



First: Sandra Day O'Connor

Evan Thomas

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Based on exclusive interviews and access to the Supreme Court archives, this is the intimate, inspiring, and authoritative biography of America's first female Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor--by *New York Times* bestselling author Evan Thomas.

She was born in 1930 in El Paso and grew up on a cattle ranch in Arizona. At a time when women were expected to be homemakers, she set her sights on Stanford University. When she graduated near the top of her class at law school in 1952, no firm would even interview her. But Sandra Day O'Connor's story is that of a woman who repeatedly shattered glass ceilings--doing so with a blend of grace, wisdom, humor, understatement, and cowgirl toughness.

She became the first-ever female majority leader of a state senate. As a judge on the Arizona State Court of Appeals, she stood up to corrupt lawyers and humanized the law. When she arrived at the Supreme Court, appointed by Reagan in 1981, she began a quarter-century tenure on the court, hearing cases that ultimately shaped American law. Diagnosed with cancer at fifty-eight, and caring for a husband with Alzheimer's, O'Connor endured every difficulty with grit and poise.

Women and men today will be inspired by how to be first in your own life, how to know when to fight and when to walk away, through O'Connor's example. This is a remarkably vivid and personal portrait of a woman who loved her family and believed in serving her country, who, when she became the most powerful woman in America, built a bridge forward for the women who followed her.

First: Sandra Day O'Connor Details

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Author : Evan Thomas

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Katie says

Can't say enough about this in depth portrait of our first female Supreme Court Justice! As a female attorney myself, I was initially drawn to the title because of the many great acts Justice O'Connor was involved with while on the bench. But I gleamed so much more from this book. From her up bringing in Arizona, her time in law school as a female in a predominately man's world, to her care of her husband during their later years, I finished this book (in one sitting I might add) feeling inspired to accomplish more not only in my career but as a person as well. The author's vivid description of paints such a clear picture of one of America's most inspiring women. Clear your schedule because you won't be able to put this biography down!

Ashley Reyes says

I was very excited to receive a free copy from netgalley for an honest review.

Short answer- I loved this book!

Long answer- I grew up wanting to be this woman, and after studying law, and reading countless briefs written by her as well as seeing documentaries throughout my life, I felt like I knew a fair amount about who she was. But, this book showed what shaped her and how irreverent she is, but also showed how seriously she took her calling. There's a difference in knowing what to do, and knowing how to do it effortlessly. I think anyone wanting to view challenges in their career, or how to give back after tackling those challenges should read this. She has heart, she has style, and she knew how to go on.

Brittany says

**Netgalley provided me with a DRC of this work
In exchange for an honest review**

Superb.

Top five of the biographies I've read in the past five years.

The cyclical storytelling of this phenomenal account of SOC's life, does not feel like the momentous (nearly) 500 page monster that it is, because it flows so wonderfully.

Each segment is hinted at in the chapter's title page, and the photographs included drew me into each section, anticipating the details.

This book had so many pieces of incredible history, lovely, thought-provoking insights and a rich blend of sentiment and shocking, political revelations to keep historians, political junkies and curious readers all transfixed.

I loved reading about Day O'Connor's tough side: forgetting to buckle in her son and her grabbing him from the side of the road, dusting him off, and continuing to drive; loving outdoor adventure; telling certain justices what to do; doing aerobics days after cancer surgery....

But her heart also was evident in anecdotes about helping her staffers who were working moms, weeping over the death of her father and retirements of friends, her fear of being forced to slow down after breast cancer...and sentencing people to prison sentences in her younger days.

This is very well-written and profound. A biographical gem.

Jean says

I have read Joan Biskupic's biography of Sandra Day O'Connor (1930-) and have read O'Connor's memoirs and other books. Thomas's book was written after she retired from the Court so contains more information about her later life. Thomas also had access to John O'Connor's papers, diary and unpublished memoir.

