



# The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin

*H.W. Brands*

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## **The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin** H.W. Brands **National Bestseller**

He was the foremost American of his day, yet today he is little more than a mythic caricature in the public imagination. Benjamin Franklin, perhaps *the* pivotal figure in colonial and revolutionary America, comes vividly to life in this masterly biography.

Wit, diplomat, scientist, philosopher, businessman, inventor, and bon vivant, Benjamin Franklin was in every respect America's first Renaissance man. From penniless runaway to highly successful printer, from ardently loyal subject of Britain to architect of an alliance with France that ensured America's independence, Franklin went from obscurity to become one of the world's most admired figures, whose circle included the likes of Voltaire, Hume, Burke, and Kant. Drawing on previously unpublished letters and a host of other sources, acclaimed historian H. W. Brands has written a thoroughly engaging biography of the eighteenth-century genius. A much needed reminder of Franklin's greatness and humanity, **The First American** is a work of meticulous scholarship that provides a magnificent tour of a legendary historical figure, a vital era in American life, and the countless arenas in which the protean Franklin left his legacy.

## **The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin Details**

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# **From Reader Review The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin for online ebook**

## **Michael Brown says**

Twenty-three years ago I read "Mornings on Horseback," McCullough's biography of Teddy Roosevelt. I had trouble putting that book down, and I became a great admirer of TR. After reading this, I don't have the same feeling about Franklin. Too academic.

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## **Joan says**

I so enjoyed reading about this great man. He was a genius! He was one of the founding fathers and because of his insight, kindness, and knowledge he helped make America great!

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## **James says**

It's nice reading about a founding father who's not a blatant racist and petitioned congress to abolish slavery. Franklin wrote often in his later years about this, also stating that he saw no difference in the intelligence of blacks, whites or native Americans. He also tried to get fair treatment for native Americans, quite a change from other founding fathers. He was also extremely tolerant about religion, even writing that if a Muslim preacher showed up in Boston, he's support letting him use his church's pulpit. Looking at him thru modern eyes though, he couldn't be called a feminist though some of his satirical letters did make nasty remarks about some forms of unequal treatment. Still he's better than our current president on the subject!

H.W Brands does a good job of showing the highlights of Franklin; Franklin as young punk, printer, writer, scientist and politician, usually using Franklin's own words. It's a long book, but Franklin has so many facets, at times it's like reading about a different person. The descriptions of English and French politics were fun and reminds me how far all of our countries have progressed socially.

I do vaguely remember reading Franklin's autobiography decades ago, it left a dry, dusty taste and a couple of decades later I read a mediocre biography that I cannot remember a tiddly bit of. I think I will have less problems with recalling this one. An excellent book on a complex and fascinating character.

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## **Marijan says**

An excellent biography of an amazing person. Deeply researched, it revelas all the aspects of Franklin's life, especially those he glossed over in his autobiography.

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## **Julie says**

I really liked the fact that this book went into detail about Benjamin Franklin's thoughts on religion, on the process of politics, how his love for the British changed, and moved to the American side when we had to change. It was very insightful and very funny at times as well what a great man we had in Benjamin Franklin.

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### **Reagan Ramsey says**

I love Ben Franklin. I mean, I know he wasn't perfect, but he's so inspiring. I love how he constantly tries to be better and is so intentional about his life. His family life needed alot of work, and it's sad to me that his relationship with his son was so painful and distant at times.

The other thing that was interesting to me about this book was seeing the events of the American birth play out as they did. I think we credit our country to this philosophical and moral giants...when in reality(though they were extraordinary in some ways), they were just people trying to do the right thing. It makes you realize that everyone's life can lead to greatness...one step at a time.

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### **Ron says**

A monumental yet eminently readable biography of (arguably) the most impressive and important of the early figures in American history. Written in a very clear style, the book moves along, drawing the reader into wanting to know the next events in this very fascinating life. VERY HIGHLY RECOMMEND! From Amazon: He was the foremost American of his day, yet today he is little more than a mythic caricature in the public imagination. Benjamin Franklin, perhaps the pivotal figure in colonial and revolutionary America, comes vividly to life in this masterly biography.

