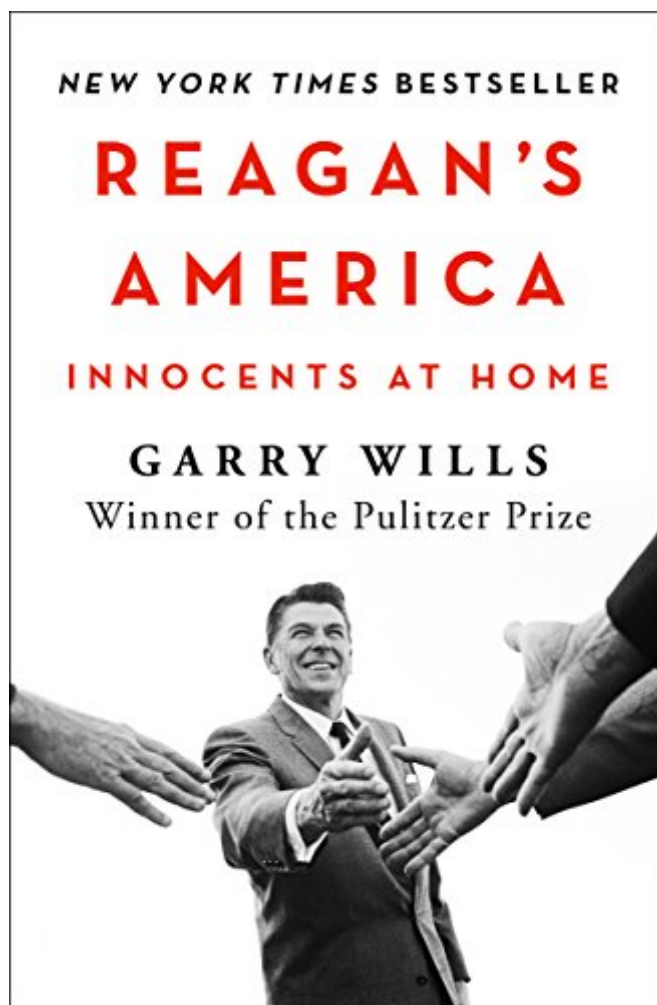


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Reagan's America: Innocents At Home



Synopsis

New York Times Bestseller: A remarkable and evenhanded study of Ronald Reagan • from the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of Lincoln at Gettysburg (The New York Times). Updated with a new preface by the author, this captivating biography of America's fortieth president recounts Ronald Reagan's life "from his poverty-stricken Illinois childhood to his acting career to his California governorship to his role as commander in chief" and examines the powerful myths surrounding him, many of which he created himself. Praised by some for his sunny optimism and old-fashioned rugged individualism, derided by others for being a politician out of touch with reality, Reagan was both a popular and polarizing figure in the 1980s United States, and continues to fascinate us as a symbol. In Reagan's America, Garry Wills reveals the realities behind Reagan's own descriptions of his idyllic boyhood, as well as the story behind his leadership of the Screen Actors Guild, the role religion played in his thinking, and the facts of his military service. With a wide-ranging and balanced assessment of both the personal and political life of this outsize American icon, the author of such acclaimed works as What Jesus Meant and The Kennedy Imprisonment elegantly dissects the first U.S. President to come out of Hollywood's dream factory [in] a fascinating biography whose impact is enhanced by techniques of psychological profile and social history • (Los Angeles Times).

