



Too Close to the Sun: Growing Up in the Shadow of My Grandparents, Franklin and Eleanor

Curtis Roosevelt

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Curtis Roosevelt was three when he and his sister, Eleanor, arrived at the White House soon after their grandfather's inauguration. The country's "First Grandchildren," a pint-sized double act, they were known to the media as "Sistie and Buzzie." In this rich memoir, Roosevelt brings us into "the goldfish bowl," as his family called it—that glare of public scrutiny to which all presidential households must submit. He recounts his misadventures as a hapless kid in an unforgivably formal setting and describes his role as a tiny planet circling the dual suns of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Blending self-abasement, humor, awe and affection, *Too Close to the Sun* is an intimate portrait of two of the most influential and inspirational figures in modern American history—and a thoughtful exploration of the emotional impact of growing up in their irresistible aura.

Too Close to the Sun: Growing Up in the Shadow of My Grandparents, Franklin and Eleanor Details

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Patricia says

This book is a simple, fast read. What most commends it is its unblinking look at the impact of instability for a young child. His mother's difficulties in settling into a life she found satisfactory meant that Roosevelt bounced from the privileged life of the White House to attending a public grade school in Seattle -- and back, and elsewhere.

It was a harrowing read because at so many points something different could have been done to help. But Roosevelt does not let himself off the hook, so the resulting story is one I found instructive.

Mikey B. says

A tender description of being raised in the shadow of two of the great figures of modern day American history – Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Curtis was the son of Anna Roosevelt – the daughter and eldest child of Eleanor and Franklin. He was born in 1930 and much of his formative years were spent at the White House and at his great grand-mother's house in Hyde Park, the birthplace of Franklin. This is the main focus of the book; Curtis being one of the planets revolving around the dual Gods of the President and First Lady. It's a story of being given preferential treatment at dinners and receptions, but also of being ignored or given secondary treatment by parents, uncles, aunts and Presidents. Curtis had care-takers who gave him more time, love and affection than his parents. He only learnt to tie his shoes when he was six or seven years old. He related much better to adults than children his own age – in fact there was very little exposure to children of his age group. Even though the Roosevelt's were liberal, when Curtis was exposed to the reality of public school his parents were upset about the rambunctiousness of the “middle class”.

In some ways Curtis had an upbringing somewhat resembling that of stories by Charles Dickens, he was constantly struggling to adjust and find his place. The pictures in the book are captivating.

Andrew says

An intimate and compelling memoir--Mr. Roosevelt ushers us behind the scenes of his grandfather's White House, at the same time his not so picture perfect family. A great read for history buffs and FDR scholars.

Janice says

Too Close to the Sun is an easy read with some interesting history of Curtis (Dall) Roosevelt, his mother Anna Roosevelt Dall Boettiger, grandparents Franklin D and Eleanor Roosevelt, his great-grandmother Sara Delano Roosevelt, plus an additional cast of thousands thrown in for good measure. Whew!

While the photographs and history are good, I am troubled by many aspects of the book. At some points the author is quite candid, depicting well the complicated dynamics within the Roosevelt family. Yet at other times he is suggestive and evasive. This is your memoir Mr. Curtis Roosevelt. If you hold anger or distrust for someone, just say it, don't cloak it in innuendo.

Additionally, the author shares memories of his childhood; memories as early as age two and three. Sure, this is his memoir, still he would have had to rely on others for the happenings of his early years. Yet, he comes across as these are his memories. Also, somewhat off putting is his continuous remarks about living in own his fantasy world. How he was never able to focus, consequently never doing well in school although he was a bright child. Curtis Roosevelt was an older gentlemen, perhaps seventy or eighty when he wrote this book, so he had years of maturity to discover answers to his lack of focus, his not interacting well with other boys, his living in a fantasy world, so why does he not tell us. . . . did he suffering from attention deficit? Was he depressed? Was he an extreme introvert? Why was professional attention not sought? Or, perhaps, he is suggesting he could only live in a fantasy world because his real world was continually overshadowed of his grandfather and hero president Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

Talk about a dysfunctional family!

Joan Graham says

This book gives the reader not only a glimpse into FDR's White House during the Depression and right up before the end of World War II, but it also demonstrates the very odd dichotomy of the privileged class: Family was paramount, who you were made you important not only in your mind but also in people's estimation, but if you were privileged enough to buy discretion, you could behave irresponsibly, even negligently, and still maintain the admiration, envy and respect of the world.