Wit, diplomat, scientist, philosopher, businessman, inventor, and bon vivant, Benjamin Franklin was in every respect America's first Renaissance man. From penniless runaway to highly successful printer, from ardently loyal subject of Britain to architect of an alliance with France that ensured America's independence, Franklin went from obscurity to become one of the world's most admired figures, whose circle included the likes of Voltaire, Hume, Burke, and Kant. Drawing on previously unpublished letters and a host of other sources, acclaimed historian H. W. Brands has written a thoroughly engaging biography of the eighteenth-century genius. A much needed reminder of Franklin's greatness and humanity, The First American is a work of meticulous scholarship that provides a magnificent tour of a legendary historical figure, a vital era in American life, and the countless arenas in which the protean Franklin left his legacy.

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### **Marto Mugss says**

Brands does an excellent job of capturing Franklin's exuberant versatility as a writer who adopted countless personae evidence of his gift for seeing the world through a variety of different lenses that not only predestined his prominence as a man of letters but also as an agile man of politics. From Franklin's progress as a self-declared ""Briton"" serving as London agent for Pennsylvania, Massachusetts and other colonies to his evolution as an American (wartime minister to France, senior peace negotiator with Britain and, finally, senior participant at the Constitutional Convention), Brands, with admirable insight and arresting narrative, constructs a portrait of a complex and influential man (""only Washington mattered as much"" ) in a highly

charged world.

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## **Ross says**

This biography of Franklin is billed as comprehensive and it certainly is that. It would seem to contain essentially every thing that is known about the great man's life. I would say it is a must read for anyone interested in American history. Even though it is a huge book.

By the title, Brands makes the case that it is Franklin who most deserves the credit for the steps that led to the creation of the American republic. Washington, of course, deserves the credit for winning the war, but who got it started is the question.

Before reading this work I had believed that it was John Adams who deserved most of the credit, probably because I had read more about Adams than Franklin. I also knew that Franklin was a libertine which I don't like.

However, Brands has convinced me that it is indeed Franklin who most merits the credit for the birth of my country. In fact it is likely that because he was a libertine he got along with the French so well and secured their critical assistance when John Adams could not.

Reading the detail of Franklin's dealings with the British government as agent for the colonies in London, leading up to the split, makes me thank our "lucky American stars" for the incredible arrogance, stupidity and greed of parliament and George III. If they had any foresight London would today be the capitol of the greatest nation on earth, albeit with most of the population on the other side of the Atlantic. Franklin was arguing for unification and the British government said, "no you are our possession."

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## **Xyra says**

I'm not sure how this received "my rating" before now, but the 4 stars are accurate. I really liked this book. I learned so much more about Benjamin Franklin. One confession, the reason I put this down dealt with me reading something that made me angry with one of my favorite founding fathers. I am glad I decided to let go of that anger and proceed to the end of this biography.

HW Brands' source notes are extensive - 40 pages worth! His telling of Benjamin Franklin's life incorporates quotes from published works, correspondence, and various other sources. including these sources helps the narrative to take on a personal feeling. The personal touch is what held my attention for so long.

The work flows well keeping the reader's attention and eye.

I learned a lot! Re-emphasized the reason Franklin's birthday is a point of discussion. How the continental congress and constitutional conventions worked. Diplomatic trips overseas and the trouble they wreaked on his person physically. Personal struggles with family, friends, etc. The great societies and institutions he founded or established. Inventions. So much more.

My edition of the book has a "silky" cover and flips well. And for as battered as the edges got over time, the binding is still unbroken. Overall i really enjoyed reading this biography and learning more about Benjamin Franklin, his life, and his contributions to building the USA.

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## Aaron Million says

Superb biography of one of the greatest early Americans. Franklin lived many different lives within one: printer, businessman, philosopher, scientist, meteorologist, inventor, politician, mediator, minister, representative of the people. Brands does a great job bringing him to life, focusing on the varied aspects of Franklin's personality and how he effectively negotiated with people in various parts of his life over the years to get what he (or the fledgling U.S) needed.

Brands does not hesitate to point out Franklin's less-than-stellar moments - such as when he, for reasons known only to him, would not return to Philadelphia from London when his wife Deborah suffered a stroke. Or his falling out with his son William - a situation that both of them could have easily avoided, or at least tried to minimize. But overall Brands praises Franklin as a sage who profoundly shaped this country (and Britain by turn) and helped it stand on its own. There are many reasons why this man is on the \$100 bill, all deserving.

