A tiny, ebullient Jew who started as America's leading liberal and ended as its most famous judicial conservative. A Klansman who became an absolutist advocate of free speech and civil rights. A backcountry lawyer who started off trying cases about cows and went on to conduct the most important international trial ever. A self-invented, tall-tale Westerner who narrowly missed the presidency but expanded individual freedom beyond what anyone before had dreamed.

Four more different men could hardly be imagined. Yet they had certain things in common. Each was a self-made man who came from humble beginnings on the edge of poverty. Each had driving ambition and a will to succeed. Each was, in his own way, a genius.

They began as close allies and friends of FDR, but the quest to shape a new Constitution led them to competition and sometimes outright warfare. SCORPIONS tells the story of these four great justices: their relationship with Roosevelt, with each other, and with the turbulent world of the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. It also serves as a history of the modern Constitution itself.

My Personal Review:
By way of disclosure I am a private scholar who has studied the interplay of power among different institutions and entities, whether it is government, corporations, or other power groups. I have been a member of the Supreme Court Historical Society for many of the last 30 years and I have been fortunate to have developed personal relationships with many associate justices and two Chief Justices. Having said that, I am simply amazed at the wonderfully expertly written, fascinating, and breathtaking book that Feldman has written.

His anecdotes and historical references are both brilliant and factual. He has truly captured the essence of the Supreme Court and its stormy relationship with FDR during a critical period of American history. This was during the 1930s and for the next thirty years. This is a book about 5 egos, four of them justices, and one President, and the interplay between them during 3 decades. The first part of the book is devoted to a fast sweeping biography of 4 associate justices all of whom were appointed by the patrician Franklin Roosevelt.

The Players in this book:

Felix Frankfurter

Brilliant beyond anyones understanding, he was the product of a poor family living in the slums of New York. He went to the City College of New York, and although it is not mentioned in the book, City College at that time was considered better than Harvard because the Ivy League was limiting Jewish enrollment intentionally. This allowed City College at one point to have more Nobel Prize winners than Harvard.

After graduation, Frankfurter put together some money and went on to Harvard Law where he excelled. Ultimately he developed mentors like Henry Stimson, an absolutely legendary power broker in Washington who served several Presidents including FDR as Secretary of War. Frankfurter is without question one of the intellectually most gifted people to ever serve on the Court.

Robert Jackson

Jackson was born dirt poor, so poor in fact, he could not afford an undergraduate education, and so he apprenticed to be a lawyer with a Jamestown New York law office. While working, he decided to pursue a year of formal education at the Albany New York Law School. He was folksy, clever, with a fabulous speaking delivery, exercised common sense and made a fortune before risking it all on a bank during FDRs first days in office.

Hugo Black
Black did a 2 year program at the University Of Alabama School Of Law. He was self-guided, extremely well read and understood that in the 1920s, the power was with the Ku Klux Klan, and so he joined in 1923. It helped him with his rise to power in Alabama and then he abruptly left the organization. It haunted him the rest of his life. He joined the Supreme Court in 1937, and became one of the most outspoken proponents of freedom, and free speech during the century.

William O. Douglas

Raised on the West Coast in Washington, he became a Yale Law School professor in his 20s. Accepted at Harvard Law, he went to Columbia Law instead. This man also knew how to be mentored. He came under the guidance of Robert Maynard Hutchins who graduated Yale Law in 1925 and immediately became a professor of law. Two years later Hutchins becomes dean of the school at 28 years of age. He then brings Douglas to Yale to be right in the center of things. Douglas would then be mentored by Joe Kennedy, JFKs father. Joe Kennedy would introduce Douglas to FDR, and thus a rocket ship ascent began for the future associate justice.

You need to understand who these players were to determine if you want to read this book. What the author clearly demonstrates is how these four individuals who on and off for thirty years would be friends and enemies would go on to reshape our modern interpretation of the Constitution, and the laws under which we live. Every major law and judicial event of the 20th century came through their hands for interpretation and lawfulness.

Their joint influence is not exceeded by anyone including Presidents. Just look at a short list of some of the seminal events they were involved in:

* The concept of Judicial Restraint

* Clear and Present Danger Case

* Dennis v. United States - The right or non-right to advocate the overthrow of the United States

* Judgment at Nuremburg - The right of the world to judge the implementers of Hitlers final solution. Associate Justice Robert Jackson presided.

* Brown v. Board of Education - Outlawing the separate but equal doctrine created by the Plessy v. Ferguson decision. Justice Jackson went through four different drafts of this new interpretation. While very ill at the time, Justice Jackson found it excruciatingly difficult to render a unanimous opinion. He went directly to the Court from a hospital bed to render support for the earthshaking decision the Court published.

* The Rosenberg Case
What you will gain from reading this book:

You will understand our country, and more importantly the true genius of the founding fathers in creating an independent Supreme Court. You will be awed by the intellectual genius of some of America's greatest minds dedicated to an interpretation of our laws. Even when you disagree with them, you will be struck by the quality of their thinking.

This is not about liberal versus conservative, which is what we see today. I have known many of the great liberals as well as the conservatives on the Court, and I am impressed by both types. My own personal demand on sitting justices is that they are people of absolute integrity, and extraordinary intellects, and for the most part we have been blessed by both from the right and the left.

Author Noah Feldman has given us a rare glimpse into some of the most interesting personalities of the 20th century. You will also get to know Tommy the Cork Corcoran, one of the most powerful legal players in the 20th century. You will meet Abe Fortas, perhaps the most influential associate justice of the 20th century. This is a man who sat in Lyndon Johnson's cabinet meetings, not at the table, but back several feet by the window. He would take it all in, and then when alone with the President dissect the whole meeting, and tell President Johnson what to do. I doubt LBJ could have remained in office through 1968 without the solid advice rendered by Abe Fortas.

In summary, if you have any interest in the Supreme Court at all, or how government works, this book should be at the top of your list. I simply could not put it down, and thank you for reading this review.

Richard C. Stoyeck

For More 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price:
Scorpions: The Battles and Triumphs of FDR's Great Supreme Court Justices by Noah Feldman - 5 Star Customer Reviews and Lowest Price!