

FALL BOOKS

'I felt obliged to notice everything.' —ELEANOR ROOSEVELT

First Lady to the World

Eleanor

By David Michaelis
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BY SUSAN BUTLER

LOOKING BACK over the life of a phenomenal figure like Eleanor Roosevelt—crowded as it was with political achievement, activism and controversy—offers a strange contrast to her early life in the cloistered environs of 19th-century New York society. Emerging from this Whartonesque world of privilege, she transformed herself into one of the movers and shakers of her era. As a public figure, she loomed larger than many elected officials: She wrote a daily newspaper column, published more than 20 books, hosted radio and television programs. In one stunning volume, biographer David Michaelis—whose mother produced Eleanor Roosevelt's last television broadcast—gives us a sympathetic view of a complicated woman who changed and grew with every challenge.

Despite her family's wealth and political connections (her uncle was Theodore Roosevelt), the childhood of Anna Eleanor Roosevelt, born in Manhattan in 1884, was, as Mr. Michaelis details, miserable. Shy and awkward, she was dubbed, to her mortification, "Granny" by her mother, Anna. She found solace in her father's love, but Elliott Roosevelt was an alcoholic finishing off six bottles by lunch. Anna died when Eleanor was 8, and Elliott jumped to his death from a window when she was 9. Lonely Eleanor grew up tall for her age and, certain she was ugly, sought by good works to be loved.

To compensate for her loss, suggests Mr. Michaelis, she retreated into a dream world: "I knew in my mind that my father was dead, and yet I lived with him more closely, probably, than I had when he was alive." She and her younger brothers were sent to live with their maternal grandmother, who had them erratically homeschooled, looked in upon by numerous aunts and cousins, plus two drunken uncles who occasionally shot off their guns. Allenswood, a girl's school in London run by the unusual, cultivated Marie Souvestre, saved her. She became the favorite of the headmistress. "This was the first time in all my life," she reported, "that all my fears left me."

She had met her distant relative Franklin when they were small and played in his Hyde Park nursery, and they saw each other occasionally. As a young woman, Eleanor stood out among her Roosevelt cousins. Tall and slender, her golden hair piled on top of her head, many commented on her beauty as a debutante. She and Franklin dated. When he was a senior at Harvard he asked her to Cambridge to the Harvard-Yale game, and shortly thereafter asked her to marry him. She unhesitatingly accepted.



HER DAY Eleanor Roosevelt sits among uniformed servicemen at a White House party in their honor, 1942.

Despite their places within a family dynasty, it was a love match. Wrote Eleanor: "I am hungry for you every moment, you are never out of my thoughts." Her signature, Michaelis notes, was the same as she had used to her father, "Your devoted Little Nell." On St. Patrick's Day, 1905, they were married, and her uncle Theodore, the

Born to a Whartonesque world of privilege, Eleanor Roosevelt became a champion of human rights.

president, gave her away. Franklin's mother, Sara, a widow, took charge of the newlyweds' lives. She had twin houses built on Manhattan's East 65th Street, joined by sliding doors. Friends were "aghast" at Eleanor's subservience to her mother-in-law. In the next 10 years Eleanor bore six babies, one girl and five boys, all of whom grew to adulthood, except a son who died of a heart condition in infancy.

In 1910 FDR campaigned for and won a seat in the New York Senate, but his next goal was to become, as Theodore had been, assistant secretary of the Navy. To that end, FDR campaigned for Woodrow Wilson, and when Wilson won the presidency the post became his. (Wilson, reflecting on Franklin's

growing charisma, called him "the handsomest young giant I have ever seen.") In Washington, Eleanor found herself performing the role of political spouse. At one point during World War I, this entailed an interview with the New York Times about saving food, with unintended results: the article, "How to Save in Big Homes," made her come off as cluelessly rich. FDR found it funny, but Eleanor vowed not to be tripped up by the press again.

More serious pressures came from within: Franklin had fallen for her young secretary Lucy Mercer. Unpacking FDR's suitcase after a trip, Eleanor found a packet of Lucy's love letters; the specter of divorce loomed. Sara, jerking the purse strings, threatened Franklin with losing Hyde Park if he left Eleanor, and it was plain that divorce would ruin his political career. When FDR agreed not to see Lucy ever again, Eleanor agreed to stay. The marriage became an armed truce.

