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Meghan McElroy

Harding University, mmcelroy@harding.edu

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Two Conflicting Worlds: Youngs' Biography of Eleanor Roosevelt

by Meghan McElroy

Eleanor Roosevelt is often contextualized by the men in her life but deserves a legacy all her own. In the second edition of *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*, J. William T. Youngs attributes Eleanor's life and contributions to 20th century American society to her own tenacity and compassionate heart rather than a byproduct of her male relationships. Youngs, an American historian and professor, originally wrote his biography of Eleanor in 1985 in order to explain Roosevelt's public career in relation to her personal growth. He wrote his second edition in 2000 to expand his ideas with newer scholarship.¹ Youngs created a captivating biography of Eleanor in which Eleanor grew into the powerful woman the world knows through personal strength and the determination to overcome the disappointments caused by her closest companions. The author argues that Eleanor's private accomplishments, setbacks, and subsequent personal growth "made possible the person whom many regard as the greatest

¹ J. William T. Youngs, *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 2000), xiii.

American woman of the twentieth century.”² Overall, Youngs, through *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Private Life*, allows readers to understand Eleanor in a more comprehensive way: both her big titles and personal struggles, both her stands for equality and her personal prejudices.

Youngs illustrates Eleanor’s personal growth and explains how that growth affected her public career through a logical and fluidly structured biography. With the prologue as the exception, the book progresses chronologically through Eleanor’s life and each chapter narrates a relative phase of growth and experience. In the prologue, Eleanor toured the South Pacific in 1943, and the prologue documents Roosevelt’s demeanor towards the people and the people’s adoration for Eleanor. After establishing Eleanor’s public persona, Youngs goes back to 1883 and describes the courting of Eleanor’s parents, Anna and Elliot. Youngs describes the life that Eleanor was born into: upper-class New York City Victorian society.³ The author covers Eleanor’s life into her late-teens in the first three chapters: her father’s battle with alcoholism and drug abuse; the death of her father, mother, and brother; and her experience being raised by her grandmother in affluent New York society. Youngs gives special attention to how Eleanor’s

² Ibid, 13.

³ Youngs, 15-16.

experiences shaped her attitudes, prejudices, and character. Next, Youngs characterizes Eleanor's early marriage especially her shyness and uncertainty. He moves forward and explains how Eleanor adapted to life as a politician's wife. Next, the author narrates Eleanor's life amid World War I and details Roosevelt's period of grief over war casualties, her husband's infidelity, and the flu epidemic. Youngs portrays Eleanor's period of pain and grief as a turning point. In the midst of her pain, Eleanor found more strength to help others through their own struggles. From there, Youngs explains how Eleanor got involved and found her purpose in public service. Roosevelt's move to the White House was the next phase of her life and was characterized by the loss of her work and her determination to find new ways to help those around her. The following chapter "The Democratic Crusade" explains how Eleanor gained new work and purpose in World War II, and Youngs contrasts the fulfillment of Roosevelt's public life with the personal loss of her brother, her mother-in-law, and in a way, the loss of her husband to war matters. The final chapter of the book illustrates Eleanor's post-FDR life: her work as a UN delegate, her lecturing work, and more. As Youngs progresses through Eleanor's life, Eleanor became more and more active and confident in her public life while she struggled and waned in her private life.

Youngs excels in weaving a storyline out of such a heavy, rich life. Despite being faced with piles of accounts of a prominent figure, Youngs masterfully structures his biography in a way that contrasts Eleanor's private and public lives, uses imagery and firsthand accounts to make the reader feel present, and chooses individual anecdotes from Eleanor's life that exemplify her demeanor and legacy. One example of Youngs structuring his writing to contrast Eleanor's private and public lives is in the chapter entitled "Grief." Youngs' writing flows from Eleanor's emotions and personal struggles then to her public work in the war effort. As her world fell apart more and more, Youngs describes how Eleanor's charity work increased and evolved. In addition, Youngs intentionally connects the two realms with powerful statements. He stated that "Out of her own grief she attained greater sympathy for other sufferers. During 1919 she spent many hours visiting wounded men in Washington."⁴ Through such statements, the author not only presents Eleanor's life but also makes sense of it.

When writing about a figure of the past, it is difficult to keep the storyline going and engaging. Youngs solves this issue by creating a vivid setting and using firsthand accounts. Youngs'

⁴ Youngs, 137.

tactics allow readers to feel present for Eleanor's life. One scene that exemplifies this tactic was FDR's inauguration in 1933. The chapter "First Lady" begins with FDR's recitation of the oath of office. From there, Youngs uses imagery to make Eleanor's life feel alive. FDR's words were said to have "boomed over loudspeakers to a vast audience standing on the grass, clinging to trees."⁵ Further down, Youngs describes Eleanor's outfit down to the ring on her finger and the way she sat on stage.⁶ Through Youngs' description of the scene, readers feel Eleanor's apprehension and feel a part of that vast audience. The quotations from letters, news stories, and interviews keep the reader engaged in that moment in time. Eleanor and her loved ones' accounts allow readers to better grasp Eleanor's demeanor and the subtle ways she acted in a particular moment. This personal element to the biography was part of what make the book so engaging. In instances where Youngs could have simply summarized and moved on, he instead allows Eleanor to tell the story. Youngs allows Eleanor to explain how her hard work in World War I felt. "The winter of 1917-18 wore away and remains to me a kaleidoscope of work and entertaining and home duties...I

⁵ Ibid, 177.