I read Walter Isaacson's biography of Franklin a few years ago. While Isaacson certainly did a good job, I thought that Brands really succeeded in explaining all of the contradictions inherent within Franklin. Brands also seemed to focus more on Franklin's political work than Isaacson did. Both books are good, and someone wanting to learn about Franklin could not go wrong with either one.

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## Mike says

I haven't read any of the author's other works, so I can't comment on how his style and craft may be evolving, but this book is well-written, well-thought-out, and as far as I can discern, well-researched.

Like most people, I've known of Franklin all my life (well, less about 6 years). And, like most people, I also knew he flew a kite in an electrical storm (which seems rather foolhardy to down-right-dangerous, if you understand what the quantity of power in a typical lightning strike is), invented the lightning rod, was a printer by trade, wrote and published "Poor Richard's Almanac", invented the "Franklin stove", had something to do with the U.S. Postal System, and was a diplomat in France (at some point).

Unlike most people, I also knew that he was honored by having his name engraved into the assembly hall of the Boston Latin School and in the 7th grade was required to read "The Autobiography of Ben Franklin" along with another colonial thriller, "Johnny Tremain".

What I learned from this book was a great deal. To go over all of the specifics would probably take a sizable fraction of the book itself. So, I'll restrict my comments to a few choice morsels.

Franklin spent years in both England and France. I mean years. (Ok, I knew about when he was young and drank water while all his co-workers drank lots of beer in a print shop in England.) He was there for extended visits in both countries. England first (before actual armed rebellion) and then France. Heck, he even planned on living in England permanently because he was so well accepted and so pleased with the culture, intellectual environment and big-city life.

Franklin's experiment with the kite was well-designed to minimize risks to the experimenter, but others repeated it and at least one got a serious shock (chalk one up to the stunningly obvious). But, the kite experiment was one of a series that helped define that various phenomena were all interrelated and described the same basic, underlying principle (or forces).

All of Franklin's real innovation and contribution to the organization and operation of the Postal Service came during decades of (part-time) effort as a Royal appointee. His work with the post-revolutionary USPS was basically to restore the fine operation that he had already created.

Franklin did not patent and essentially gave away the plans for the Franklin "fireplace" (i.e. stove) to help people heat the homes with less fuel and with less money.

I could go on and on, but if anything I've written here intrigues you, go out and read the book!

And, yes, I liked it.

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### **Gerald says**

Earlier: I think this is the Vook edition. It has embedded video. I downloaded it as an app to my iPhone from the Apple iBookstore. I have a hunch this multimedia book experience is not as rich as it could be, but it's a start on a form that's in its infancy.

Update: Turns out I'm not a big fan of the Vook format, at least for recreational reading. I suppose I'm too retro, equate reading with "quiet time."

I like taking books, and ebooks, to public places. Unless I want to wear earbuds, I'm not comfortable playing the clips in the Vook when there are other people around.

I still think that the ideal app for a video-book app is the textbook. The multimedia elements really enhance the experience, I'm sure.

As to the content, Franklin was a character. I'll add him to the list of "people I'd like to have dinner with."

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### **Doreen Petersen says**

Absolutely loved this book!!! Franklin was then and always will be a fascinating man. I would definitely recommend this book!

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### **Daniel Kukwa says**

"The First American" is a wake-up call — never again will I ignore this fascinating-yet-gentle giant of intellect and words. H.W. Brands crafts a sumptuous biography that does great justice to a great man...and it

should be shared far and wide. Drag Ben Franklin out of the the realm of cliché and the fog of forgetfulness, and force him back into the spotlight he so richly deserves.

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### **bup says**

The best biography I've ever read. Franklin is so human I could walk into the next room and not be surprised to see him sitting there.

The biographer also makes a very compelling argument that Ben Franklin was the most indispensable figure in the American Revolutionary adventure. Or at least tied with Washington.

Most historians agree that without George Washington, there's nobody else who could've stepped forward to successfully keep an army together, miraculously beat the most powerful country in the world, and then step down when people were asking him to become emperor.

After this book, though, you'll believe the war was unwinnable without Franklin - nobody else could've gotten the French to lend the US money and give naval support (and others did try).

Plus, of course, the man's life was fascinating.

