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Dutch

— A MEMOIR OF —

RONALD REAGAN



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"This book, the only biography ever authorized by a sitting President--yet written with complete interpretive freedom--is as revolutionary in method as it is formidable in scholarship. When Ronald Reagan moved into the White House in 1981, one of his first literary guests was Edmund Morris, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer of Theodore Roosevelt. Morris developed a fascination for the genial yet inscrutable President and, after Reagan's landslide reelection in 1984, put aside the second volume of his life of Roosevelt to become an observing eye and ear at the White House.

"Coming and going with Reagan's benign approval ('I'm not going to charge up San Juan Hill for you'), Morris found the President to be a man of extraordinary power and mystery. Although the historic early achievements were plain to see--the restoration of American optimism and patriotism, a repowering of the national economy, a massive arms buildup deliberately forcing the 'Evil Empire' of Soviet Communism to come to terms--nobody, let alone Reagan himself, could explain how he succeeded in shaping events to his will. And when Reagan's second term came to grips with some of the most fundamental moral issues of the late twentieth century--at Bitburg and Bergen-Belsen, at Geneva and Reykjavik, publicly outside the Brandenburg Gate ('Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!'), and deep within the mother monastery of the Russian Orthodox Church, Morris realized that he had taken on a subject of epic dimensions.

"Thus began a long biographical pilgrimage to the heart of Ronald Reagan's mystery, beginning with his birth in 1911 in the depths of rural Illinois (where he is still remembered as 'Dutch,' the dreamy son of an alcoholic father and a fiercely religious mother) and progressing through the way stations of an amazingly varied career: young lifeguard (he saved seventy-seven lives), aspiring writer, ace sportscaster, film star, soldier, union leader, corporate spokesman, Governor, and President. Reagan granted Morris full access to his personal papers, including early autobiographical stories and a handwritten White House diary."

-- from the book's jacket description

Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan Details

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Author : Edmund Morris

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From Reader Review Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan for online ebook

Dave says

Edmund Morris caught a lot of shit for writing this book. Yet, I for one, thought it was one of the best political biographies ever. Reagan was one of those guys defined by public life; he had little use for introspection, personal relationships etc. He was truly most comfortable and at home in the limelight. A quote from the book to illustrate the point:

"Decades before Alzheimer's clouded Reagan's mind, he showed a terrifying lack of human presence. "I was real proud when Dad came to my high school commencement," reports his son, Michael Reagan. After posing for photos with Michael and his classmates, the future president came up to him, looked right in his eyes, and said, "Hi, my name's Ronald Reagan. What's yours?" Poor Michael replied, "Dad, it's me. Your son. Mike."

Mike says

I was inspired to read this book about Ronald Reagan, my favorite president in my lifetime, by everything that I had read about Edmund Morris and his exalted biography of President Theodore Roosevelt.

When I first began reading the book, I read the publisher's note and the comments made by numerous people. It was evident that the book was controversial, but I still fully expected to be reading an excellent biography about an excellent president.

You can imagine the depths of my disappointment with the book! With each page, Mr. Morris's dislike, disdain, and disrespect for Ronald Reagan became more and more obvious. He even admitted as much in the book when he states that he doesn't know whether or not he likes the president. Although, in the end, he acknowledges a "love" for the president, his demeaning, belittling, and hurtful adjectives and descriptions of R. Reagan show otherwise.

To think that Mr. Morris was invited by the president to be his official biographer! That was certainly inviting a snake in the grass, "Anguis in Herba" (Morris likes to borrow from foreign languages), into your home, thinking you've invited a good friend in.

Although I won't commit myself to a decision regarding reading more of Edmund Morris's books, I will be very hesitant to ever spend more of my good money on anything authored by him.

Chris says

I liked the actual Biography and thought the author had some good insights. However, it felt like it was as much about the fictional narrator than Ronald Reagan. I didn't know until after I had finished that more than two thirds of "first person" accounts were fictional. I didn't enjoy them when reading, and felt the book

would have been much better if they had been left out.

