



Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2: The Defining Years, 1933-38

Blanche Wiesen Cook

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Historians, politicians, feminists, critics, and reviewers everywhere have praised Blanche Wiesen Cook's monumental **Eleanor Roosevelt** as the definitive portrait of this towering female figure of the twentieth century. Now in her long-awaited, majestic second volume, Cook takes readers through the tumultuous era of the Great Depression, the New Deal, and the gathering storms of World War II, the years of the Roosevelts' greatest challenges and finest achievements. In her remarkably engaging narrative, Cook gives us the complete Eleanor Roosevelt—“an adventurous, romantic woman, a devoted wife and mother, and a visionary policymaker and social activist who often took unpopular stands, counter to her husband's policies, especially on issues such as racial justice and women's rights. A biography of scholarship and daring, it is a book for all readers of American history.

Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2: The Defining Years, 1933-38 Details

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From Reader Review Eleanor Roosevelt, Volume 2: The Defining Years, 1933-38 for online ebook

Caroline says

This book, the second volume of Blanche Wiesen Cook's three-part biography of Eleanor Roosevelt, covers the first five years of her role as First Lady of America, from 1933-1938. It's quite a brief interlude in a life, considering the first volume covers the first forty-plus years of ER's life before the White House, and the final volume covers the next thirty-odd years of ER's life up to her death in 1962. But in many ways these five years were the central years of ER's life, setting a pattern and pace that would define not just her but America itself.

Eleanor Roosevelt had always been a champion of the downtrodden and oppressed, had always been a voice for the voiceless, a champion of freedom and liberalism - but FDR's election to the Presidency, and the desperate poverty and hardship of the Depression, gave her a position and an authority to really make a difference, and she took full advantage of it. As a result of FDR's disability, Eleanor was his eyes and ears across the country, and she took that initial role and made it something entirely her own.

She disagreed with her husband on many occasions, publicly and vehemently at times, and scarcely ever felt constrained by his position or politics to self-censor herself. One notable exception was in international affairs, and Eleanor was noticeably silent on the issue of Germany's treatment of the Jews. Yet she had other ways of making her feelings known, and she was incredibly active on behalf of organisations championing tolerance - whether that was combating anti-Semitism, racism, sexism, anti-communism. At times this drew an immense amount of conservative criticism, yet by the close of 1938 Eleanor was outpolling FDR in terms of approval ratings.

These years were also defined by Eleanor's intensely close relationship with Lorena Hickok, a newspaper reporter, who became one of ER's closest friends, perhaps more. Certainly their letters display an intense love, tenderness and passion for one another, but as with so many aspects of ER's internal emotional life much is still left a mystery. But Wiesen Cook handles the potentially controversial issue with great respect and delicacy, and it only serves to illustrate just what a complex, fascinating personality Eleanor Roosevelt was. Roll on the final volume!

Women's National Book Association of New Orleans says

The Women's National Book Association sent this book to the White House today (March 6) in honor of Women's History Month: <https://www.wnba-centennial.org/book-...>

From the Women's National Book Association's press release:

Volume 2 chronicles Roosevelt's first six years as America's most controversial first lady and maps her contributions to the New Deal. When Eleanor discovered her husband's marital infidelities, she decided not to divorce him, but to create a new marital partnership that allowed both of them freedom and gave her the space to forge her own career while forming a female support network.

Catherine says

A delight. Revealed: ER was a terrible cook but a brilliant politician. I would highly recommend this biographical series to anybody who cares about the history of Women's Rights, White House gossip, New Deal politics, and how-to-become-a-tour-de-force-in-politics-even-if-your-husband-is-a-cheating-weasel.

Darcy says

It's possible that my high rating is influenced by my delight at FINALLY finishing this book, but only slightly; it was truly an enjoyable and informative read. Eleanor Roosevelt is the Mary Poppins bag of historical figures -- every time I think I understand her, she surprises me. (And every time I start to put her on a pedestal, she frustrates or disappoints me. Kudos to Cook for her honest portrayal.) As in Volume 1, Cook did a masterful job of capturing ER's personal and professional story, weaving it into the larger story of pre-WWII America and beyond. Considering ER's dizzyingly full life and the world-altering events of the 1930s, the result is a real page-turner (as 500+ page biographies go, anyway).

Don says

Quite some time ago, the Hofstra Alumni Book Club chose to read the first volume of Blanche Wiesen Cook's comprehensive biography of Eleanor Roosevelt. I was so impressed with it that I promised myself I would read volume II. I then moved on to other great books and forgot all about it. When I saw that the third volume became available in recorded form, I decided that it was time to read volume II.

