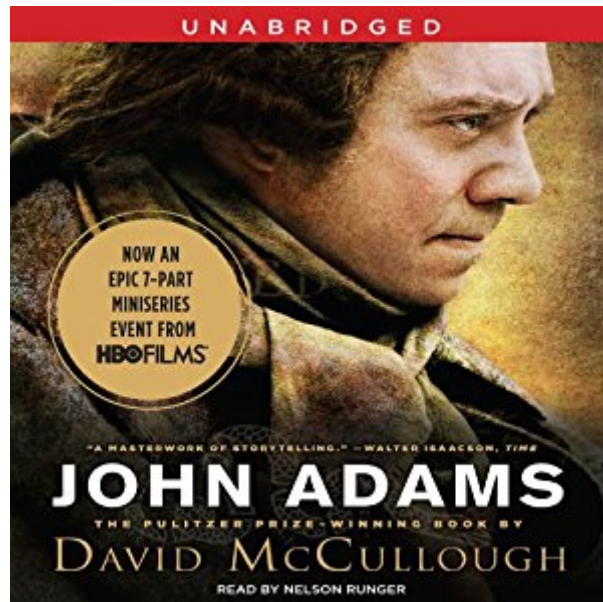


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# John Adams



## Synopsis

A New York Times Bestseller A Pulitzer Prize-winning Author In this powerful, epic biography, David McCullough unfolds the adventurous life journey of John Adams, the brilliant, fiercely independent, often irascible, always honest Yankee patriot -- "the colossus of independence," as Thomas Jefferson called him -- who spared nothing in his zeal for the American Revolution; who rose to become the second president of the United States and saved the country from blundering into war; who was learned beyond all but a few; and whose marriage is one of the moving love stories of American history. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

My curiosity in John Adams first piqued by repeatedly in my youth watching the musical "1776" (of which Adams is the main character), I looked forward anxiously to McCullough's latest take on America's 2nd President. It didn't hurt that McCullough's bio "Truman" is still perhaps my favorite political biography of them all. With all these high expectations, I was waiting for my hopes to be dashed. But, nothing could be further from the truth. "Adams" is a terrific piece of work. Relying on a treasure trove of letters and correspondence written by Adams and his tremendous wife Abigail (both of whom were compulsive/obsessive writers), McCullough replays the history of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the Washington Presidency and Adams's tumultuous four years as President with vibrant storytelling and just the right amount of detail without getting weighed down. In McCullough's view, Adams was a brilliant, determined, forthright, nonpartisan, stubborn

politician who was unabashedly American and ambitious for higher office only to the point that public service (according to Adams) was the greatest calling of all. Anybody looking for a line by line history of America's birth, from 1776 to 1800, will probably be disappointed. McCullough skips over the details of the American Revolution and the drafting of the Constitution. He instead tracks the diplomatic journeys of Adams, who travels to England, France and Holland with Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (both occasionally) as they try to negotiate various peace and commercial treaties. The best surprise of the book? Abigail Adams, an amazing woman living entirely ahead of her time. Without her, McCullough obviously believes, John Adams would never have achieved his status in American history. The only disappointments in the book? A skewed and very negative portrayal of Alexander Hamilton, and a less-than-complete discussion of why two of Adams's sons, Thomas and Charles, came to financial and physical ruin, while another, John Quincy, became our 6th President. Though not quite as entrancing and new as "Truman," "John Adams" has its own charm. It's an amazing journey with America's inception, and a reminder of the greatness of all of our Founding Fathers, perhaps the most misunderstood of all being the delightfully stubborn and pigheaded Mr. Adams.

"In the cold...New England winter, two men on horseback traveled the coast road below Boston, heading north. The temperature, according to records kept by Adams' former professor of science at Harvard, John Winthrop, was in the low twenties." One can almost hear the amiable yet dramatic tones of historian David McCullough, punctuated by paintings of New England blizzards and the sound of hoofbeats. (McCullough is a frequent narrator of documentaries, notably those of Ken Burns.) McCullough's familiar cadence resounds through this extremely well written best-seller. The details never slow the reading or obscure the portrait; instead, source materials (much of it from the Adams' personal letters) illuminate and concretize his subject. McCullough writes clearly, forcefully, and with an ear for detail, humor, and anecdote. Overall this is a flattering portrait of Adams' longtime service as lawyer, revolutionary, writer and philosopher, diplomat, politician, and farmer. The book could well have been subtitled: "An Appreciation," both because Adams demonstrates so much to admire (including integrity, erudition, patriotism, work ethic, and courage) and because McCullough either doesn't criticize Adams or couches his disapproval by leaving some issues open. Some readers may suspect a positive bias. Criticized and embattled by Jefferson, Madison, and Hamilton--and by the libelous hyperbole of opposition newspapers and rivals--Adams takes on an almost martyr-like persona. To test McCullough's balance, one must read other books on both the Founders and the political culture of the times. Joseph Ellis' "Brothers of the Revolution," for

example, is a more analytic, speculative, and impersonal book than "John Adams," and Ellis does not temporize on such issues as Jefferson's affair with Sally Hemmings. (McCullough: "for all the rumors . . . relatively little would ever be known." Ellis: "which was only confirmed beyond any reasonable doubt by DNA studies done in 1998 . . . "). Ellis engages in comparatively more "psychobiography" ("[Adams had] a congenital inability to separate his thoughts from his feelings about them"); McCullough resists theory, and relies more on the literal evidence of his source materials. Also, because it is a biography, we miss some history: Since Adams was an ambassador in Europe during the war, securing French naval assistance and Dutch money, there is little mention of the country's trials military victories in the latter years of the war. Hamilton's role in stabilizing the country through the Federalist papers and establishment of a central bank receive little attention. There is little question that Adams was, for the most part, the right man for the times, largely steering clear of both Republican and Federalist extremes. McCullough demonstrates that Adams was largely underappreciated by his contemporaries. More than Jefferson, Adams seems the man of the people, as well as the more flexible: Adams was an idealist when the times called for it; a pragmatist when they did not. McCullough includes some fascinating insights into Adams' personal life, especially his love, partnership, and correspondence with Abigail Adams and their son, John Quincy Adams. One comes away liking Adams, despite certain temperamental qualities implied by McCullough. The book documents just how well (and how often) Adams served his country, no matter what the inconvenience to himself or his family. Overall, the appreciation is well deserved. Readers will likely use this fine biography as a springboard to further investigations, such as Ellis' book. "John Adams" has 654 pages of text; additionally, there are black and white as well as color plates, extensive source notes, and a thorough index. Highly recommended.

This book is an outstanding success on so many levels. The writing is most lyrical and beautiful...there is not one wasted word in the whole book. It's a book that is difficult to put down for the night. Perhaps the greatest success of the book is the correction of many John Adams stereotypes. In this book you meet a John Adams who is a delightful wit, a man deeply in love with his nation, and more-so with his wife. Mr. McCullough also gives Abigail Adams her due as a most delightful person and one of the most important women in our history. The love the couple shared is as deep a love as humans are possible of giving and receiving, and that love is radiated to you from the pages of this book. A warning to Jefferson fanatics...during his research, I think McCullough, perhaps more than anybody else, gained a true understanding of Thomas Jefferson and has done the nearly impossible...portraying Jefferson as a human being. As a human being, Jefferson loses

some of his shine. As a human being, John Adams shines even brighter. Mr. McCullough has done with John Adams what he did with Harry Truman a few years ago...he has restored the lustre of a truly great and underrated American. I hope that preparing this book gave Mr. McCullough as much pleasure as I had reading it.

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