Young Curtis, son of FDR and Eleanore's only daughter Anna, was 3 years old when FDR replaced Hoover during the height of the Depression in 1933, and over the next few years Curtis and his sister, along with Shirley Temple, became the most photographed children in the country. While Anna and her four brothers switched spouses more often than most people trade cars, Curtis and his sister were shielded from normal childhood things like playmates, popular music, games and pop culture influences. When Curtis finally held a baseball bat at age 10 or so, and miraculously got a hit, he had no clue about what he was supposed to do next, and when Shirley Temple visited Eleanore Roosevelt, the children, who were by then 8 and 11 years old, had no idea who she was. Despite these efforts to "shield" the children from things that might hurt their psyches, Anna didn't seem to have qualms about inexplicably pulling the plug on daddies, teddy bears or nannies that the children had become attached to.

The family enjoyed lunches, receptions and dinners with distinguished guests, evening cocktails, long stretches of time in the White House and summer vacations at Hyde Park and Val Kill with Eleanore, Franklin, and Eleanore's mother. After Anna's marriage to her second husband, they moved to Seattle to work for a newspaper. Fearing kidnapping and then Japanese infiltration of the West Coast after Pearl Harbor, Anna moved her children four times in as many years, never seeming to take much notice of Curtis' failure to connect with people or academics at school.

Curtis describes Grandma Eleanor as interested but not affectionate. His main attachment was to his

grandfather, FDR. Although there is no mention of Lucy Mercer, Curtis and his sister were somewhat aware of FDR's closeness with "Cousin Suckley" but they never realized the extent of the relationship until they found a stash of letters after her death. She had given FDR his beloved dog Fallah and took one of only two photographs of him sitting in his wheelchair.

Curtis adored his grandfather, who always made time for him, and he explained how FDR's magnetic presence lit up any room. By the time FDR died of an aneurysm three months after taking his fourth oath of office in 1945, Curtis was a young teen at military school in Wisconsin. Accustomed to masking his feelings, he refused to attend the funeral and took this great loss with stoicism while the nation mourned.

I liked this book partly because of its format. Its big, heavy, high-gloss pages bring out the best in the many excellent, historically significant photographs. Apparently Curtis drew on the many letters written back and forth between Eleanor and Anna, as well as other related correspondences, diaries, social calendars, dozens of photographs and conversations with others who lived through those times. Among the saddest stories are those he told about his father, who, although he tried to maintain a meaningful relationship with Curtis and his sister, was kicked aside in favor of the stepfather. The children even took their stepfather's last name, until Anna divorced him too, and then Curtis decided to go by his middle name, Roosevelt.

The lack of stability in the children's lives, and Anna's unwillingness to compromise what she wanted to provide a more solid base for her children really surprised me. In the epilogue, Curtis reveals that he followed family tradition and married four times. I don't think today's gossip columnists and paparazzi would be as kind to the Roosevelts as those in the 30s and 40s were.

Jodie says

Some parts are lol funny. Realistic view of the Roosevelts. Worth the time. Love the pictures too.

Donna says

Excellent. Very interesting to read the perspective of FDR's grandson - growing up in the White House, in the midst of a very famous family. If you like history, you'll enjoy this.

Jean says

Insightful! Glad I read it. Good history. What a lousy mother, Mrs Anna Roosevelt, in my opinion! No wonder Curtis must have had kind of a "messed up" life. All the divorces in the Roosevelt family - in earlier decades than recently. Easy to read. How could he actually "remember" so much, or was it more re-creating? No wonder kids in the public eye have difficulties!

Karyn says

This book was quite fascinating and held my attention. Written by FDR's oldest grandson, the book provided

a unique perspective on the popular president and his wife Eleanor. The author did a wonderful job describing incidents and events from his personal childhood memories. However, what I found to be most interesting was when Roosevelt described a boyhood memory and then reflected on the same event as an adult after reading the personal correspondence of the individuals involved in the incident. He found often children do not have all the perspective needed to decipher an event--sometimes due to a lack of maturity or other times because adults, for various reasons, did not give or explain the details. A good read for those intrigued with the Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt.

Kris says

I expected this memoir to provide insight into the Roosevelt family, and in the very narrowest sense this is indeed what I found. However, I feel that this book needed a much stronger editor and far fewer pages to tell the essence of the story contained within the covers.