As can be seen from the title, this volume deals with the first five years of F.D.R.'s presidency.

There are many reasons to recommend this book. Chief among them is that the author does an amazing job portraying this very complex and sometimes contradictory woman.

If you think that first ladies do little more than support their spouses while taking on a pet cause or two, you will be surprised by what you will learn. E.R. (as she is referred to throughout this book) accomplished more in her life than ten ordinary people put together. Her contributions to the causes of women's rights, equality for black people, education, the arts, and in many other areas are astounding. At one point, Wiesen Cook mentions a NEW YORK TIMES editorial which argued that she would have made a great president. After reading this biography, it would be next to impossible to argue the point.

With that said, E.R. was not always consistent or predictable. There were many times when she spoke out for causes in which she believed even though her viewpoints didn't correspond with those of her husband. However, her response to the rise of the Nazi movement, (or, rather, her lack of response) is incredibly distressing to contemplate. I understand that there were times when she felt that she had to support her husband for the good of the country, but, given her strong personality and her willingness to publicly challenge him from time to time, her silence is shocking indeed.

There would be no way to tell the story of E.R.'s life without devoting time to her relationship with reporter Lorena Hickcock. Historians differ about whether they had a lesbian relationship, though Hickcock was a lesbian. E.R.'s letters would seem to indicate that the couple was romantically involved, but it can be argued that this had more to do with Eleanor's rather flowery writing style than with anything else. This is certainly

an important aspect of E.R.'s life which cannot and should not be ignored. With that said, I got rather tired of reading about it after a while. The relationship is quite complex and interesting, but these portions of the book could definitely have used some editing.

If you wish to read a fascinating portrait of an accomplished woman who lived during a most interesting time in American history, this is the book for you. Volume III will be my next read.

Patty says

The two volume set on ER is very good, sort of biography through the prism of events and politics. She was a fascinating woman. The only disappointment is that the set only goes up to 1938.

Danielle says

I'm currently reading this one. Eleanor Roosevelt has challenged me to be more involved in my community and be aware of what's going on in the world. She constantly had to redefine herself and sometimes put her own needs aside for the better of her family

Frances Johnson says

This second book in a three part series by Blanche Wiesen Cook covers the presidential years of Eleanor Roosevelt as First Lady to WWII. It is excellent and covers all the important subjects ER worked on during those years, her many friends who didn't always get along with each other, the loving relationships she had with both male and female friends, and the often difficult relationship she had with her husband, the President. It's an important book about an important and talented woman. What surprised me was the many pleasant and charming pictures of ER that you don't often see in other books. It's a great book that tells us much about a famous, complex family, as well as the difficult world at that time.

Susan Katz says

Like Cook's first volume about Eleanor Roosevelt, this is an excellent book, well researched and well written. I can't help thinking how easily ER could have been a different person. She had the money and position to indulge herself in gratifying her own personal desires. And she had the background of tragedy and grief that could easily have been used to justify selfishness. And yet she chose to devote her life to helping others with almost unbelievable energy and self-sacrifice. To be "of use," as she put it. What an inspiration she remains, decades after her death. I hope Cook will produce a last installment of this extraordinary life.

George says

A powerful,inspiring portrait of a remarkable woman in her first six years as First Lady. My one regret is that

so far vol. 3, carrying the story beyond 1938, has yet to appear.

Linda says

Very thorough, very enjoyable.

I've loved reading about the Roosevelts, for some reason, since I was very young. I've read Joseph Lash's books and Doris Kearns Goodwin's. Last summer I read "Hissing Cousins" about Eleanor and Alice Roosevelt Longworth. I've watched the PBS series about the Roosevelt's. And yet, I can still learn something new.

Much of the information in this book comes from letters. I'd read this one again.

Summer says

The first volume of this look at Eleanor Roosevelt's life was riveting even at 600+ pages. This volume however, was a slog to get through. I found myself increasingly annoyed at the author's clear bias and slanted portrayal of the facts. Perhaps things were the way she presented them, but she seemed to be making a lot of leaps and I would have preferred her to present them as such instead of writing as if she were in ER's head. It made it hard to know what was presented as ER's feelings because there is evidence (letters, etc.) clearly stating those feelings or because the author surmised those feelings from her extensive research. It is clear that Cook has extensively researched ER's life, I actually welcome her opinion on what she thinks may have been the underlying feelings and motives in certain things, but I want the writing to be clear that this is conjecture (perhaps educated conjecture, but conjecture nevertheless) on the author's part. Additionally this volume was more convoluted than the last. The author seemingly sought to find a balance between telling ER's story and setting the scene of the political turmoil between 1933-1938, but she didn't find it. The first volume covered ER's entire life up to 1933 (1884-1933). This book was 100 pages longer and only covered five years. In my opinion that was unnecessary. I persevered only because of the subject itself, but I doubt I will read the third volume (if it ever comes out) and I wish that I had attempted a different author's telling of ER's life altogether.

