tell a very personal, human story of Ann Richards's remarkable rise to power as a liberal Democrat in a conservative Republican state. Reid traces the whole arc of Richards's life, beginning with her youth in Waco, her marriage to attorney David Richards, her frustration and boredom with being a young housewife and mother in Dallas, and her shocking encounters with Lyndon Johnson and Jimmy Carter. He follows Richards to Austin and the wild 1970s scene and describes her painful but successful struggle against alcoholism. He tells the full, inside story of Richards's rise from county office and the state treasurer's office to the governorship, where she championed gun control, prison reform, environmental protection, and school finance reform, and he explains why she lost her reelection bid to George W. Bush, which evened his family's score and launched him toward the presidency.

Reid describes Richards's final years as a world traveler, lobbyist, public speaker, and mentor and inspiration to office holders, including Hillary Clinton. His nuanced portrait reveals a complex woman who battled her own frailties and a good-old-boy establishment to claim a place on the national political stage and prove "what can happen in government if we simply open the doors and let the people in.""

Let the People in: The Life and Times of Ann Richards Details

Date : Published October 1st 2012 by University of Texas Press (first published August 17th 2012)

ISBN : 9780292719644

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Format : Hardcover 467 pages

Genre : Biography, Politics, Nonfiction, History, Biography Memoir



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Scott says

Book #57 - Let the People in: The Life And Times of Ann Richard by Jan Reid. This was an excellent read. I have been meaning to read this for several years but I decided I had to read it now for the history of Austin class I've been teaching at U.T. for adults with IDD. The book is entertaining, exhaustive and engaging, I was particularly taken by events described in the book that remind me of current affairs. For example, many of the meetings Ann Richards had with columnist (and idol of mine) Molly Ivins and lots of other colorful figures happened at Scholz Garten, which is where I meet with the policy team of Austin Justice Coalition regularly.

Richards' 1990 governor's race against republican Clayton Williams reminded me of Hillary Clinton's race against Donald Trump. Tell me if this sounds familiar, Williams was pressed a lot by the news media to release his tax returns? Then the differences happen: Williams said essentially you would need a semi to pick up all of his tax returns. And so the Richard's campaign showed up at his home the next day with said semi. And days before the election, when asked about his returns, Williams perhaps sealed his fate by saying, "I'll tell you when I didn't pay any income tax, was 1986." He explained that was a tough year for his industry but all voters needed to hear was that he skipped a year.

Williams was infamous for his comments about women, some of which rival Trump's, mostly famously William's remark likening bad weather to rape, saying, " "If it's inevitable, just relax and enjoy it" It didn't help that Williams also famously refused to shake Richard's hands and was shown in an ad talking about how wonderful the power of eminent domain is, sounding just like a certain not-self-made millionaire we have in office.

Also, remember some people getting mad at Willie Nelson for doing a concert to help Beto O'Rourke? Willie did a concert for Ann Richards.

Overall, its a great book as is the book by her daughter, Cecile, which talks not only about her life but her mom's.

Next up in my reading is a book about Texas by Lawrence Wright called God Save Texas

Adam says

I'll admit, I'm probably not the intended audience for Jan Reid's biography of Ann Richards. As someone who was only eight years old when Richards lost her re-election bid for Texas governor to George W. Bush, I knew her only as a peripheral figure in modern politics--that feisty, white-haired woman from the Lone Star State who ridiculed George H.W. Bush at the '88 Democratic National Convention and staked a claim for feminists everywhere, and both times in wicked little soundbites. In fact, it was in her death that I first came to know her; as news channels replayed those two punchlines ad nauseum-- "...born with a silver foot in his mouth," "...backwards and in high heels"--she lodged herself in my conscious so thoroughly that, by the time Reid's biography was published last year, I knew enough about her that I also knew I wanted more.