The book is well written and meticulously researched. Thomas interviewed almost all of O'Connor's law clerks and staff as well as friends and colleagues. I found the information about how each of the male Justices had to adapt (or not) to a female Justice interesting. I found the lunch meeting between O'Connor and Ginsburg most interesting. This meeting took place just after O'Connor was appointed to the Supreme Court and long before Ginsburg was appointed to the Court. Thomas provided a number of insights as well as material not covered in prior books. This book is well worth the read. I noted how far women attorneys have come since the day O'Connor graduated from Stanford Law School and found out that firms would not hire women.

I read this as an e-book on my Kindle app for my iPad. There were lots of photographs. I wished I had the photograph with all the women Justices together. The book was 455 pages and published by Random House.

Casey Wheeler says

This book is well researched and written. The author's writing style makes this an interesting read. It covers the life of the first woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court. The book does an excellent job of describing how O'Connor arrived at the opinions that she wrote and how she dealt with differing opinions within the court itself including some attacks that were more personal versus objective. Justice O'Connor was a trail blazer in many ways and it is unfortunate that the current make-up of the court has become increasingly political and positioned to undo much of the work that she did.

I recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the first woman to be appointed to the Supreme Court or the more recent history of the court.

I received a free Kindle copy of *First: Sandra Day O'Connor* by Evan Thomas courtesy of Net Galley and Random House, the publisher. It was with the understanding that I would post a review on Net Galley, Goodreads, Amazon and my fiction book review blog. I also posted it to my Facebook and Twitter pages.

I requested this book as I am interested in the Supreme Court and its history. I have read a number of books by the author.

Chris says

An absolute triumph. The public knows so little about any given justice, even a famous, historic justice like O'Connor. Thomas skillfully brings her to life.

Thomas is to be commended for his perfect pacing. He seems to know exactly what to include to fascinate, entertain, and illustrate. Every aspect of her life receives exactly the right amount of attention. Answers the big questions (e.g., why was she chosen?) as well as the smaller ones (how did she end up at Stanford from Lazy B?).

A must read for anyone interested in Sandra Day O'Connor, the Supreme Court, or lovers of fantastic biography.

Bob H says

An inspiring, and well-researched, biography of the nation's first woman on the U.S. Supreme Court. The author may be among the last to interview the former Justice (now in assisted living), and had numerous interviews with her former law clerks, colleagues (including other Justices), and family friends. He had rare access to her private papers and seems to have done formidable research at the Library of Congress and at the Court.

He follows her life from her early days on a ranch on the Arizona-New Mexico border to her school days. She goes on to six years in combined undergraduate and law studies at Stanford, where she was classmates with, and briefly dated, the future Chief Justice William Rehnquist. We learn of her graduation with honors and, as a woman, being offered nothing at law firms but secretarial work. Even a dozen years after graduation, after she had married John O'Connor and moved to Phoenix, she was unable to join a law firm. Her husband was a partner in a top law firm while she had to hang out her shingle in a Phoenix strip mall. Nonetheless, she and her husband would raise a family and rise in Phoenix society and Republican politics, and she would get an appointment to the state senate -- a rough legislature and rude male colleagues, we're told -- and eventually to a position as a state court judge.

We find how the times had changed so that, when Ronald Reagan became president, he would want a female Supreme Court appointment, and how O'Connor, then a state appellate judge, would be chosen. Most of the book, therefore, is of her time on the Court from 1981-2006. The book tells us much about the Court's work in those years, its internal dynamics and O'Connor's role, more and more, as a swing vote. As a legal history of the Court in those times, the book is valuable. It was a period of major, sometimes harshly controversial, rulings on everything from abortion to affirmative action to the Bush v. Gore election of 2000. As someone who has studied, and followed, constitutional law, I can say that it's a well-told and detailed look at the Court in those times, and of the bigger-than-life personalities that served alongside her: Brennan, Rehnquist, Scalia, Thurgood Marshall, and the rest.

We get a sensitive discussion of her tragedies as well: her husband's creeping dementia, the creeping

infirmities of her own aging, the decision of when, and how well-timed, was to be her retirement. That she was balancing all this, during her final years, with contentious and momentous caseloads says much. Highly recommend, not just to legal scholars but to anyone interested in this country's social history in the last quarter of the 20th Century. Highest recommendation.