Lee says

I do not read a lot of nonfiction for leisure reading because I read a lot of it for my job. So when I love a work of nonfiction (and read as many pages of it as these two volumes are) that is really saying something. I read this volume (the second one) first because my book club chose it. I was so fascinated with Eleanor Roosevelt and thought the book was so well written that I also read Volume One before the meeting. Bottom line -- Eleanore Roosevelt was an amazing woman whose ethics are well worth emulating -- she rose above considerable personal pain and devoted herself to the greater good -- the U.S. was VERY lucky to have had her as first lady during extremely difficult times.

Mikey B. says

This second volume covers a much shorter time period – from 1933 to 1938. These are definitely key years in the history of the United States with Franklin Roosevelt attempting to overcome the effects of the

Depression – and, throughout the world, with Nazism and Fascism on the rise in Germany, Italy and Japan.

Eleanor Roosevelt was at the forefront of it all. As described in this book she is constantly on the move – giving speeches, writing articles and books, and meeting with diverse groups of people. She was always open to new ideas. She was progressive and left-leaning – espousing a multitude of causes – from women’s rights to the growing plight of refugees (mostly Jewish people fleeing from the reprehensible rule of Hitler’s Germany). She inserted herself into a multitude of causes that she was passionate about.

Her most fervent cause was that of the plight of African Americans through-out the U.S. – most particularly in the Southern States. This was at a time when Washington DC itself was still under Jim Crow. Eleanor brought several African Americans to the White House including women who were in prison; prison reform being another cause that Eleanor was involved in. When she toured the South she was told that audiences had to be segregated, so when she was not the featured speaker she would place her chair in between the black and white audiences. Pictures of her with African Americans, even with small black children, caused a tremendous uproar, for which she was vilified. She campaigned, along with many others, to make lynching a crime. Very sadly she was unsuccessful in this, which shows the strength and ignorance of the conservative faction in U.S. politics of that era.

The enormity and significance of Eleanor Roosevelt’s actions cannot be over-emphasized. She often disagreed publicly with some of her husbands’ weak-kneed efforts at reform – particularly his lack of legislation to make the U.S. racially equal. She also encouraged the growth of unions which were instrumental in outlawing child labour, lowering the hours of work, and making a minimum wage.

For all these activities she was labelled a communist, a Red, a threat to democratic America, a threat to Anglo-Saxon values... This did not faze her and she did have millions of admirers who encouraged her actions for the rights of all Americans. Eleanor Roosevelt was a crusader for “Human Rights” before the term was invented (after the Second World War she was instrumental, along with others, in making, for the newly created United Nations “The Universal Declaration of Human Rights”).

There are two flaws in this second volume.

It is too American centric.

Page 177 (my book)

America’s commitment to segregation and its ghastly habit of public lynching, unpunished and unopposed, emboldened Nazis in Europe.

The author over-emphasizes the importance of the U.S. on events in Europe – particularly on influencing Nazi Germany (like the above statement). The Nazis in Germany needed no examples from the U.S. to deter (or encourage) them in their destruction of Jewish culture – and Western Civilization. It was indeed disingenuous of Americans to criticize Nazi racist policies when their own country persecuted and disenfranchised millions of African Americans. Eleanor Roosevelt was cognisant of this.

Hitler was much more concerned with France, England, and the Soviet Union. The author, at times, writes as if the U.S. was a player in European affairs, it wasn’t.

It was always interesting to learn of Eleanor Roosevelt’s’ friendships – and she had many. She was a non-stop communicator. So it was very difficult for her friends to have a one-to-one personal friendship with Eleanor Roosevelt – such was the case with Lorena Hickok. This leads to the second flaw in this book. There are just too many references to this friendship with Lorena, using quotes from letters which for the most part are repetitive and superficial. This took away from the book’s flow.

Otherwise some of her friendship portrayals are of great interest with interesting psychological aspects highlighted. Her husband Franklin, for example, was much less emotional than Eleanor. He would never betray his inner feelings, but his door was always open. By contrast Eleanor would literally freeze people out of her life.

So with the two above caveats, this book is a captivating portrayal of a First Lady who was unlike any other - before or since!