Mr. Michaelis thinks it was this shocking affair that set Eleanor free to lead her own life as she pleased. In light of it, she later wrote, "I faced myself, my surroundings, my world, honestly for the first time." It would take a few years to show. In 1921, when FDR contracted polio at their Campobello Island vacation house and almost died, Eleanor was there to pull him through. When he later spent months with his secretary Missy LeHand on a houseboat in Florida, trying to regain the use of his legs, she understood.

Her heart moved on as well: By the time FDR was president Eleanor had fallen in love with Lorena (Hick) Hickok, the Associated Press's highest-paid female reporter. According to Mr. Michaelis, it was "not just a love affair, but a grand passion." Eleanor sported a sapphire-and-diamond ring Hick had given her, and Hick discreetly moved into the White House, a breathtakingly outrageous act. Hick was, Mr. Michaelis informs us, the "invisible force" behind Eleanor's ground-breaking plan to hold press conferences for women. Come summer, Eleanor and Hick went on the first of many car trips, with Eleanor the driver, Hick having been hired as field investigator for WPA chief Harry Hopkins. They poked into all sorts of situations Eleanor thought would interest FDR. The New Yorker ran a cartoon of two miners deep in a coal-pit, over the caption "For gosh sakes, here comes Mrs. Roosevelt."

Appalled by what she saw when visiting black communities, Eleanor joined the NAACP and pressed FDR to back an antilynching law. As racist Southern Democrats chaired every congressional committee, FDR's staff pressed him to curb her advocacy. "This will ruin you," warned one aide. "You go right ahead and stand for whatever you feel is right," FDR told her. "I can always say that I can't do a thing with you." In 1935, advised by Hick, she started writing "My Day," 500 words that appeared in newspapers six days a week.

She became a world figure, routinely featured in newsreels and the press. When in 1939 she championed the right of France to buy America's newest airplanes, it reached the ears of German propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, who advised her to "keep her pen away from things of which she is ignorant."

After FDR's death, Eleanor did not fade away: Harry Truman appointed her a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly. She became U.S. representative to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, receiving a standing ovation from the delegates after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted. President Kennedy appointed her chair his Commission on the Status of Women. When she died in 1962, three living presidents, Truman, Eisenhower, and Kennedy, as well as Vice President Lyndon Johnson, attended her funeral.

As readers will learn from Mr. Michaelis's superb account, Eleanor was publicly influential until the very end. Seventy-eight and terminally ill with tuberculosis, she climbed up on a truck in Washington Square to make a campaign speech for Ed Koch, then running for assemblyman. Writes Mr. Michaelis: "As soon as people noticed her, a great crowd gathered." The magic was still there.

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Steinbeck, In Love And in Anger

Continued from page C5

fatalist about money," he said in a letter in 1931. "Even the law of averages doesn't hold with me. Any attempt to get me any kind of an award is predestined to failure. Furthermore I seriously doubt my brand of literature will ever feed me." Marriage, stimulating friendships, the companionship of dogs and the daily struggle with what he called the "sharp agony of words"—it made for a noble kind of penury.

If 'The Grapes of Wrath' were only a protest it would be respected but not beloved. It's the epic romance that draws us in.

But once Steinbeck focused his writing on his native California, in books like "The Pastures of Heaven" and "Tortilla Flat," he acquired a reputation as a regionalist. As well as being obsessively disciplined, he was a world-class listener, and many of his stories and ideas were openly borrowed from acquaintances. The most influential friend was the charismatic marine biologist Ed Ricketts, whose avatar would appear in no fewer than three of Steinbeck's books. It was

Ricketts who put him on to the philosophical theory of the phalanx, a version of biological determinism premised on the idea that the needs of groups rather than of individuals dictate human behavior, as with schools of fish or colonies of coral.

It's easy to forget the role this theory plays in "The Grapes of Wrath," given the novel's fame as the pre-eminent fictional account of the Great Depression. The book sprang from a series of articles Steinbeck wrote for the San Francisco News titled "The Harvest Gypsies," which revealed the squalor and disease endured by migrant fruit pickers but also the spirit of community that persisted among their ranks. Now, in writing his novel, his usual creative monomania was intensified by political outrage, and he had a wealth of firsthand details he was desperate to convey. The Steinbeck scholar Susan Shillinglaw has pointed out that in the early pages of the manuscript, he took care to make the text large so that his wife would have an easier time typing it up, but soon, as the story possessed him, he began omitting punctuation and paragraph breaks and his handwriting grew minuscule and frenzied.

