

Thomas Jefferson: Author of America (Eminent Lives)

By Christopher Hitchens

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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—a man conflicted by power who wrote the Declaration of Independence and acted as ambassador to France yet yearned for a quieter career in the Virginia legislature. A masterly writer, Jefferson was an awkward public speaker. A professed proponent of emancipation, he elided the issue of slavery from the Declaration of Independence and continued to own human property. A reluctant candidate, he left an indelible presidential legacy. With intelligence, insight, eloquence, and wit, Hitchens gives us an artful portrait of a complex, formative figure and his turbulent era.

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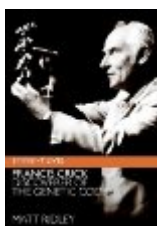
In this unique biography of Thomas Jefferson, leading journalist and social critic Christopher Hitchens offers a startlingly new and provocative interpretation of our Founding Father. Situating Jefferson within the context of America's evolution and tracing his legacy over the past two hundred years, 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 America's 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.

Jefferson's 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 Jefferson's 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 America's reputation regarding national defense.

In the background of this sophisticated analysis is a large historical drama: the fledgling nation's 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.

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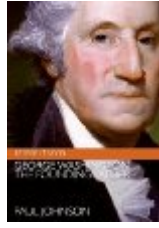
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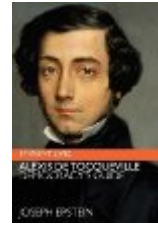
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From Publishers Weekly

In this brief yet dense biography, the newest in HarperCollins's Eminent Lives series, Hitchens (A Long Short War, etc.) proposes that Jefferson "designed America" when he wrote the Declaration of Independence, establishing "the concept of human rights, for the first time in history, as the basis for a republic." Hitchens is quick to point out, however, the obvious contradiction—that Jefferson was both an advocate for freedom and a slaveholder. Beginning with his aristocratic upbringing, which Jefferson purportedly viewed with "indifference," this biography explores both the private and public aspects of Jefferson's life, from his political philosophies to his affair with his slave Sally Hemings. In an attempt to set the facts straight about Hemings, Hitchens explains that, while technically a slave, she was actually related to Jefferson's wife and was treated "more like a privileged housemaid." Presenting countless excerpts from Jefferson's writings, Hitchens closely analyzes the President's words to reveal the Enlightenment ideas that shaped American policy, such as the separation of church and state and the prohibition of cruel and unusual punishment. This opinionated, lively narrative sheds light not only on Jefferson's complex personality but on the politics of his time, making it both a fascinating character study and an excellent review of early American history.

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From [Booklist](#)

In the brief-biography arena, essayist Hitchens' *Jefferson* vies with historian Joyce Appleby's *Thomas Jefferson* (2003) for the loyalty of the time-challenged reader. Hitchens brings his inimitable style of coruscating precision to Jefferson's ambiguities, which have long provoked disparate opinions. Hitchens gives no quarter on the way Jefferson contradicted himself on slavery, but eschewing easy condemnation, wishes Jefferson were less diffident against it: in any case, he extols Jefferson's bolder achievements (e.g., against state-sanctioned religion) that ensured that the American Revolution "was to be truly a change of system and not a change of master." This admiration girds Hitchens' assertion that Jefferson was the author of America, citing as proof the Declaration of Independence and Jefferson's presidency. Imaginative without being inventive, Hitchens is the rare author who can prune a complicated life such as Jefferson's to reveal its salient characteristics. *Gilbert Taylor*

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