⁶ Ibid.

wondered if I could live another day.”⁷ While this is a simple example, the primary accounts make the story feel personal. Finally, Youngs’ writing is strengthened by his choice of personal stories and anecdotes. Eleanor Roosevelt’s life was extremely well-documented and there were certainly a plethora of stories Youngs could have chosen to include in the book. While anecdote choice may seem insignificant, including too many, too little, or the wrong stories would impact the effectiveness of the work. By including too many stories the biography becomes dense and uninteresting. By utilizing too little stories, the biography does not feel personal. In addition, the wrong stories do not effectively support the author’s thesis. Youngs found the sweet spot by including a moderate number of anecdotes that makes Eleanor’s life seem personal, keeps the plot advancing, and supports his arguments. One of the best stories that Youngs’ included was Eleanor and her close friend, Hick’s, three-week road trip while Eleanor was First Lady.⁸ The story supports Youngs’ argument about the balance between Eleanor’s private and public lives. While Eleanor did not allow FDR’s presidency to get in the way of her adventuring, her public life kept creeping into this excursion.

⁷ Youngs, 131.

⁸ Youngs, 186-189.

The story was both engaging and revealed Eleanor's humor and down-to-earth nature. Youngs explains that the Secret Service was worried about Eleanor's trip. Both Eleanor and her companion were rather large women and Eleanor responded to the Secret Service's fears with "Where would they hide us?"⁹ The road trip story is one of the longest stories in the book, but it captures the readers' attention the entire time. None of the anecdotes are lengthy and all of them are purposeful and entertaining. Overall, storytelling is certainly a strength that Youngs leans into throughout *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Private Life*.

While Youngs has many strengths in his writing, a couple weaknesses are present within his biography. First, Youngs spends considerable time explaining sexuality within the book. While the dynamics of FDR and Eleanor's relationship did need to be established, most of Youngs' comments about sexual behavior do not serve a purpose and do not make significant contributions to the larger work. When he describes Eleanor's parents, Youngs predicts that "On that last night Elliot must have yearned to make love to his beautiful fiancée."¹⁰ There is no reason for the statement, it did not have any greater meaning, and it is not fact. At

⁹ Youngs, 186.

¹⁰ Ibid, 19.

times, Youngs seems to journey from historical fact into a realm of his own fiction. A second weakness in *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Private Life* is the difficulty to determine where Youngs derived his information from. While the book appears rich in sources, the lack of references raises questions about Youngs' validity. A full bibliography is not included at the end of the book, only notes on the sources. It is hard to tell whether some minor events happened or if Youngs is merely theorizing. When he describes Eleanor's honeymoon, Youngs said that "they may have strolled along a path fringed with pine forests" and that "they must have enjoyed being together like this."¹¹ There is no explanation of whether those statements are factual or if any of Eleanor or FDR's writings backed up those ideas. The questionable statements undermine Youngs' validity as a historian. A historian is called to share the events, but Youngs seems to make details up as he went along. All in all, Youngs would have benefitted from more specific references. References eliminate doubt about the author's claims, and references would add to the scholarly value of the biography. The section of notes about the sources does not validate Youngs' writing but can be helpful for someone looking for greater resources.

¹¹ Youngs, 86-87.

Despite the lack of references, the book utilizes sources well and Youngs' work is thoroughly researched. Youngs uses a huge number of primary sources including Eleanor's autobiography and writings, magazine articles, news stories, and interviews. Beyond that, Youngs lists over ten other biographies done about Eleanor and other secondary sources that involved Eleanor.¹² Also, Youngs' portrays both the positive and negative aspects of Eleanor Roosevelt in a remarkable way. Despite being primarily a narrative historian, Youngs does not only share Eleanor's good qualities that made her a good protagonist and made for a perfect story. Youngs shares both Eleanor's beautiful qualities and her ugly prejudices. Youngs informs readers that "Eleanor disdained Jews" prior to World War II.¹³ He does not leave out her detached way of parenting, her closed-off nature towards FDR, or her initial views on women's suffrage. All in all, the book utilized sources well and no major biases were evident in Youngs' writing.

All aspects considered, Eleanor's personal growth was narrated in an engaging and credible way in *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*. The book is well-structured, and Youngs masterfully uses imagery, firsthand accounts, and anecdotes to

¹² Ibid, 267-275.

¹³ Ibid, 122.

fulfill his purpose. J. William T. Youngs is successful in illustrating the relationship between Eleanor's personal struggles and her public triumphs. This book would be useful as a secondary source about 20th century United States women, specifically the Roosevelts, and is a pleasurable read for anyone interested in United States politics, humanitarianism, or women's rights.

Bibliography

Youngs, J. William T. *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Personal and Public Life*. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 2000.