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I have read many books by Gary Wills, and this is one of his best. It is an astonishing work of history and cultural analysis, impressive in the breadth of his learning and the depth of his insight. Mr. Wills writes knowledgeably and skillfully about a wealth of topics: the America of Mark Twain ... religious fundamentalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries ... the Great Depression ... history of Hollywood, including labor politics ... California politics ... the John Birch Society ... Cold War strategy, nuclear deterrance, and the "Star Wars" defense system ... relations with Latin America, the World Court, and the United Nations ... "supply-side economics," the Laffer Curve, and Reagonomics ... and much, much more, all to create the context in which to understand Reagan's success and his appeal to his constituencies. Uncritical Reagan enthusiasts will not be happy with the way Wills dissects the contradictions inherent in Reagan the politician, but Wills's analysis is cogent and persuasive. Wills discusses at length the gap between word and deed in Reagan's career. Of Reagan as Governor of California, Wills writes: "Thus, the candidate who had run against big spenders quickly became the governor who asked for and got the highest tax raise in the history of California (or any other state)...." And of Reagan's first term as President, Wills writes: "In 1982, unemployment rose to 10.7 percent, higher than it had been since the Great Depression, along with the greatest number of bank failures since 1940. Record bankruptcies and farm closures were occurring.... He added as much to the national debt in those four years as had been accumulated in our national history to that point, so that one of every seven dollars spent by the government in 1985 went to paying interest on the debt." And Wills spends considerable time critiquing the myths of individualism and self-reliance that underlay the Reagan mystique. Wills is critical of Reagan, but his assessment is never disrespectful or mean-spirited. Wills works hard to understand Reagan in terms of Reagan's own values and in terms of the values of the Americans that supported him. This is a remarkable study of a man and his times, and is well worth reading. I was astonished to learn that while in high school, Reagan saved the lives of over seventy-five people while working as a lifeguard.

COvering much of the same ground as Edmund Morris in his authorized biography, "Dutch," Garry

Wills' "Reagan's America: Innocents at Home" is a much more successful look at the institutions and country that shaped the 40th President. With his usual incisive analysis and beautiful use of the English language, Wills does what Morris found impossible: the discovery of Reagan's soul. To Wills, Reagan is the logical product of the American heartland and of the institutions of the heartland: community service (he was a lifeguard first), small town media (he was a Des Moines, IA, radio announcer). Reagan is also shaped by the institutions of coastal America that are marketed to the heartland: movies and big business (when Reagan made the final turn toward conservatism, he was the national spokesman for General Electric). Finally, Reagan is also the product of a dysfunctional family, with some of the same logical results: a withholding from others, a love of the abstract and of fantasy. At the end of Wills' study, the reader gains a clear impression of the forces that created Ronald Reagan and bonded him to the American people. It is true that Reagan, as Morris argues, is enigmatic. But he is not impossible to begin to understand. Wills is the essential guide to the Reagan who was fully formed long before he reached the White House.

Those who criticize Wills for "sloppy work" are off base and clearly have an ax to grind. On the other hand, this book is not a "consummate" piece of work, either. The task of writing a Reagan biography is virtually impossible. Edmund Morris tried to do it and wound up with a botched, absurd, fictionalized mess. Wills doesn't pretend that this book is a biography. It's actually an essay in book-length form (41 short chapters, perhaps a botched attempt at writing 40 chapters to match Reagan's status as 40th president) meditating on specific episodes from Reagan's life, particularly his childhood, adolescence, and initial career as sportscaster, movie star, and Screen Actors Guild president, and the relation of Reagan's life and self-image, and his construction of that image, with the perceptions of America, particularly in connection with the mythmaking of Americans -- their propensity to willfully forget the reality of the American past in order to build a version of the past that serves as a comforting and communal illusion in a time of unprecedented chaos and change. Reagan, Wills explains, is the perfect emblem of that illusion: "The power of his appeal is the great joint confession that we cannot live with our real past, that we not only prefer but need a substitute." Wills' book is not the hatchet job that some make it out to be. He clearly has a respect for Reagan's story, his communicating magic, and his ability as a public figure to unite the American people behind a common purpose, even if that purpose is largely mythical. Nor is the book the testimony to sainthood that many of Reagan's admirers would want. It is clearly critical of Reagan's forgetfulness, his willingness to simplify, his urge to blur distinctions and to make up details of his own life and of American history out of thin air. It is for the most part a balanced book, although it

does not, unfortunately, do any justice to the man's time as President, which is the most significant part of Reagan's legacy. The book was published in 1987, but it really ends with the war against Grenada in 1983, saying virtually nothing about Reagan's presidency and life beyond that point other than a very brief mention of the 1984 campaign and several (too many) mentions of the movie "Back to the Future" (at one point Wills confuses the movie's date of release, saying that Reagan mentioned it in his 1982 State of the Union address; the movie was released in 1985). Wills also touches on some events of Reagan's first term, but only sketchily. Anyone expecting this to be a thorough treatment of Reagan's presidency will be severely disappointed. However, it has a great deal of value as an exposition of the reasons why Reagan was a success, or was perceived as a success, as a president. Its final two chapters, two essays on the relation of Reagan to America and its relation to him, are breathtaking.

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