Reid's book is a thorough, researched, entertaining, and often surprising account of how a mother and housewife who was active in political circles became the most recognizable woman of her time, and almost always through hard work and endurance rather than the typical dumb luck and good-ol'-boys nepotism. But lest we think of Richards as just a tender lily among rough bramble-patches, Reid dispels any preconceptions by letting us know--in page after page, chapter after chapter--about Richards' troubled younger years, when she spent her days doing drugs, getting drunk, and gradually drifting away from her husband as a sense of uselessness overtook her. It's a strange few chapters in the book, not because it sometimes feels like oversharing--this is a biography, after all, and Reid's job is to tell the truth as it is--but because in this age of hyper-sanitized life stories and endless media scrutiny, it's unique to see a politician's struggles laid out so bare and unpolished for us to see. In fact, as Reid points out, Richards did much the same during her own life, turning opponents' attacks on her alcoholism into opportunities to reach out to those who also struggled, especially Texas inmates who lacked any rehabilitation beyond prison walls. (As Reid mentions towards the end of his biography, one of Richards' greatest legacies is that of someone who helped the incarcerated fight the demons of dependency, which often led prisoners to re-offend and fall back into the system.) By the time she was elected governor, she was off illegal drugs, had been in AA for years, and maintained a respectful relationship with her ex-husband.

Even more incredible, though, is the detail Reid puts into demonstrating just how progressive Richards was on social issues, even as she governed a state that was becoming increasingly more conservative. (Texas has not had a Democratic governor since Richards left office in 1995.) Richards--the second female governor of Texas, and the first to be elected without help from a prominent spouse--appointed more women, Hispanics, and African-Americans to top government posts than anyone before or since, and her stance on LGBT rights--she didn't care--put her at odds with most of the country in the early 90s and, unfortunately, helped Bush's campaign--led by Karl Rove--make her into a liberal with radical views who didn't deserve to keep the state's top job. That's not to say Reid lets Richards off the hook for some of her more damaging decisions--not vetting close friends and campaign aides, letting her emotions get to her during speeches, becoming too enamored with the national spotlight--but he also knows that Richards was an anomaly: a politician who wanted to do right by all the people, not just those who voted for her, and in following her sense of duty she became a target.

What tends to slow Reid's book down, besides his immersion in all things Texas, is his over-reliance on letters written to and by Richards. They are deeply personal, often witty, and rich with information about Richards as she was beyond the cameras and speeches--her letters to Bud Shrake, for example, are sweet and frequently heartbreaking--but they often dominate chapters that are fine on their own. Reid relishes in reprinting many of Richards' letters and speeches fully, even though they take up pages at a time and tend to numb any interest the rest of the chapter had already built up. On top of this, Richards' most important speeches, including her '88 convention speech, are left either in snippets or unprinted altogether. This seems like an ultimate travesty--to write the biography of a state treasurer who was catapulted to national prominence (and the Governor's Mansion) because of a knock-down political speech and not give that speech its due. For many people, myself included, that speech defined Richards' legacy as someone who was funny, whip-smart, and photogenic but also warm, relatable, and never far from her roots...precisely the person Reid writes about, and precisely the kind of person we need more of.

This review was originally published at There Will Be Books Galore.

Barrett says

A book has not made me this happy in a long time. In the 1980s and early '90s I was only just coming-of-political-age-but-knew-I-was-going-to-be-an-excellent-Democrat just one state away, in Oklahoma, and Anne Richards was my hands-down hero. So I am not unbiased. But I didn't know. I didn't know HOW wild she was, HOW real, HOW courageous, and HOW FUNNY. It has become my new life dream to get away with what she did and be relevant – prominent – nonetheless. She inspired, she affected change, and she shot from the hip. The cowboy age she lived in has gone the way of the previous century's cattle drives, and she would have had a much more difficult time under our current social media microscope, but I aspire nonetheless. The author writes at a breathless pace, which works fairly well stylistically, but too-often interjects himself, which is distracting and unnecessary. However, in the end, in addition to meeting Anne at every stage in life, you come away with a truck load of never-knews about Texas politics.

