



Welcome to our February book Historians!

Our first meeting of the spring is on Tuesday, February 5 at 6:30 to discuss *Grant* by Ron Chernow published in 2017. Ron Chernow, of course, is the author of *Hamilton* which we read in our very first meeting of The Historians. With *Grant*, Chernow is hopeful of rehabilitating Grant's legacy and of separating fact from the political fake news of the time which all too often has been mistaken for the truth about Ulysses S. Grant. Personally, I enjoy a biography in which the biographer clearly has deep affection for his subject and yet still maintains an objective and honest reliance upon the facts of the subject's life. Chernow does not ignore Grant's mistakes in judgement or the scandals associated with his presidency. However, he provides a personal context for the drinking and a political context for the scandals and how they were reported. Chernow explains "It is sadly ironic that Grant's presidency became synonymous with corruption, since he himself was impeccably honest." As he did in *Hamilton*, Chernow has written a thorough biography, taking advantage of the new scholarship available on Grant. Despite the length of the book, you will find that the story of Grant's life moves swiftly. As always, if you find yourself short of time, feel free to skim the sections you are less interested in and read more deeply in the sections that pique your curiosity.

Grant moves swiftly through the sections on Grant as military leader in Mexico and in the Civil War. Most of the book is focused on the presidency. Having said that, Chernow provides ample evidence for what John Keegan, military historian, called Grant's invention of "unheroic leadership." By that, Keegan meant that Grant did not take glory for himself. He was always of the belief that it was his staff and his men in executing his orders in the fighting who deserved the glory. And Grant really believed this. At the same time, Chernow provides ample evidence of Grant's strategic genius in figuring out what had to be done, particularly at Vicksburg and the Battle of the Wilderness. As you read, do you agree with Keegan? Is "unheroic leadership" a good term for Grant as commander? Is it strategy or is it his willingness to hold fast that leads to these two remarkable victories?

You will find Chernow's account of Grant's presidency eye-opening. Chernow argues that Grant probably saved the US from a second civil war during Reconstruction. No less a person that Frederick Douglass believed that Grant was more committed to black equality under the law than Lincoln. Did you know that Grant created the Department of Justice specifically to fight the KKK? And that it was Grant and his second Attorney General Amos T. Akerman who insisted that the job of the Department of Justice was to "uphold the rule of law"? Was Grant right to believe that passing the 15th Amendment "was the most important event that has occurred since the nation came to life"? Does Chernow overstate Grant's importance during Reconstruction in protecting minorities? Or is he right to note that one reason we hear so much about the scandals is because of what Grant did to protect the black vote?

And what are to think of the scandals? Chernow does not deny that Grant was far too trusting of his friends. At the same time, is Chernow correct to argue that under Grant's administration we see for the first time big capital putting pressure on the government to pass laws for its personal gain and not for the people? As you can see, many of the questions raised by a new look at Grant's presidency have a real relevance in the political world we find ourselves in today.

There will be lots to talk about as we explore *Grant* by Ron Chernow on Tuesday, February 5 at 6:30. Come expecting a lively discussion with people who enjoy history as much as you do and who are equally fascinated by the legacy of U S Grant.

Donna McBride