I'm sure Mr. Roosevelt pondered this book for years, but I find it difficult to read multiple chapters on a 3 year-old's recollections of daily events. I kept waiting for the narrator to grow up and offer some insight, but a third of the way through the book (page 100, end of chapter nine) he had only aged two years. While I'm sure this kind of narrative is charming for some, I was frustrated by the lack of focus and depth. There was no specific organization to or timeline for this story; I think it would have made an excellent manuscript for family members, but it doesn't offer enough to compel a casual reader to stay with the story.

By Chapter 10, I simply skimmed the remainder of the book and set it aside. There are far too many good stories out there to spend any more time on a well-intentioned but ultimately bland text.

Joseph J. says

Owned and read again over ten years. I pulled it out over the holidays to experience A Roosevelt Christmas again, with real candles on the White House Christmas tree and all. Could not put the whole book down. Here is the extended Franklin D. Roosevelt family in all their glory and the too occasional glorious dysfunction. Penned by Curtis Dall Roosevelt, FDR's eldest grandson born Curtis Roosevelt Dall to FDR's only daughter Anna. Curtis starts us in the third floor White House nursery, with the clattering food truck-steam tables and all-bringing breakfast up the creaky elevator. We follow little Curtis from kissing grandpa in the morning to moving across country to Seattle and his mother's second marriage. Always FDR and Eleanor loom large. Beautifully illustrated. A warm, personal and honest memoir of a family and a time, told by one of the last witnesses, however young of the Roosevelt White House. And Matriarch Sara emerges in an especially beloved light.

Michele says

Fascinating Look at the Roosevelt Family

Written by the grandson of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, this is a memoir about what it was like to grow up in the bright spotlight (the sun) of the White House. Born Curtis Dall, then Curtis Boettiger after his stepfather, and finally Curtis Roosevelt, he is the son of Franklin and Eleanor's oldest child (and only daughter), Anna. Anna divorced her husband Curtis Dall and moved to the White House when her two

children were only six and three years old. Known as "Buzzie and Sistie," the First Grandchildren immediately became the darlings of the press.

Curtis writes that his life in the White House offered "immense and wonderful privilege," yet admits it had a double edge. "Life outside the protection and isolated White House cocoon became hugely distorted, especially for an impressionable youngster like me . . . Intoxicated by the exhilarating environments . . . I created a dream world that protected me and it became a form of addiction."

This is an interesting take on what it was like to grow up in front of the press and in the White House, and it's especially interesting on the verge of the new administration, when once again, young children will be involved. Will the impact be overwhelming as it was for this author? Or will it be like more recent children of Presidents (carefully shielded from the press) and merely be a unique phase of childhood? One can't help but be fascinated by the offspring of our Presidents.

This is a fascinating inside look at the Roosevelt family with an impressive collection of photos. A great holiday gift idea for those interested in American and Presidential history.

Stephen says

An interesting perspective. I can see why Curtis admired his grandfather so much, and how complicated finding one own's place must be in the shadow of such a charismatic and powerful figure. The book goes little into what I hoped it would- what role an heir of such a personality plays in creating a lasting public image. Aspects of how Sunnyside and Val Kill became National Historic Parks, the FDR Memorial's impression on him, lecture circuits- these more post-mortem aspects of Roosevelt's life are rarely even hinted at. Still, his memoirs show a great grandfather as father role model and it is well written and revealing. One can see that this book is the culmination of long years of thought over the subject, and how his first 15 years made his definition of self hard to grasp in later years. A great read, and very obviously not a ploy to gain notoriety from his grandfather's fame.

Sarah Beth says

Curtis "Buzzie" Roosevelt was the oldest grandson of FDR and was only three when his grandfather was elected as president. Following his parents' divorce, he was raised in the White House and FDR remained Buzzie's father figure until his death. I found this memoir deeply moving and felt such sympathy for a little boy who was constantly admonished for the slightest fault and simply longed to be near his grandfather and be a normal boy. I loved getting an insider perspective on Franklin and Eleanor from someone who knew and loved them. This was yet another example that a so-called privileged childhood is not always what it seems.

Sara Brunetti says

Very interesting perspective of growing up in one of America's most prestigious families as the eldest grandson of Franklin & Eleanor Roosevelt. Engaging and thoughtful. Worth the read.