Allison says

I was only 8 years old when Ronald Reagan left office, so I felt like I was rediscovering the era of my childhood while reading this book. RR was such an imposing figure upon my imagination, and I remember sadly watching as Alzheimer's slowly took his faculties and he dwindled away into a shadow of what he once was as I grew into an adult. I definitely learned much about twentieth-century American history, and especially about Dutch himself. The best part about this memoir is the author's ability to insert himself into the narrative (which was highly controversial since he basically made himself a semi-fictional character in this biography), but it works. This is a much more literary biography than I've read before, with beautiful, haunting descriptions and creative narrative touches throughout, including, appropriately enough for the actor-turned president, some script-style sections. The only drawback, in my opinion, is that I think the author expects the reader to be more familiar with the time period that is covered, and there were many cultural and historical allusions or references that were unfamiliar to me. Perhaps, though, it just means I need to brush up on my 20th Century history! All in all, I rate this as a fantastic book, and well worth the six months it took me to finally finish (of course, I had to read the footnotes, too-- they are almost as interesting as the bio itself!).

Marlene says

I found this a bit difficult to read. The author was trying to be clever, but I sometimes felt like it was an autobiography rather than a biography of President Reagan. However, there certainly are some interesting insights into Ronald Reagan.

Jaime Contreras says

This massive book is reflection of the complex and sometimes baffling man that was Ronald Reagan. Ronald Reagan is presented as a man who always was up for whatever life brought to him but often did not know what was coming next. His rural Illinois roots in several Illinois towns and a brief stay in Chicago made Reagan was a reflection of middle America - unassuming, engaging, and hard-working. Reagan grew up in a Christian household, was athletic and enjoyed the arts. Gifted, with intelligence and charisma, he attended Eureka College at a younger age than other students. Possessed with an innate ability to learn in every situation and used his natural talents to sway and motivate others. Reagan's collegiate studies and interests led to a brief career in broadcasting. He easily moved from sportscaster to movie extra, Reagan was a social persona. In time, he became a stalwart studio actor and married a young starlet, Jane Wyman with whom he would have three children (albeit one died in childbirth). In the military, he was assigned to The First Motion Picture Unit (FMPU), the propaganda film production unit of the US Army Air Forces during WWII. Reagan was one of several actors who served through the film-making unit. It was here that Reagan's political knowledge was expanded through what he saw during the war. The atrocities and man's ruthlessness would stay with him throughout the remainder of his life.

The author paints the post-WWII years as a time when Reagan sharpened his political savvy through his leadership in the Screen Actors' Guild (SAG) and various other entertainment councils and committees. As

SAG President he would oppose the HUAC 'witch hunt' of Communists and their influence. As chairman of the Motion Picture Industry Council (MPIC), he honed his political leadership and negotiation skills.

Reagan's political position as staunch liberal would change to moderate Conservative in the late-1940s when he began to appreciate that a strong society needed rules and parameters. He would see his acting career stagnated while his wife's soared. The author likens this period to an actor preparing for a new role. Indeed, the middle-aged actor did hone new skills and remade himself into a social and civic leader.

I must admit that Mr. Morris' writing style was challenging at times but I came to handle it as I read. Nevertheless, it worked especially well when we experience the years of tumult and change that formed the future persona of Reagan. The unpredictable nature of Reagan and how the times shaped his course come across clearly in this section of the book. We feel his doubts, distrust of Communism, hatred of appeasement, living through his divorce from Wyman and being single in the 1950s. Reagan's humor, wit and intelligence carried him though and we see inklings of his future as he looked for a new direction in his life.

The author paints the bulk of 1950s as the as the time when Reagan matured as a leader with grand ambitions and public appeal. With a new wife, Nancy Davis and more children, the family man would now looked for a new life. Publicly, his ideology underwent a drastic change as he moved to the moderate and finally conservative sphere of politics. The interesting part of this change was that Reagan was able to adapt new ideas while preserving his belief of uplifting the working man and empowering the laborer with an ethical resolve to have dignity while fighting for a better future. Ever the politician, Reagan evolved as a speaker for laborer's rights and embracing a brighter tomorrow. he rose to the forefront of the labor world and gained valuable allies in the business world and politics. His faith also was reborn as he studied the bible and became friends with many religious leaders. By the early-1960s, the course for his life was set as he became active in the Republican Party. He stood with Richard M. Nixon while he sought the Office of President in the 1960s.