If "The Grapes of Wrath" were strictly a work of naturalism, it would be respected but not beloved. But Steinbeck wove his theories about the group-man into the story, endowing it with broader allegorical possibilities. (High-schoolers reading it today may interpret it as a timely parable about

ecological destruction.) And coursing throughout is Steinbeck's boyhood love of heroic romances. The novel's heightened, dramatic episodes reside somewhere between journalism and fantasy, as though Steinbeck were a medieval historian relating an era of miracles and wonders. It's a true epic, with all the excesses that entails.

"The Grapes of Wrath" won the

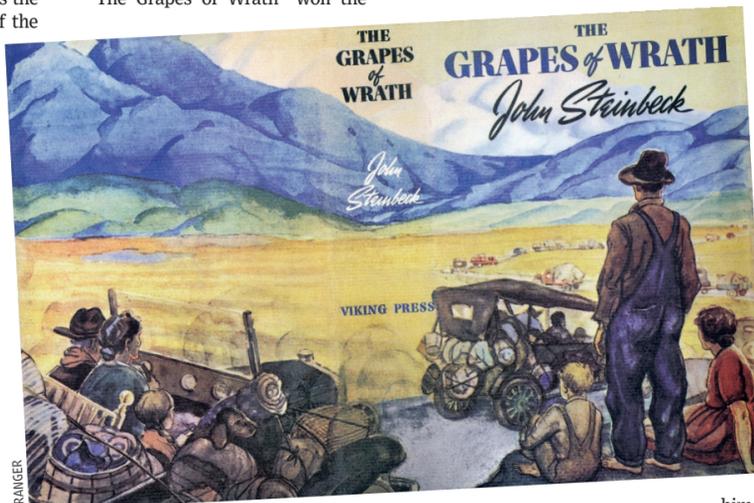
succeeded by a third, to a more mature woman named Elaine Scott. By this point Steinbeck was fully ensconced in his "second life" as a public figure, contending with chronic depression, health problems, money troubles that had never arisen when he was poor and unknown, and behind everything the steady throb of what an

remains are the gloomy externalities of divorce and depression, which inform Mr. Souder's argument that anger was the animating force behind Steinbeck's art.

There's a lot to this, and certainly the bitterness toward domestic life in later works like "East of Eden" and "The Winter of Our Discontent" is hard to miss. But I'm more persuaded by Mr. Benson's claim that Steinbeck holds our attention because "he was a lover of life, rather than a hater of life." The innocence and restorative joy that Steinbeck felt from writing never deserted him. One senses it in the soaring raptures of his sui generis work of natural history, "Sea of Cortez," or in his delightful comic idyll, "Cannery Row," written in the midst of an emotional collapse. His zeal for creation is undimmed even in his rascally penultimate book, "Travels With Charley," a collection of stories masquerading as non-fiction.

Still, he couldn't free himself from his obligations to the outside world. In 1962, six years before his death at 66, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. When asked if he thought he deserved the honor, Steinbeck answered, "That's an interesting question. Frankly, no." This wasn't false modesty; it was a plea. All he wanted was to be left alone so that he could get back to work.

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Pulitzer Prize and was adapted for the screen by John Ford, and the acclaim drove Steinbeck to a nervous breakdown. The worst casualty was his marriage to Carol, which was already dissolving in a haze of alcohol and paranoia when Steinbeck began an affair with 19-year-old Gwyn Conger while in Los Angeles to learn the movie business. Their marriage, though it gave Steinbeck two sons, was short and miserable and was quickly

earlier biographer, Jackson J. Benson, called "the nausea of success."

Mr. Benson's monumental 1984 biography, written across 15 years and nearing 1,200 pages, hangs over Mr. Souder's endeavor. On one hand "Mad at the World" is condensed, clear and readable. (Mr. Souder's previous books include brisk lives of Rachel Carson and John James Audubon.) But it achieves its relative brevity by omitting excerpts from Steinbeck's journals and letters. What