Brady says

A truly compelling read! This biography covers the early life and political career of Ann Richards, a dynamo of a person. Not only did she rise through the political ranks as a woman in an old-boys club, but she did it in Texas. With a fierce conviction for equality and inclusion, she won hearts and minds across the state, and eventually across the country. "Let the People In" is a direct quote about her feelings on government - for it to work you have to let the people in, not keep them in the dark. It is bittersweet, however, because this country - this world - could benefit from her voice right now. Politics aside, the book reveals a woman who had an unbreakable exterior and deep reserves of strength, but who was also flawed and all too human. And that is what made her great - she didn't believe she was above others.

Valerie Walley says

I remember Ann Richards' infamous speech at the 1988 Democratic National Convention, and how cool I thought she was, and how much I wished that she were the governor of my state (Mississippi). And boy, do we need her more than ever now! This well researched and lively biography is a great story of a lady who lived a real and remarkable life. Her personal story is fascinating, but also the story of how she rose to power and maintained her commitment to feminist values, public service, women's rights, and indeed really opened up the government so that all minorities could have an important voice and role. This is an inspiring book that is much more interesting than the bickering we read about in this election year. Do yourself a favor and read a book about a politician that actually accomplished something, not to mention many somethings!

Cameron says

I couldn't put this book down, Ann Richards was such a charismatic person who used her ideals, charm, and grit to enact change in Texas. As non-Texan, this book taught me so much about the political field of Texas, and her lasting contributions to the republic.

I can't recommend this book enough.

Camille says

I have enjoyed this book because I was in Austin at the time in school and remember how it was then. However, the book goes off on so many "bunny trails" that we sometimes lose sight of Governor Ann. Enjoyable but tiring after a while. I got bogged down and did not really finish the book.

Colleen Ellis says

I have a great admiration for Ann Richards and am so happy that there is finally a book to put her legacy and considerable contributions in context. This exhaustively researched, detailed biography is a fascinating read.

Judy says

This was very interesting to me because I was living in Texas (and the Austin area) during her political career. I was also fascinated to find that one of my favorite library school professors, Sam Whitten (who taught Public Libraries) and his wife were great friends with the Richards when they were all young marrieds with children. The author was married to one of her staff, so had some insight into the more personal aspects of her life. The picture that emerges is of a woman who was not perfect, but who had great goals, and worked hard.

Bookworm says

Overall a pretty good read about the former Governor of Texas. The book follows Ms. Richards through her childhood, marriage, runs for political office, her gubernatorial reign and the end. Many familiar names appear: George W. Bush, George H. W. Bush, Kay Bailey Hutchinson, Rick Perry, Karl Rove, Bill Clinton, etc. There are also discussions of other Texan politicians too, and I would imagine someone who is more well-versed in Texan political history would enjoy this book.

For the most part I liked it, but I somewhat got the impression Reid might have white-washed it a bit. Discussions of Ms. Richard's alcoholism seemed somewhat abrupt and I got the feeling the author might have been either self-censoring or edited out of respect of the family. But it was a part of her life and it was still an interesting read.

Towards the end, though, I became somewhat bored. For some reason the book really thrived when discussing Richards' rise through politics, but once it got to the Governor's Mansion it just seemed to drag on a bit. Maybe it was my mood, maybe it says something that I am not aware of, but it was a tad disappointing to see the book seemed to taper off.

As other reviews note, there is no retrospect, which was surprising and disappointing. But, as other reviewers note, perhaps this book's audience is actually a very narrow one: students of Texan political history and not necessarily one for US political science/history students in general.

If you have any interest in Texan politics, Ms. Richards or women in politics in general, it's worth a read. But keep in mind that you may need to have some knowledge of the political landscape in Texas at the time to really get the full value out of the book.

Richard Jespers says

I pre-ordered this book from the University of Texas Press, so I literally got it hot off the . . . following its release. I thought I knew pretty much everything there was to know about late governor of Texas, Ann Richards. Not true. I didn't realize she had four grown children, not just Cecile Richards, the current national president of Planned Parenthood. I didn't know that she had become quite bored and discouraged as a mother and homemaker and entered politics in order to challenge her mind. I didn't realize Ann had lived her last years in Manhattan. I didn't know that, following her divorce, she had had a long-term relationship with a male writer.

