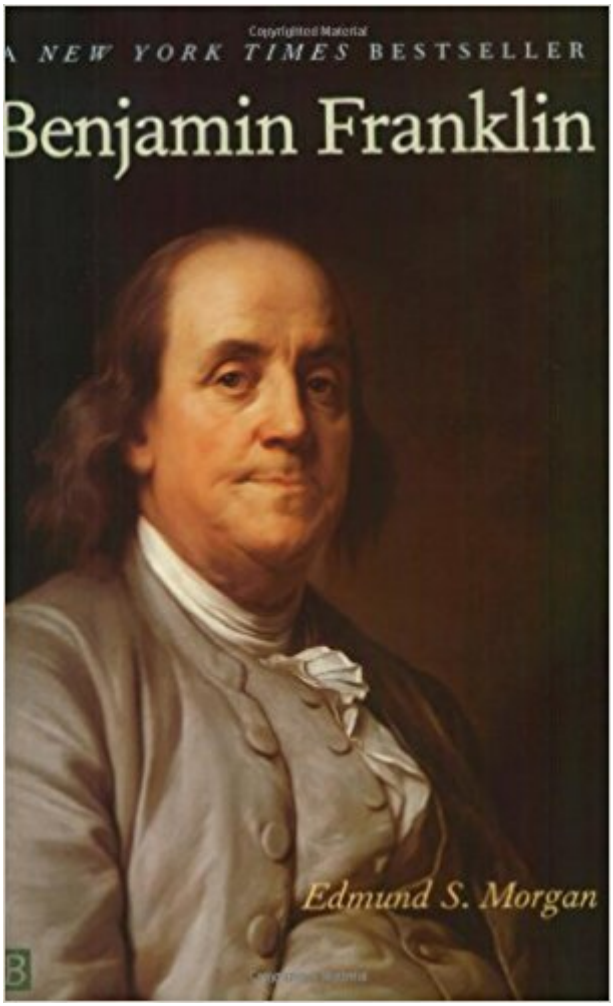
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Benjamin Franklin (Yale Nota Bene S)



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Synopsis

Ã¢â ¬Å“The best short biography of Franklin ever written.Ã¢â ¬Â•Ã¢â ¬â ¢Gordon S. WoodBenjamin Franklin is perhaps the most remarkable figure in American history: the greatest statesman of his age, he played a pivotal role in the formation of the American republic. He was also a pioneering scientist, a bestselling author, the countryÃ¢â ¬â„¢s first postmaster general, a printer, a bon vivant, a diplomat, a ladiesÃ¢â ¬â„¢ man, and a moralistÃ¢â ¬â ¢and the most prominent celebrity of the eighteenth century.Franklin was, however, a man of vast contradictions, as Edmund Morgan demonstrates in this brilliant biography. A reluctant revolutionary, Franklin had desperately wished to preserve the British Empire, and he mourned the break even as he led the fight for American independence. Despite his passion for science, Franklin viewed his groundbreaking experiments as secondary to his civic duties. And although he helped to draft both the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution, he had personally hoped that the new American government would take a different shape. Unraveling the enigma of FranklinÃ¢â ¬â„¢s character, Morgan shows that he was the rare individual who consistently placed the public interest before his own desires.Written by one of our greatest historians, Benjamin Franklin offers a provocative portrait of AmericaÃ¢â ¬â„¢s most extraordinary patriot.

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Customer Reviews

"This best-selling biography has been praised for its accessibility and the author’s almost exclusive

reliance upon Franklin’s own . . ."-"American History"

Chosen as a Notable Book of the Year by the New York Times Book Review and as a best book for 2002 by the Los Angeles Times Book Review, Washington Post Book World, and Publishers Weekly, A finalist for the 2003 National Book Critics Circle Award for biography, A New York Times Bestseller

