

= Washington : A Life =

Washington : A Life is a 2010 biography of George Washington , the first President of the United States , written by American historian and biographer Ron Chernow . The book is a " one @-@ volume , cradle @-@ to @-@ grave narrative " that attempts to provide a fresh portrait of Washington as " real , credible , and charismatic in the same way he was perceived by his contemporaries " .

Chernow , a former business journalist , was inspired to write the book while researching another biography on Washington 's long @-@ time aide Alexander Hamilton . Washington : A Life took six years to complete and makes extensive use of archival evidence . The book was released to wide acclaim from critics , several of whom called it the best biography of Washington ever written . In 2011 , the book won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography or Autobiography , as well as the New @-@ York Historical Society 's American History Book Prize .

= = Background = =

The book 's author , Ron Chernow , is a former freelance business journalist who later became a self @-@ described " self @-@ made historian " . His 1990 history of financier J.P. Morgan 's family , The House of Morgan , won the National Book Award for Nonfiction . In 2004 , he published a biography of American Founding Father Alexander Hamilton , for which he won the inaugural \$ 50 @, @ 000 George Washington Book Prize .

Chernow conceived the idea of a book on Washington while researching Hamilton 's life ; the two men had worked together closely , and Chernow had come to believe that " Hamilton is the protagonist of the book but Washington is the hero of the book " . On discovering a letter about a quarrel between Hamilton and Washington , Chernow concluded that there was a more temperamental side to the president than had previously been portrayed . In a later C @-@ SPAN interview , he said that he came to see Washington as " a man of many moods , of many passions , of fiery opinions . But because it was all covered by this immense self @-@ control , people didn 't see it . " Despite what he estimated to be more than nine hundred books written on Washington , Chernow decided to write another , with the goal of providing a fresh portrait .

In writing the book that would become Washington : A Life , Chernow made extensive use of the archival evidence left by Washington 's meticulous record @-@ keeping . These documents included recently discovered written correspondence , maps , and images from the Papers of George Washington , made available by a University of Virginia research project , which began in 1968 . Washington : A Life took six years to complete , the first four years of which were spent purely on research . In June 2009 , near the end of his work on the book , Chernow slipped on a stair and broke his ankle in the three places . He was unable to do anything but read for the following months , and later attributed the injury with allowing him to return to the book with a fresh perspective and improve the manuscript .

= = Summary = =

The prelude of Washington : A Life draws a parallel between Gilbert Stuart 's portraits of George Washington and Chernow 's attempts to give a fresh portrait of his character in a biography . Stuart , Chernow argues , was not deceived by Washington 's " aura of cool command " , but painted him as " a sensitive , complex figure , full of pent @-@ up passion " ; Chernow states his intention to do the same , presenting Washington as " real , credible , and charismatic in the same way he was perceived by his contemporaries " .

Chernow presents Washington as " a man capable of constant self @-@ improvement " , rising from a provincial childhood to the presidency of the United States . Beginning with his boyhood , the biography discusses the major events of Washington 's in largely chronological order : his early life and service in the British Army during the French and Indian War ; his career as a planter and his growing dissatisfaction with British rule of the American colonies ; his service in the Continental

Congress and as commander @-@ in @-@ chief of the Continental Army in the American Revolution ; his resignation and brief retirement following the revolution 's successful conclusion ; his return to public life at the Constitutional Convention ; his two terms as the first president of the United States , in which he set a number of important precedents for the office ; and the final years of his life . Chernow describes Washington 's accomplishments as president as " simply breathtaking " :

He had restored American credit and assumed state debt ; created a bank , a mint , a coast guard , a customs service , and a diplomatic corps ; introduced the first accounting , tax , and budgetary procedures ; maintained peace at home and abroad ; inaugurated a navy , bolstered the army , and shored up coastal defenses and infrastructure ; proved that the country could regulate commerce and negotiate binding treaties ; protected frontier settlers , subdued Indian uprisings , and established law and order amid rebellion , scrupulously adhering all the while to the letter of the Constitution ... Most of all he had shown a disbelieving world that republican government could prosper without being spineless or disorderly or reverting to authoritarian rule .

Several chapters also detail Washington 's complex feelings about slavery , an institution on which he relied but which he also despised ; he left provisions for his slaves to be freed after his death , the only slave @-@ owning founding father to do so . The personal aspects of Washington 's life covered by Chernow include the design , creation , and management of Mount Vernon ; his leisure activities and hobbies ; his difficult relationship with his mother ; his personal relationship with the married Sally Cary Fairfax , with whom Washington fell in love just before his marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis ; and his relationships with his adopted children , stepchildren , and grandchildren . Chernow also describes the relationships between the childless Washington and a succession of " surrogate sons " such as Alexander Hamilton , the Marquis de Lafayette , and Tobias Lear .

= = Critical response = =

In 2011 , Washington : A Life won the Pulitzer Prize for Biography , which included a cash prize of \$ 10 @,@ 000 . The three jury members for the biography award were Elizabeth Frank , who won the 1986 Pulitzer Prize for Biography , and historians Arthur L. Herman and Geoffrey Ward . The book was also honored by the New @-@ York Historical Society as the 2011 recipient of the American History Book Prize , which included an award of \$ 50 @,@ 000 and the title of American Historian Laureate for Chernow .

The book received positive reviews from Andrew Cayton and Janet Maslin of The New York Times . Both felt that Chernow had been able to show an intimate side of Washington that had previously been unrecognized in biographies of the man . Maslin stated that Chernow presented Washington as a " more human and accessible " individual , and Cayton wrote that " [m] ost readers will finish this book feeling as if they have actually spent time with human beings . "

Aram Bakshian of The Washington Times and T. J. Stiles of the Washington Post gave opposing reviews of the book . Bakshian felt that Washington : A Life " does full justice to the one truly indispensable man in our nation 's history " . Stiles was less enthusiastic , stating that while the book offered a purposeful presentation of the life of Washington , he felt that the book was too long . He also criticized Chernow 's writing style , which he considered to contain uneven prose and too many cliches .

Simon Sebag Montefiore of the The Daily Telegraph and historian W. Ralph Eubanks both commented that Chernow 's access to the recently unearthed Papers of George Washington brought a " fresh analysis " and perspective of Washington . Eubanks stated in a review for National Public Radio that " few [books] have given as complete a picture of our first president as Ron Chernow 's compelling new biography , Washington : A Life " . Gordon S. Wood , recipient of the 1993 Pulitzer Prize for History , wrote in a review for The New York Review of Books that the book was :

" [t] he best , most comprehensive , and most balanced single @-@ volume biography of Washington ever written ... One comes away from the book feeling that Washington has finally become comprehensible ... [Chernow 's] understanding of human nature is extraordinary and that

is what makes his biography so powerful . "

Max Byrd , writing for Salon , also called it the " best biography of George Washington yet " , concluding , " Chernow 's narrative is so rich , its scale so massive and epic , that what is new fits seamlessly into the wider picture ... Chernow has gone into Washington 's world , almost into his mind , and inhabited it . "