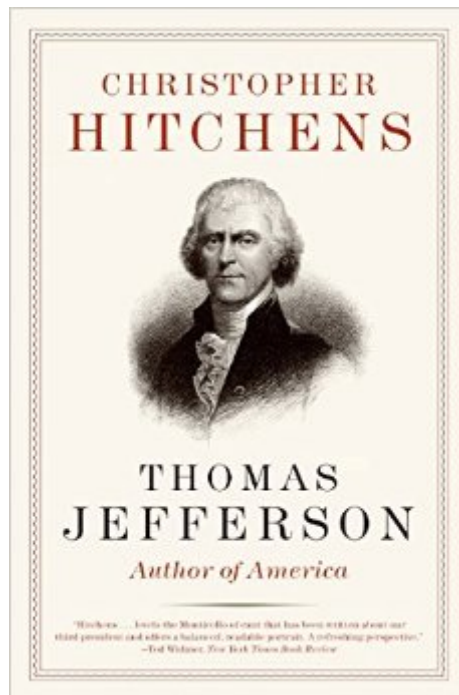


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Thomas Jefferson: Author Of America (Eminent Lives)



Synopsis

In this unique biography of Thomas Jefferson, leading journalist and social critic Christopher Hitchens offers a startlingly new and provocative interpretation of our Founding Father—a man conflicted by power who wrote the Declaration of Independence and acted as ambassador to France yet yearned for a quieter career in the Virginia legislature. A masterly writer, Jefferson was an awkward public speaker. A professed proponent of emancipation, he elided the issue of slavery from the Declaration of Independence and continued to own human property. A reluctant candidate, he left an indelible presidential legacy. With intelligence, insight, eloquence, and wit, Hitchens gives us an artful portrait of a complex, formative figure and his turbulent era.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've read two volumes in the Eminent Lives series now, and have been very impressed with both. Paul Johnson's *George Washington: The Founding Father* (Eminent Lives) and Christopher Hitchens' essay on Thomas Jefferson are very different books. But each was in its own way remarkable. I think it's safe to say that this is a book that few readers will soon forget. As Hitchens notes early on, Jefferson was more than just a "man of contradictions." He more or less embodied contradiction. Few writers, in my experience, are better equipped to identify contradictions, expose hypocrisies, and "call B.S." when necessary, than Christopher Hitchens. He did it with (or to) Clinton, he did it with Kissinger, and it seems only right to have spent a few hours on this Fourth of

July exploring with him the evolving ideas and motivations of Mr. Jefferson himself. Today, conservatives, libertarians, and leftists, Republicans and Democrats, anti-government "militias" and activist social-engineer types all claim Jefferson as one of their own. And each does so with some justice. Hitchens does an excellent job of walking through Jefferson's shifting opinions on questions like the proper powers of government, centralization versus "states' rights", the necessity of revolution, international relations, and much more. This is far from a comprehensive biography of Jefferson, and it certainly lacks the Olympian objectivity we get from most modern biographers. Hitchens has strong opinions, especially about religion, and he's not in the least hesitant about making those part of his discussion.

This is a photographic negative of Jefferson pocket bios of earlier eras. There are terse acknowledgements (with detailed faults appended) of the significance of the Louisiana Purchase, the founding of the University of Virginia, and etc., but a whole chapter of outrage devoted to Sally Hemings. Hitchens makes Jefferson's failure to solve the dilemma of The Peculiar Institution the central fact of his career, if not the main theme of this book. So, can a fair biography of Thomas Jefferson be written by someone who still reveres the genie of Bolshevik revolution, Leon Trotsky? Trotsky, who would certainly not have turned into a Jeffersonian democrat, had he ever gotten the whip hand in Russia? Well, generally speaking, yes. Jefferson gets a predictably rough ride in these pages. His famous contradictions are not excused, and unqualified admiration is given only for his many scientific interests and his anticlericalism. And one wonders if such charity as Hitchens does extend to Jefferson is a result of his galvanized respect for the American project in the wake of 9/11. As many enemies as Hitchens has made over the years, though, no one serious has ever accused him of being ignorant. Hitchens has read deeply and wide--he ticks off an impressive bibliography in his introduction--is aware of his own leanings, and his writing has the familiar learned but curdled j'accuse tone it always did. (Plus, students picking up this small book for a homework assignment will probably need to look up words like "uxoriousness", for example.) Hitchens is of course a well-known cultured despiser of religion, and he is drawn to those passages in Jefferson's writings which reflect the same attitude.

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