Each year, I re-read Franklin’s Autobiography because I remain fascinated by the interaction of his ever-curious mind with the political, economic, and social events of the years during which he lived. I have also read other biographies of Franklin, as well as of Washington, Jefferson, and Adams; also, accounts of their era, notably Ellis’ Founding Brothers, Ferling’s Setting the World Ablaze, and Bailyn’s To Begin the World Anew. In my opinion, Morgan provides in this volume the single best source of information to answer questions such as these: "Which of Franklin’s experiences as a child and young man had the greatest influence on his development? How to explain his insatiable curiosity? What was he like as a husband and father? Why was he so reluctant to draw public attention to himself? Given the times, was he a legitimate scientist or merely a clever tinkerer? What were his unique contributions to the creation, establishment, and development of a new nation? Why was he so popular in Europe, especially in France? As his death drew near, what was Franklin’s own estimate of his achievements?" Morgan offers answers to these and other questions.It is indicative of Morgan’s erudition as well as his writing skills his narrative seems as if it were an eyewitness account such as James Boswell’s of Samuel Johnson. There are hundreds of anecdotes included, many of them previously unfamiliar to most readers. Morgan also makes generous but appropriate use of Franklin’s own written works as well as of sources contemporary with him. In the final chapter, however, Morgan quotes one of Franklin’s best-known maxims, "let all men know thee, but no man know thee thoroughly." Franklin’s actions always spoke much louder than his words. Indeed, he was renowned for his silence in the Pennsylvania Assembly, in the Continental Congress, in the Constitutional Convention, and throughout countless meetings with government officials in England and France.Lest we misunderstand what motivated this pattern of silence, Morgan observes that Franklin "knew how to value himself and what he did without mistaking himself for something more than one man among many. His special brand of self-respect required him to honor his fellow men and women no less than himself." I was intrigued by Morgan’s account of what seems to be an essential contradiction in Franklin: his self-confidence and his humility. Franklin was guided by a spirit which can never be confined to any one religious

denomination. He recognized strengths and weaknesses in himself as well as in others, "in a spirit that another wise man in another century called ’the spirit which is not too sure it is right.’ It is a spirit which weakens the weak but strengthens the strong. It gave Franklin the strength to do what he incredibly did, as a scientist, statesman, and man." In this context, I am reminded of Voltaire’s advice that we should cherish those who seek the truth but beware of those who find it.Although we will never know Franklin "thoroughly," Morgan has helped us to know him well.

I and others in my book club found this book quite hard to read. Many said that they would read a chapter or so, and then set it down for quite a while, only to come back to it later. I guess it was that the language seemed old-fashioned or stilted or otherwise just did not flow well.However, we certainly came away from this book with a much broader understanding of the man that Benjamin Franklin was. So many of us had a very one-dimensional view of him that we learned in our high school history classes. It’s not a great book, but it certainly engendered a great discussion at our meeting.

I was terribly disappointed that the book was a history of his actions rather than an examination of the man himself. Now i have to go find a different biography.

I have to confess to being almost totally ignorant about Benjamin Franklin, the subject of this lovely book by Edmund Morgan. My knowledge of Franklin stopped with the basics--trained as a printer in colonial Boston, made his way to Philadelphia while still very young, published Poor Richard’s Almanac, proved that lighting was electrical, represented the American colonies in England and newly independent America in France.In slightly more than 300 elegantly written pages, Yale historian Morgan transformed this skeleton into a living, breathing man. Although Morgan based this brief history on a wealth of source documents, he tells Franklin’s story effortlessly. I felt as though I had taken a long walk with a very interesting companion, and come away with a whole new understanding of a great and complex figure.Morgan devotes most of the book to detailing Franklin’s central role in the long series of calculations and miscalculations that pushed thirteen loyal and tractable British colonies into revolution and forged them into the United States of America. Franklin, we learn, was there at every step, usually behind the scenes, but always extremely influential, a potent catalyst to change.It’s as fascinating to follow the evolution of Franklin’s own thoughts and feelings about the British Empire and the future of America as it is to get to catch a replay of the fateful steps in Britain and the colonies that led to the American

revolution. I wish that America were blessed with more statesmen like Franklin; we could certainly use someone like him right now.Just one caveat--Franklin's scientific accomplishments are mentioned, but really as a side issue. In this, Morgan seems to be following Franklin's own lead; we learn that he viewed the scientific accomplishments that won him universal acclaim as less important than his far-sighted, patient, sometimes personally costly contributions as a politician and statesman.It's hard to imagine a more readable, edifying or enjoyable introduction to Benjamin Franklin.Robert AdlerAuthor of Science Firsts: From the Creation of Science to the Science of Creation (Wiley, 2002).

You will learn much about the great man. Couple this read with Isaacson's work - they supplement and complement each other well.

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