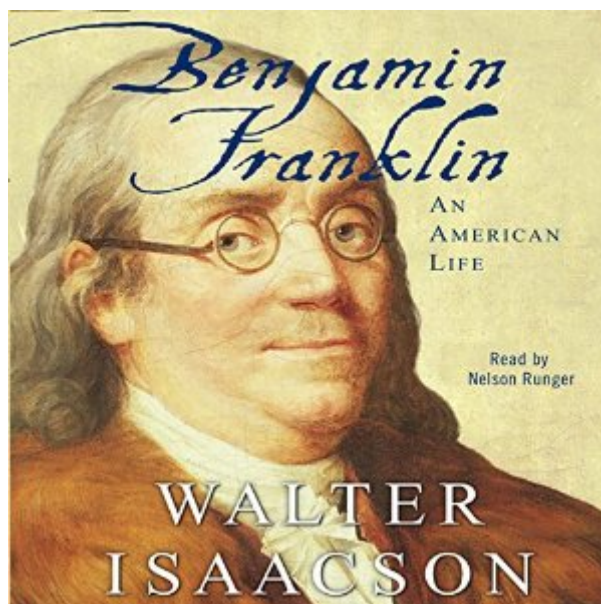


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# Benjamin Franklin: An American Life



## Synopsis

Benjamin Franklin is the founding father who winks at us - an ambitious urban entrepreneur who rose up the social ladder, from leather-aproned shopkeeper to dining with kings. In best-selling author Walter Isaacson's vivid and witty full-scale biography, we discover why Franklin turns to us from history's stage with eyes that twinkle from behind his new-fangled spectacles. In Benjamin Franklin, Isaacson shows how Franklin defines both his own time and ours. The most interesting thing that Franklin invented, and continually reinvented, was himself. America's first great publicist, he was consciously trying to create a new American archetype. In the process, he carefully crafted his own persona, portrayed it in public, and polished it for posterity. His guiding principle was a "dislike of everything that tended to debase the spirit of the common people". Few of his fellow founders felt this comfort with democracy so fully, and none so intuitively. In this colorful and intimate narrative, Isaacson provides the full sweep of Franklin's amazing life, from his days as a runaway printer to his triumphs as a statesman, scientist, and Founding Father. He chronicles Franklin's tumultuous relationship with his illegitimate son and grandson, his practical marriage, and his flirtations with the ladies of Paris. He also shows how Franklin helped to create the American character and why he has a particular resonance in the 21st century.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Ben Franklin An American Life by Walter Isaacson is a book that should be required reading for all American high school students. I wish I had read this book thirty years ago for this book has

transformed my cartoonish, single-dimensional view of Benjamin Franklin into the multi-dimensional, sometimes controversial, and at all times entertaining historical figure he actually was. And while we view Mr. Franklin through the eyes of Author Walter Isaacson, his opinions are mostly invisible throughout almost 600 pages of text, allowing the reader to draw his own conclusions. We know Ben Franklin today mostly as one of the founding fathers. But his presence in our lives comes mostly to us through companies that either bear his name or use his likeness in advertising. Generally we think of Franklin as a wise man whose Poor Richards Almanack and thirteen virtues remind us to work hard to improve ourselves. His character is affiliated with savings, with insurance, with investments and a whole host of products, which we buy because we should. Because it would be the right thing to do, if not the most desired thing to do. After reading Isaacson's book, I believe Franklin would get a chuckle out of what we have turned him into. I don't mean that Isaacson portrays Franklin as a fool. He certainly was not that. Isaacson allows us to see Franklin as so much more than his own Autobiography would have us know of him. Mr. Franklin was a great man, great in science, printing, writing, diplomacy, and democracy. Indeed he was the first great promoter of the middle class in America. He believed in the ability of man to make himself better. Certainly he was a self-made man. But he was also great in the way he lived his life. He loved to travel. As postmaster, he saw more of America probably than any American of his era. His wanderlust did not stop on this side of the Atlantic. He also visited most of Europe. For that matter he lived most of the second half of his life in Europe. Perhaps what I enjoyed so much about Isaacson's book was learning what Franklin was not. For example, he was not American, as we think of him, until very close to the actual Revolution. For most of his life, Franklin saw himself as a loyal citizen of the throne of England and worked mightily to avoid the very Independence Day in which Americans remember him so highly. He viewed the problems with England as a problem first with the Proprietors, then with the Legislature, and only finally with the king himself. If it had been possible to maintain America as an expanded part of England, with equal rights and responsibilities, Franklin would have happily supported such a plan. Also while Franklin was great in many endeavors, he was not a particularly good family man. He married his wife more out of expedience and necessity than out of romantic inclination. He needed a mother for his newborn son, William, and Deborah (not William's mother) was a willing candidate. Franklin lived fifteen of the final 18 years away from Deborah: he lived in Europe and she lived in Philadelphia. While he was always fond of Deborah, he was also fond of other women as well. Isaacson does not paint Franklin so much as an adulterer, though he may have been, but rather as more of a flirt. Franklin did not have many close relationships either. He was estranged from his son, when William remained loyal to the