Lisa says

An inspiring and enlightening autobiography of a most amazing woman.

SUMMARY

Sandra Day was born in 1930 in El Paso and grew up on a cattle ranch in Arizona. At a time when women were expected to be homemakers, she set her sights on Stanford University. She graduated near the top of her law school class in 1952, but no firm would even interview her. Sandra Day O'Connor's story is that of a woman who repeatedly shattered glass ceilings—with a blend of grace, wisdom, humor, understatement, and toughness.

She became the first ever female majority leader of a state senate. As a judge on the Arizona Court of Appeals, she stood up to corrupt lawyers and humanized the law. When she arrived at the United States Supreme Court, appointed by President Ronald Reagan in 1981, she began a quarter-century tenure on the Court, hearing cases that ultimately shaped American law. Diagnosed with cancer at fifty-eight, and caring for a husband with Alzheimer's, O'Connor endured every difficulty with grit and poise.

REVIEW

Absolutely loved this authoritative and well-sourced autobiography of Sandra Day O'Connor, who became the most powerful woman in America. Sources include Supreme Court internal records, and interviews with O'Connor, and many of her clerks, friends and family. *FIRST* draws a fabulous portrait of her childhood, her personal life, and her twenty-five years on the bench.

The writing is superb. I cried when I read the explanation of her appointment to the Supreme Court, just as I had when she was actually appointed in 1981. I loved hearing about her thoughtful deliberations on the tough issues of discrimination and abortion. I laughed at the many funny stories of dancing, making jokes and having a good time. I enjoyed reading about her jovial husband John, and how he dealt with being married to the "most powerful woman" in America. I was captivated at many details of her relationships and interactions with the other justices.

Being from Florida, one of my favorite parts of the book was the chapter on *Bush v. Gore*. Not because I necessarily liked the outcome, but because I now finally understand the rationale behind it. *FIRST* is an inspiring and enlightening autobiography of an amazing woman. The book is smartly structured and is bounding with magnificent personal and professional details. Highly recommended.

Author Evan Thomas is the author of nine books including two NYT best sellers: *John Paul Jones* and *Sea of Thunder*. Thomas was a writer, correspondent, and editor for thirty-three years at *Time* and *Newsweek*, including ten years (1986–96) as Washington bureau chief at *Newsweek*, where, at the time of his retirement in 2010, he was editor at large.

Thanks to Netgalley, Evan Thomas and Random House for an advance reading copy of this book in

exchange for an honest review.

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Review www.bluestockingreviews.com

Mike says

One of the better biographies I have read in a while. I knew very little about Sandra Day O'Connor other than the fact that she was the first female Supreme Court Justice. I really enjoyed learning about her life in the Southwest and appreciated her approach to work and success. She never made excuses, was direct in her approach, was disciplined in her habits, and she expected others to be the same in these areas. She was tough on her clerks, but also tried to mentor and look out for them. In her decisions as a Justice, she would often look at the real life impact of the cases, and also stayed away from making definitive rulings in an effort to allow the states, legislatures, and society work out difficult moral issues. Her love with her husband was special to read about, and his eventual death to Alzheimers was sad and tragic. A fascinating life and I highly recommend this book to all readers.

Alana Wilson says

I couldn't read this book fast enough, or slow enough. I wanted it to continue so I could learn even more about the fascinating life of the first woman Supreme Court Judge.

This book is so well researched! The details obtained information through diaries, articles, interviews with family and friends and each lending to a more concrete and established labor of love. I even loved reading the annotated bibliography!

I laughed, I cried, and I begged to be one of the clerks in SOC's staff. This book introduced me to one of the most resilient women in America. While I will never carry the weight of her personal history and accomplishments, I am proud to be a woman who knows that doors have been opened for me because of her dedication, fearlessness, ability to be objective and to stand her ground in a man's world. The image of her breaking through the glass ceiling and mystifying her male colleagues by her knowledge, determination, and her boldness to stand with them is a large part of the woman's movement and advancement.