As Nixon rose in power within the Republican Party in the 1960s, Reagan became the voice of the other side of the Republican Party - reformers. He found a base in California and local leaders encouraged and supported his desire to be the governor of the state. The world of politics was a natural for the skilled orator, negotiator and charismatic man. Reagan was at home in the public eye as the Governor of California. Ever the protector and visionary, Reagan fought for reform in labor, welfare, housing and taxes. His stands were not at the center of the party and many considered him an outsider. But as the 1970s dawned, the 60+ politician cemented his position as governor and won re-election, Reagan looked for the next challenge.

The author dedicates the bulk of the latter part of the book on Reagan's strong sense of decency and devotion to a high set of principles as he sought and eventually won the highest office in the land - the presidency. By the 1970s, reagan was an avowed Christian with strong roots in the teachings of being a noble servant leader. Reagan was the embodiment of what America wanted to reclaim and embrace - strength, decisiveness, and morality. He barely lost the 1976 Republican Party nomination to Ford but won the country's heart. As President Carter stumbled, Reagan waited and planned another presidential run.

The last part of the book deals with the Reagan Presidency and retirement. The late-1970s and beyond witnessed Reagan riding a wave of rebirth, nostalgia and hope, By now the wise and savvy politician was the strong and moral leader that the people sought. After winning the election, President Reagan appeared aloof but in fact was quite conscientious of the needs of the people. His popularity grew as he survived an early-term assassination attempt, The legend grew as he unveiled and implemented his dream to restore 'the shining City" (America) to its intended state of strength. With his bold concept of Reaganomics, Reagan prepared to guide the nation though a recession and to reclaim its place as the world leader. His respect and support of the laborer formed the basis of his labor reforms. While he was a stalwart supporter of the military

he also saw the need for arms control and eventually, arms reduction. The author dedicates many pages to Reagan's role in the arms control and overseeing the death of the USSR and the dismantling of its military. Reagan's tact and diplomatic skills kept America strong in the face of many military involvements in Latina America, Asia and Africa. Much time is spent of Reagan's meetings, discussions and negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the dying USSR. In spite of a cancer scare, Reagan remained the strong leader as his second term wended down. During his second term, Reagan steered the country through the Challenger disaster, the Beirut bombings, the hostage taken in Lebanon, the Contra arms deal debacle, the disarmament talks with the USSR, the collapse of Communism, and tax reform while dealing with several personal issues. Reagan battled cancer as did his wife, Nancy. Through it all, Reagan's legacy took many hits and his last several months of his eight (8) years in office. The author pulls no punches here as he portrays Reagan as tired, withdrawn, and aging. Still, the man had one last victory, overseeing the fall of Communism and the 'evil empire' (USSR). The author wraps up the book by stating that Reagan's legacy as America's man moral leader and passionate courage. Dubbed 'the great communicator,' Reagan was never one to shy away from the battle but always strategic. He wore the mantle of leadership and re-energized and empowered "the shining city" (the nation) for 8+ years. Reagan stated he had succeeded on filling his promise of making the nation safer and stronger. For me, this was the best part of the book because the historical man is fleshed out by the sharing of thoughts and dreams.

As he adjusted to life after the presidency, Reagan's faculties began to fail him and he struggled to maintain the role he once mastered. He made a handful appearances, including a medal ceremony and Nixon's funeral. By 1993, the diagnosis of dementia confirmed that Reagan was not well and frail. In closing, The author treated the deterioration of the once great leader with respect. The author recalls his visits with Reagan from 1993 to 1998 and sensed the rush of death. Ronald Reagan eventually died on June 5, 2004, having suffered from Alzheimer's disease for nearly a decade. Reagan is remembered as a leader who surrounded himself with a group of reliable advisers and experts but always had the last say. He spoke from the heart but always used his head. Throughout his two terms in office, there was no doubt he was the powerful man with a vision. This was a wonderful book about an important 20th century man and leader.

Rachel says

I read quite a bit of this book several years ago but all I can really remember is having to stop because I found the business with the fictional narrator so weird and confusing. It's like that book *The Devil in the White City* that everyone loves so much. I can't read stuff like that because I need to have a clear idea of where the research ends and the fancy begins.

Ronald Reagan is definitely one of the most fascinating figures I can think of. Somehow he managed to make quite an impression on my little psyche before I was even eight years old. He figured big in a really cool dream I had a few months ago.

I wish I knew more about this man, and that is why I've got the *American Experience* episode about him in my Netflix queue.