crown. The fact that William remained loyal was not such a shock when one considers that he was raised in England by Franklin when Franklin considered himself first and foremost a British citizen. While Franklin knew more great men of his generation than anyone, he was not particularly close to any of them. He was closer to the women in his life. This closeness was more of companionship and conversation than anything more lurid. My intention here is to write a book review, not another biography. But I have to admit that one of the great things that has happened in my life as a result of Isaacson's biography of Franklin's life is that I am more keenly desirous of knowing about the minds and the lives of the founding fathers of our great country. Benjamin Franklin An American Life helps me to understand who we are as Americans, as well as who we aren't. Understanding more of what happened 250 years ago helps me to understand more about today. I thoroughly enjoyed reading Isaacson's biography of Franklin. It is a long read. But near the end I was saddened to have to finally finish it. When I read the chapter of Franklin's death I was saddened as if I had lost someone close to me. I was pleased to turn the page and discovered that Isaacson wrote another entire chapter about Franklin after his death. Many writers and thinkers have commented on Franklin's life throughout American history. Franklin has gone through many recreations throughout the past two centuries and reading what has been written at various times also tells us something of those times and the changes in our country. I give Benjamin Franklin An American Life by Walter Isaacson my highest recommendation of five stars out of five stars. Read it. Enjoy it. Benefit from it. This book of Franklin's yesterdays can change your tomorrows.

If you are looking for a holiday gift that is both serious and enjoyable while capturing much of the spirit of America's founding, you need go no further than "Benjamin Franklin: An American Life." Isaacson understands something about the American Revolution and the founding fathers that many students of the era never quite get. Each founding father plays an essential role in our becoming an independent republic. Washington is the titan of moral authority on whose integrity our nation rests. Jefferson is the brilliant writer and theorist who helped create modern politics. Madison's systematic hard work created the system of legislative power and constitutional authority that protects our freedoms. Hamilton's understanding of economics and social forces established the capitalist structure, which has made this the wealthiest society in history. Yet in the deepest sense, these great men were pre-American. They belonged to an earlier, different era where most were landed gentry. Even Hamilton longed for the stability of monarchy. Only Franklin personified the striving, ambitious, rising system of individual achievement, hard work, thrift and optimism found at the heart of the American spirit. Only Franklin worked his way up in the worlds of business and

organized political power in both colonial and national periods. Only Franklin was a world-renowned scientist, founder of corporations, inventor of devices and creator of the American mythos of the common man. Gordon Wood's "The Radicalism of the American Revolution" caught intellectually this sudden shift from the stable, serious gentry who dominated the founding to the wild, energetic, boisterous Jacksonians who came to define the American ethos. Franklin is the precursor to the Jacksonians. He personified, literally lived, the American dream and then captured it in an amazingly self aware, fun to read autobiography, which may be the first great book of the American civilization. Isaacson has captured and portrayed Franklin in all his glory and complexity. This is a book worth giving any of your friends who would better understand America or any foreigner who wonders at our energy, our resilience, our confidence and our success.

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