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### **Kathryn says**

While I am still trying to finish this book, I absolutely love it. It is heady, intelligent, and full of detail that is hard to find in a lot of other autobiographies.

This is a book which requires concentrated time if you want to take in all of the information included in this book. Whenever I pick it up to read a chapter, I am completely engrossed and lose track of time.

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### **GoldGato says**

*A rebellion is always legal in the first person, such as "our rebellion." It is only in the third person - "their rebellion" - that it becomes illegal.*

Ben Franklin

Touching the history of the venerated Founding Fathers, who apparently descended from heaven to wage war against George III, is a difficult task. So it was with trepidation that I started this book, wondering what new angle yet another biographer was going to try to discover. By the time I finished (it took me almost as long as the Revolutionary War itself...this is a big tome), I felt Mr. Franklin was no longer a god but a self-made guy I could relate to, albeit in a very respectful, reverent way.

He was one of seventeen children. 17! I mean, think of that. There was no welfare system, no Google apps, no convenience stores. How did a Founding Father emerge from that burden? He was apprenticed to an older brother, but ran away, which made him a fugitive in New England, so he wound up in Pennsylvania, a



colony run as a personal holding by the Penn family (it isn't just Franklin we learn about in this book). Then, Franklin began his extraordinary life. I lost track of his inventions, of his process enhancements (long before 'kaizen' existed), of his frontier defense ideas, of his diplomatic victories, of his.....it never ends.

If the Brits had treated Franklin and his views with more respect, there probably wouldn't have been a consolidated revolution. When he made the decision for independence, he never looked back. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson led with passion, but The Sage was the one behind them, filling the gaps. As the book explains, the Yanks didn't suddenly throw tea into the sea and demand the cutting of the cord from the Mother Country...resentment had been building for decades. Faced with having to bear the physical and financial burden of fighting England's wars on their home soil, but then watching as the King and his cabinet made post-fight decisions without regard to the feelings of the colonists, the Ben Franklins and George Washingtons slowly turned from loyal subjects to disgruntled rebels.

*The waves do not rise, but when the winds blow.*

I think what I liked about this book, and Franklin himself, was his outlook. He wasn't one of the high-born southerners or British ground-swillers. In essence, he embodied the middle class, the shopkeepers of the world. As he created his own wealth, he understood its use was to purchase one's *own* freedom. Freedom to travel, freedom to eat what one wants, freedom to work or not work, freedom to choose one's own doctor, freedom to read the books one wants to read, freedom to print the books one wants to print. He never patented his inventions, as he felt they should be available to help all, not just the 1-percenters of the world.

*We've spawned a new race... Rougher, simpler; more violent, more enterprising; less refined. We're a new nationality. We require a new nation.*

This book takes that path, to help us understand the man behind the man. Franklin could be infuriating (he stayed overseas instead of coming home to his dying wife, he severed all ties with his Loyalist son), but he was right and far, far ahead of his time. It's a LONG read, but worth it.

Plus, it helped me get past the Ben Franklin of the movie musical, whom I have always loved because he was the one Founding Father I could envision singing and dancing on a staircase while the United States was being founded.

Book Season = Autumn (kites and storms)

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## **Tim Dudek says**

"Finally," this is what all my goodread friends are saying. I started this book seven months ago. What took me so long. First, I don't actually read that much. Secondly, I often found myself pausing while reading to look up some piece of information. I was led down many a wikipedia trail reading this book. Finally, the printer printed on big pages in a small font.

Ok all my excuses are finished, what about the book. I personally prefer learning about history through the lens of biography. Given that caveat, I consider The First American to be one of the best historical books I've

ever read. We get an intimate portrait of the greatest thinker of his time if not one of the greatest thinkers in all of history. The author exposes us to a very human Franklin. We see witness his sadness at the breaking of relations with his son, who chose loyalty to the crown over loyalty to his father.

Beyond Franklin himself we encounter a treasure of information about the milieu that produced the revolution and eventually, the United States. I learned more about what lead to the revolution reading this book than I did in all the schooling I had. I highly recommend it to anybody with an interest in the period

"Go on doing great things and loving pretty women"

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### **Jim Swike says**

An inventor, statesman, and Forefather to our country. Well-researched, and well-written. Great resource book, enjoy!

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