In this unique biography of Thomas Jefferson, leading journalist and social critic Christopher Hitchens offers a startlingly new and provocative interpretation of our Founding Father. Situating Jefferson within the context of Americas evolution and tracing his legacy over the past two hundred years, Hitchens brings the character of Jefferson to life as a man of his time and also as a symbolic figure beyond it. Conflicted by power, Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence and acted as Minister to France yet yearned for a quieter career in the Virginia legislature. Predicting that slavery would shape the future of Americas development, this professed proponent of emancipation elided the issue in the Declaration and continued to own human property. An eloquent writer, he was an awkward public speaker; a reluctant candidate, he left an indelible presidential legacy. Jeffersons statesmanship enabled him to negotiate the Louisiana Purchase with France, doubling the size of the nation, and he authorized the Lewis and Clark expedition, opening up the American frontier for exploration and settlement. Hitchens also analyzes Jeffersons handling of the Barbary War, a lesser-known chapter of his political career, when his attempt to end the kidnapping and bribery of Americans by the Barbary states, and the subsequent war with Tripoli, led to the building of the U.S. navy and the fortification of Americas reputation regarding national defense. In the background of this sophisticated analysis is a large historical drama: the fledgling nations struggle for independence, formed in the crucible of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, and, in its shadow, the deformation of that struggle in the excesses of the French Revolution. This artful portrait of a formative figure and a turbulent era poses a challenge to anyone interested in American history -- or in the ambiguities of human nature. Discover More Eminent Lives

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One can never accuse Hitchens of being timid about voicing his opinions in his essays. And in my view this is one of his best: the most erudite most compact and most detached. Although the author respects and admires Jefferson, he is not awed by him.

Kissinger was a much easier task and obviously a more fiendishly Machiavellian target for him. Hitchens clearly didn't like Kissinger much (and neither did I) and did not humanize him. Orwell, on the other hand, was a more proper subject for him and a fellow Etonian iconoclast to boot. His essay on Orwell was thorough, yet not nearly as probing as this one, and relatively uncontroversial, and especially gentle. Hitchens clearly admired and liked Orwell personally.

However, with Jefferson, Hitchens bypasses all of the normal niceties and wastes no time getting to the heart of all the controversial issues. One gets the impression that Hitchens gets his kicks from bringing down the "tall trees," that are larger than life, and they do not get much larger than Jefferson. I do not believe that I am alone when I suggest that the author seems to relish exposing Jefferson's many contradictions.

In this book, each of Jefferson's many contradictions are examined with a fine-tooth comb, and carefully exposed in the raw via a kind of sophisticated and veiled analysis that only Hitchens can pull off: Anyone who had doubts about Jefferson and Sally Hemming, for instance, well this book erases all doubt. On Jefferson's views on religion: He edited his own version of the New Testament, stripping it verse by verse of all of the "pie-in-the-sky" religious nonsense. Jefferson was a "deist," rather then religious. The same goes for Jefferson's attitude towards blacks and slavery. Again Hitchens "zero ins" on Jefferson's dissembling and contradictions on this important issue, making the surprising claim that because of Jefferson's refusal to support the outlawing of slavery (in the new territory of the Louisiana Purchase, or in the expansion states of the West), he made the Civil War all but an inevitability. In Hitchen's view of Jefferson's attitudes on slavery (and towards blacks more generally), it is clearly not a case of the author having applied a contemporary moral standard, retroactively. Hitchens makes clear that there were a number of Jefferson's contemporaries (such as Thomas Paine for instance) who understood how devastating a contradiction supporting the continuation of slavery was. There were many strong advocates for ending slavery promptly, solely
because they viewed it has representing a moral stain on the conscience of the new nation.

In summary, this is not a book for "Jefferson lovers," but it is an essential addition to the Jeffersonian literature. It is fresh, and as Hitchens is wont to do, full of wit, obscure facts and pulls no punches.

Five Stars.

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