Arminius says

I was disappointed in this book. Edmund Morris wrote fantastic books about Theodore Roosevelt so I

expected his book on the Great Communicator to be just as good. I like that he pointed out how President Reagan developed his communication skills through his acting career and how he adopted his language to be understandable to the masses. I disliked that the author discussed much of his own trials and tribulations which he encountered while writing this book. If you want to learn about President Reagan's great accomplishments I recommend Dinesh D'Souza's *Ronald Reagan: How An Ordinary Man Became an Extraordinary Leader*.

Bev says

Worst biography I've read. Morris doesn't respect President Reagan, in fact shows great disdain for him on nearly every page. It was apparently written for the entertainment generation: it is crafted into screen plays and Saturday Night Live entertainment which means it's not credible. And Morris deems he is important enough to tell his whole life story simultaneously with Reagan's. I kept reading it because this is the authorized biographer who was allowed access to all of Reagan's papers, journals and access to his inner circle for the last three years of his presidency. Morris is bored with his journals, pans his autobiography and in a trip to Geneva to meet Prime Minister Gorbachev for the first time, writes most on his conversation with the younger Ron Reagan. Now I must read Reagan's autobiography to clear my mind of this book.

Fred says

I enjoyed this book, just as a good read, not as a hagiography (it's far from that), or a history book. Obviously, Edmund Morris's approach (fictionalizing Reagan's life with a participatory, made-up narrator based on Morris himself), was offbeat. And he doesn't really seem to like Ronald Reagan very much, which I think was also off-putting to a lot of people (including me, to some extent, it seemed disloyal somehow, since Reagan essentially hired him to write it as an "official" biography and gave him crazy access). But it's really a fascinating story, well told, covering some of the major events of the twentieth century - the war, Communism in Hollywood, the rise of California) in a readable and interesting way. I am pretty much a fiction reader, so maybe that's why this approach appealed to me. But I urge you to give this a try, it's a fairly quick read, for a big book, and an interesting look at history as narrative/biography.

Duane says

Highly controversial not just for his "fair and balanced" approach to the much revered president but also for the author's literary technique.

The technique of inserting the author into the story in a sort of Dante-esque quality is a little odd for a modern biography. But Morris could be excused because he was given unprecedented access to Reagan while he was running the country. In the later chapters when Morris actually "was there" watching history unfold, he offers an intriguing perspective to the inner workings of government and how Reagan ran the executive office like a Turkish pasha.

Many people were aghast at Morris describing the president as "somewhat of an airhead" which was jarring to besotted fans of the late president. But overall, Morris admired Reagan enough to write this memoir with "warts and all." Reagan was somewhat aloof and people close to him readily admitted (including his

children) that they really never knew him. It is no surprise that Nancy Reagan hated this book (though I doubt she read it), but it is surprising that his kids (except for Michael) claim this "memoir" was an accurate depiction of their father.

Edmund Morris is probably one of my top three non-fiction writers (next to Robert Caro and Ron Chernow). This is one of my favorite books.

Mel says

Many reviewers have been dismayed that Morris injected himself as a fictional character in the first half of the book. Those that criticize the method as being dishonest and difficult to follow are clearly not paying attention. I suspect that most negative reviewers would prefer to worship at the altar of their perfect President and cannot abide any criticism of their God and his wife.

Morris was allowed unique access to the inner working of the White House and accompanied Reagan's entourage to the US/USSR summit in Reykjavik. He often met personally with Reagan from early in his Presidency until the post-presidential years when Reagan no longer recognized him (or anyone else). This familiarity gives Morris a clearer perspective than many of Reagan's other biographers who usually have a political agenda.

Steven says

Chapter for chapter, page for page, this is the single daffiest nonfiction work I have ever read from a respected author.

Edmund Morris, author of widely praised books about Theodore Roosevelt, was given a free hand and direct access to prepare a biography of Ronald Reagan, and apparently found himself in over his head. In fact, judging from this weird amalgam of memoir, biography, and melodramatic fiction, Morris lost his mind. Even Reagan's admirers acknowledged the man's often spooky lack of affect, and his ability to speak utter nonsense with the utmost conviction. Maybe Morris, unable to get a handle on this affable sphynx, suffered a lapse similar to what Miss Quested experienced in the Marabar Caves scene from *A Passage to India*. At any rate, this Pulitzer-winning historian decided that the best way to tell the story of Ronald Reagan was to make a fictionalized version of Edmund Morris one of the players. The Faux Morris is present at all sorts of events the real Morris never witnessed, and in the most deranged scene it is revealed that the youthful Reagan, while on lifeguard duty, saved the Faux Morris from drowning.