Dave says

"First" is an in-depth biography of one of the most remarkable women in American history. In many ways, Justice O'Connor has not received the recognition she deserves for being such a groundbreaking figure. Based on over a hundred interviews with friends, family members, fellow justices, and almost all of her law

clerks, First offers a wide sweeping portrait of O'Connor from her beginnings on a dusty Arizona ranch hours from the nearest city to her final years when she left the Court to care for her husband as he suffered from late-stage Alzheimer's.

The first part of the book traces her early years in the Day Ranch as O'Connor grew up and formed her values. The story follows her to Stanford where she met and dated future Supreme Court Chief Justice Rehnquist. But, even graduating from a top university with stellar grades only garnered her job offers as a legal secretary, not as a lawyer. Their loss!

O'Connor worked her way from the bottom to become the Majority Leader of the Arizona Senate and then a judicial appointment to state court. Her struggles and success in the Arizona Legislature are detailed here but are not as compelling as the rest of her story.

The story then turns to what made her famous: her appointment to the Supreme Court by President Reagan. Like the Brethren, Evans details for us the inner workings of the High Court, but with O'Connor as the center hub of the story, not Brennan. Evans both humanizes O'Connor and her fellow justices. Major court decisions are discussed as are the inner court debates on how to decide the cases. The discussion is at a level which is complex enough to appeal to a legal audience and to lay readers as well (I think).

This biography is well-researched, well-detailed, and leaves one with an appreciation for what a remarkable person Justice O'Connor was and what a remarkable life she led.

Many thanks to the publisher for providing a copy for review.

Rose says

First is a beautiful biography of America's first woman Supreme Court Justice, Sandra Day O'Connor. It tells about how she grew up and became the first woman justice. I loved this biography and highly recommend it to fans of history, biographies, and influential women.

I would like to thank Netgalley and the publisher for providing me with a copy of this book free of charge. This is my honest and unbiased opinion of it.

Karen says

For a big dose of inspiration, I highly recommend reading this book, though I must admit I felt like an underachiever! I suspected Sandra Day O'Connor had impeccable credentials and connections in order to be appointed the first woman on the Supreme Court, but never would have imagined the hurdles she climbed to get there. She beat great odds as only 300 of more than 8,700 judges in the United States were women (and only 8 of 520 federal judges).

The first chapters introduce Sandra growing up on her family's huge Lazy B ranch, working as hard as any of its male ranch hands. Her father was a tough nut but also Sandra's biggest supporter. How she was raised seems to have played a significant role in building her strong and disciplined character.

Fresh out of Stanford, Sandra was unable to find work in a law practice despite her already significant achievements, the partners' beliefs that only men could be capable lawyers. She was offered a job as a secretary instead! She eventually found work as a deputy district attorney and worked her way up the corporate ladder. Her resume is impressive, the unwavering support and love of her family incredible.

Sandra was a true pioneer, forging uncharted territory through smarts, hard work and lots of relationship building. Her ideas could be called radical for the times yet spot on perfect, eventually earning well-deserved respect at the highest levels of government. She made significant contributions pre-and post- Supreme court, and her Supreme Court record was impeccable. Sandra seemed to not only care about the rule of the law, but she cared about people and was meticulous in her research to arrive at opinions. Her story is so compelling. Sadly, she was diagnosed with dementia in 2018. Thanks to Random House for an ARC in exchange for an honest review.

Missy says

First: Sandra Day O'Connor, by Evan Thomas, is the first biography I have read about Sandra Day O'Connor. Clearly, a lot of research went into the book, but unfortunately the writing is disorganized and lacks focus. The introduction of her early life, her wonderful marriage to John, and her early career is well done. Her upbringing and marital support gave her the fortitude to face the sexist challenges of her time. But beginning with the Supreme Court appointment, the book breaks down. The narrative bounces around chronologically, and it is full of details of court cases that did not serve to tell Sandra Day O'Connor's story. I felt the author needed to choose between a book about case law, or a book about SDC. There are interesting nuggets in each chapter, but I was often skimming after chapter 7. The description of her post-retirement years is quite unflattering. While it's important to be truthful, I think some interview comments could have been left out for the sake of graciousness. iCivics is a wonderful program, and perhaps more could have been said about that and less about her bossiness and rudeness.