Krenzel says

In the first volume of her series on Eleanor Roosevelt, Blanche Wiesen Cook, a historian and women's studies professor, introduced us to a compelling historical figure who, after years of living in passive submission to her husband and mother-in-law, had finally broken free to create her own "independent life" – a life filled with careers (teacher, writer, public speaker) and fulfilling private friendships. In volume two, Eleanor Roosevelt faces the challenge of keeping her independent life as she assumes the traditionally social (and passive) role of First Lady. "Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933 – 1938" contemplates Eleanor Roosevelt's life during the first five years of her husband's presidency.

In her first volume on Eleanor Roosevelt, Cook took a feminist approach in asking questions about power, relationships, and identity. Unfortunately, volume two falls short of the first volume, in leaving many of these questions not only unanswered, but sometimes even unasked. Whereas the central theme of volume one was Eleanor's struggle to assert herself as an "independent power," in volume two, we are not just reading the story of Eleanor Roosevelt, but also the parallel story of her husband and his presidency, which places Eleanor Roosevelt in a dependent role as she must work her way into her husband's political circle to gain influence. In fact, too often, volume two devolves into a story of FDR's presidency and Eleanor's reaction to it, rather than the story of Eleanor Roosevelt as an individual, independent agent. Eleanor is often portrayed as dependent on FDR for power, her moods uplifted when his speeches reflect her views and depressed and cold when they don't, particularly when she is shut out from the inner circle and has to learn about what is going on from her own son. While she occasionally dissents from the administration's talking points, her writing and speaking career is now primarily aimed at advancing FDR's policies. The most disappointing example of Eleanor's capitulation to her husband is on the subject of the Holocaust, where she remains silent from 1933 to 1938. When a German refugee appeals to Eleanor Roosevelt's sense of justice, asking, "Can you really stand by and watch this? Can you stand and see us more or less all gassed? I should like to have your word, you will do something," Eleanor Roosevelt replies, "Unfortunately, in my present position I am obliged to leave all contacts with foreign governments in the hands of my husband and his advisers." Obviously, Eleanor Roosevelt does gain power within FDR's political circle, but it is never clear what the extent and significance of this power really is.

Another central theme in volume one was how Eleanor Roosevelt's relationship with a new circle of feminist and lesbian friends helped her create her own life apart from FDR. After Eleanor discovered FDR's infidelity with Lucy Mercer, and they began living separately, Eleanor established her own new life at Val-Kill, a residence she shared with Nancy Cook and Marion Dickerman. In addition, Eleanor made her first true friend in Lorena Hickok, an established reporter with the Associated Press. In volume two, these relationships all dissolve, as Eleanor acrimoniously splits with Cook and Dickerman and drifts apart from Hickok. Hickok, in fact, is the key figure in volume two, as her relationship with Eleanor Roosevelt is chronicled in painful detail. While their relationship is clearly the most important in Eleanor's life during her time as First Lady, it unfortunately takes a bit of a tragic turn as Hickok gives up her job with the AP, and along with it, her self-respect, becoming dependent on Eleanor Roosevelt for work, in addition to financial and emotional support. As Hickok grows increasingly depressed and resentful of Eleanor's other friends and

busy schedule, they continue to drift apart, to the point where, when they do share a vacation alone together, Eleanor is miserable, missing her work and eager to return to her life as First Lady. As Eleanor Roosevelt drifts away from the friends who were so important to her in first creating her own independent life, it is clear that her interests and priorities have changed. Her political life is now the most important thing in her life.

What does this say about Eleanor Roosevelt's identity? This is the final question then left to be answered. Unfortunately, the question is never even posed to readers. Does it matter that Eleanor Roosevelt depends on her husband for power and she no longer has an independent role of her own? What does it say that she pulls Lorena Hickok into a dependent relationship where she retains all the power? Why is her public life more important to her than her private relationships? What, in fact, is her new identity? While in volume one, we are left with the image of Eleanor Roosevelt as an independent woman, pursuing her own career interests and developing her own loyal set of friends apart from FDR, in volume two, we are mostly left with an image of Eleanor Roosevelt not as an independent force, but as the First Lady, a woman who keeps a busy schedule and cares for a lot of causes and people, but none in particular.

In focusing on the day-to-day details of Eleanor Roosevelt's life and FDR's administration, "Eleanor Roosevelt: Volume Two, 1933 – 1938" reads more like a timeline from a boring history text – a list of dates and facts – than a compelling biography of Eleanor Roosevelt the person, her priorities and main accomplishments. In trying to tell two stories – first, of the political movement behind the New Deal and, second, of the role Eleanor Roosevelt carves out for herself within her husband's administration – ultimately Cook fails to tell either story.