During my time as a newspaper editor, I became aware of a syndrome in which a novice reporter -- otherwise very smart -- would panic and decide that instead of writing a standard news story, instead attempt what he thought was a brilliant new approach that yielded deeper truths than mere pyramid style could contain. I had to talk a couple of these tyros down from the trees and it wasn't pretty, but they eventually realized that they had simply clutched and needed to calm down.

Unfortunately for Edmund Morris, too much money, time and prestige had been invested in *Dutch* to allow for such a graceful exit, and the book now exists like a crazy relative chained in the attic of an otherwise distinguished career. Fortunately for us, journalist Lou Cannon did the job Morris should have done with *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, and that will have to stand for now.

John says

This is one of the worst books I have ever read. The author injecting himself into the story as a fictional character was an egotistical and awkward attempt to insult the President. Very cowardly. Once I got my equilibrium after the initial confusing first couple of chapters, it was obvious to me that this book was less to do about Reagan, and more to do with the author's oversized ego.

Mr. Morris wrote a critically acclaimed book about Theodore Roosevelt. After reading this disaster, not sure that I want to invest the time.

Sarah says

There is not going to be a way for me to write this review well, so bear with me while I muddle through.

I bought this book a couple of days after Reagan's death in 2004 from Borders in Springfield, Missouri, along with a city guide of San Francisco and a copy of "On the Road." I bought them for the trip to California, and packed them along with my entire collection of Natalie Goldberg and my heartsick copy of "A Tree Grows In Brooklyn." I found that I had wanted to attend Reagan's funeral, and why didn't he die just three weeks later when I could have made a Southern California stop.

Yes, I admired Reagan. I never got the chance to vote for him--my first voting opportunity was Clinton, and I didn't like Bush--but I have to admit that I loved Reagan's personae. I never knew much about his politics; I was eight years old when he took office and sixteen when he left. But he was comforting. And maybe the fact that he was President during those years of my life made him the FDR of my days, it's hard to say.

When I arrived in California I was lucky enough to live in the South Bay at an apartment with a pool and at a location two train stops from Palo Alto's Stanford Theater. That summer Stanford Theater was featuring all of the movies of Ronald Reagan--I know that I saw two, but the only one I remember was "Kings Row." Despite the fact that I was raised on classic movies my parents never watched Reagan's films (I have a strong suspicion it was because they didn't like him as much as I did), so I was seeing him young for the first time, an unnerving experience. I saw the movies and tried to read the book, but the biographer seemed to be over my head, like Henry James or something, and I gave up. I also gave up on Kerouac and picked up "The Tree Grows in Brooklyn" and Goldberg books instead--all that heavy literature depressed me when I was so homesick.

A couple years back and millions of heartbeats later, I tried again, making it about a hundred pages farther than I did the first time. Still blech. The book is written from a fictional premise with facts, something a little hard to deal with when I was sorting out a broken bone and something even more difficult to explain now,

but all I can say is, that with the complete concentration I can afford these days, it finally made sense this time. I'm sure my smarter friends would get it in twenty seconds and marvel at my stupidity, or judge its obtuseness, but in the end I'm glad to have read it. I find that I worship Reagan less after doing so, but that I like him more, that I wish in some ways I could be like him while finding myself ashamed by that envy. This book also made me think about comparisons between the Cold War and our current battle with global terrorism. The comparisons are too complicated to discuss here, but I loved making them in my private journals.

The book was mine, but now it's read. There's a problem--most people in this area hate Reagan, and I have to give the book away now. If I give the book away using BookCrossings, it will get destroyed. So it gets the boring fate of the library donation. I hope someone else in the Bay Area has the open mind to read it. I hope someone else in the Bay Area is an Independent.

Good night, Great Communicator, and thank you.

P.S. - Ronald Reagan's final letter to the American public, in which he disclosed his diagnoses of Alzheimer's, was handwritten, in cursive. I found this particularly poignant, and that in a generation someone will have to translate it, even though it's written in English. The cursive facsimile is reproduced in the book courtesy the author, and I was grateful.