An advance copy of this book was provided to me by Netgalley.

Deb says

Through NetGalley, I received a complimentary copy of this book from the publisher, Random House. Opinions expressed in this review are completely my own.

The book shares insight into O'Connor's childhood, education, family, and career. It also addressed the challenges Sandra faced after graduating from law school. Sandra had to leave Lazy B when she was six to live with her maternal grandparents and go to school. The Lazy B roots will influence much of O'Connor's life. Her children and family were always top priority to Sandra. The O'Connors had three sons and Sandra was able to successfully blend motherhood and a career. She was a strong-willed, intelligent, and humble woman."

John O'Connor was not threatened by her "intellectual power" and very supportive of Sandra. John and Sandra had a good time together dancing, joking. "O'Connor loved amateur theatricals, both watching them and putting on her own skits with John." In this book, I felt a clear understanding of John and Sandra's relationship. The book touches on the impact to John when Sandra was appointed to the Supreme Court. He

gave up his influential position in Phoenix and found a position in Washington. “The O’Connors’ closest friends saw the effort that John put into his role as husband of the Most Powerful Woman in America.”

She was the “first” at many things including “...the first female majority leader of a state senate in Arizona and U.S. Supreme Court.” Sandra mentored her clerks and was involved in their personal lives. She would walk away from fights she deemed unnecessary, while never shying away from the important ones. She knew when to tease, when to flatter, and when to punch...”

“O’Connor was the most powerful Supreme Court justice of her time.” For most of her 24+ years on the Court, she was the controlling vote on many of the great societal issues. Sandra had a close relationship with her law clerks. The clerks understood that they were undergoing more than legal training in her chambers.” The book frequently touched on an exercise class Sandra started for the interns (and anyone else who wanted) and herself to participate before the workday.

Once confirmed, “The justices, she was surprised to discover, rarely spoke to one another; they preferred to communicate by memo.” “...justices rarely spoke to each other outside of conference. Their chambers were “nine separate one-man law firms,” as one justice put it. With few exceptions, they did not visit each other or pick up the phone. Sandra was instrumental in changing this. Justice O’Connor “was more in sync with the public mood than her fellow justices.”

A great deal of the book addresses major cases before the Supreme Court and Sandra’s stand on the cases, including abortion, elections (Bush v. Gore), women’s rights. Often she was the “fifth vote.” Her childhood and background greatly influenced her decisions Book rolled right along but bogged down in the details of legal cases which may lose some readers. Ruth Bader Ginsburg joining the court is touched upon. “The two women were not natural pals... but ... When Ginsburg was diagnosed with cancer in 1999, O’Connor was able to guide her through...” O’Connor’s influence on Ginsburg is discussed. The relationships and approaches with the other justices was shared. Sandra. “made it her business to get along with every justice...” “The reason this place was civil was Sandra Day O’Connor.” “The plight of women and children reached a deep place in O’Connor. So, too, the plight of minorities. But she continued to see no easy answer for the legacy of racism in society. Race, or rather racial preference, continued...”

Health issues were raised up: Sandra battled breast cancer. She fought this battle while on the Court and “returned to the Supreme Court ... ten days after surgery.” During this time, the book shared her emotional turmoil but “hardly a pause in the O’Connors’ social calendar.” Sandra “...did not speak publicly about her cancer for six years.” John was later diagnosed with Alzheimer’s and in true Sandra form she took care of her husband much longer than most. She was very reluctant to have him in a facility.

She stepped down from the Supreme Court because “John needs me.” True to form, she chose her family over her career. She was actually modeling a balanced life... Make time for your family. Take care of yourself.” “Never complain, never explain,” might be her motto.

The book ends indicating Sandra is now battling Alzheimer’s disease. I found this to be a well written book and very insightful of Sandra Day O’Connor. A lady I can admire.