The biography by Jan Reid, a writer-at-large for *Texas Monthly* with many other journalistic credits, as well as several books, is in many ways a memoir. Reid and his wife, "Darthy," (Ann's pronunciation of Dorothy) were close to Ann, and many parts of the book shift to first person after having established a certain objectivity in the third person. A little jarring at times, the point of view also offers a more personal view of Ann than a straight bio would have. As one can imagine, I found a number nuggets I found irresistible and share them here:

"[Ann] had a green rubber stamp that read 'Bullshit.' She used it often in her correspondence with Zabel. One day, she banged the stamp on a copy of a letter from a small-town district attorney who had written to a representative in support of a House bill that increased the fines in Texas for prostitution convictions: 'The fine is still a maximum of two hundred dollars. It's a simple matter of arithmetic to see that a prostitute only has to have eight customers in order to pay a two hundred dollar fine. She can generally do this or more in one night.' Beside her 'Bullshit' stamp Ann wrote: 'The insidious effects of inflation are felt in all segments of society. Eight tricks a night is damned hard work'" (79).

Richards's son, Clark, said of his mother after she stopped drinking:

"She was a champion and everybody looked up to her. I saw her that way, too. But part of me wanted to say I was upset about the way things went when I was a kid. That part of me didn't have a chance to express itself. Any time I went to a group, I couldn't say, 'Godamighty, when I was young and Mom was drunk, she was mean.' 'Nobody wanted to hear that story. Part of me had a need to say to some-body, 'You know, that hurt.' So this guy [his therapist in Japan] provided me with an opportunity eight thousand miles away, and I could say when I was young, Mom would sometimes have these rage attacks, and boy, they scared the hell out of me.'" (119).

Paul Burka, a *Texas Monthly* political writer, said of Ann after her gubernatorial win in 1988:

“She has turned an office from one that’s supposed to be weak—the Texas governor has no direct control over state agencies and doesn’t even get to appoint a majority to their boards for at least two years—into one with muscle Ann Richards is a politician, in the true sense of the word—someone skilled in using the political process. She is the first governor since the fifties to push her agenda by testifying at legislative hearings” (285).

“Engraved on the other side of Ann’s tombstone is a graceful line that I couldn’t hear when the helicopter was circling the Capitol that day of her inauguration, all those years ago: ‘Today we have a vision of a Texas where opportunity knows no race, no gender, no color—a glimpse of what can happen in government if we simply open the doors and let people in’” (426).

Ann Richards’s remarkable story is heightened by recalling the context in which it happened. You’d think now, not the nineties, would be when Ann might have attempted to open the doors of the Lone Star State’s government (if still alive), but because of the Republicans’ choke hold on the legislature and the state’s gerrymandered congressional districts that send representation to Washington, Ann Richards couldn’t get elected today any easier than the day she lost in 1994. Whether you were fond of her or not, you might like to learn more about one of the most colorful figures in Texas political history.

Wendy Zuern says

I didn’t finish. While I love her, this author puts a lot of extraneous info that takes away from why I wanted to read it in the first place. Still love Ann. Will try her autobiography instead.

Katie Donaldson says

I loved this book. Ann Richards’ life is an inherently compelling story. From poor Waco girl, to politically active housewife, to alcoholic, to politician, to first woman elected governor of Texas in her own right. But most importantly to me, this book taught me to understand the context in which I grew up. The Texas I’ve known, in my mind, would never have elected Ann Richards governor. I’ve now learned so much about the defining years and events which determined the course of politics in my home state and the country for my lifetime so far.

Ulla says

A good read, but a little disorganized to my eyes. Overall, though, I was quite moved at times, and I did get a few good laughs. What an incredible life story!

Wendy says

wasn't a fan of Ann Richards before I read it and I am not a fan of her now. This was a must read for book club and I felt like there was no story line and that the time jumps made no sense...
