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Who exactly *is* Bill Clinton, and why was he, of all the brilliant and ambitious men in his generation, the first in his class to reach the White House? Drawing on hundreds of letters, documents, and interviews, David Maraniss explores the evolution of the personality of our forty-second president from his youth in Arkansas to his 1991 announcement that he would run for the nation's highest office. In this richly textured and balanced biography, Maraniss reveals a complex man full of great flaws and great talents. *First in His Class* is the definitive book on Bill Clinton.

First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton Details

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Doug says

This is probably still the definitive biography of Bill Clinton, although it ends its narrative at the beginning of his presidency.

This book chronicles Clinton's growing up in Arkansas, his attending Boy's State, band competitions and dating Arkansas beauty queens. Maraniss describes Clinton as a good student who was always involved in student government & band and who was a regular over-achiever.

This book also covers Clinton's attendance at Georgetown, including his formative experiences, professors and running for office. It recounts his attendance at Oxford, Yale, his meeting Hillary Rodham, his avoidance of the Vietnam War and his European travels. It also discusses his working for Senator Fulbright and how he would bust out singing Elvis songs while working at the Capitol. One interesting insight comes by way of Maranniss's discussion of many of Clinton's young contemporaries and how Clinton was a part of the "Class of '68" but was amongst a group who, while believing in dramatic change, felt it must be done within the existing system (rather than doing away with the system per se).

Some of the best parts of this book are about Clinton's younger days and it recounts his running for Congress, AG and Governor of Arkansas.

One of my favorite stories was (as I recall) of Clinton vetoing (or not vetoing) a bill as Governor. A certain person or interest group was not happy with the outcome and persuaded Clinton to change his mind. It was after hours and the bill had already been shoved under a door per procedure. So they got a coat hanger and got the bill back out from underneath the door and Clinton made the desired change.

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John says

I really tore through this, it was fascinating and readable and I highly recommend it. It really seems like Bill was shooting for the presidency from about age twelve. He seems to have been sorta like Lyndon Johnson; from what I gathered from reading this and a bio of LBJ, both of these guys were born to be politicians, always working the room and keeping tabs on people and figuring out how they are going to run the next campaign. One bonus about this book is that it also serves as a partial biography of Hillary (though obviously there isn't as much about her as there is about Bill). This was written in the mid 90s, and Maraniss writes several times about how people thought Hillary could have had just as successful a political career as Bill, and how she was a better law professor and maybe even a better student, but she sacrificed some independence and moved to Arkansas and attached herself to him. Of course today we know that she would become Senator Clinton and Secretary of State Clinton and almost President Clinton herself, but back then she seemed to have made the decision that it would be all about Bill and his rise.

Scott Cox says

When I purchased Maraniss' biography, I didn't realize that it did not cover President Bill Clinton's tenure in office as 42nd President of the United States. This lengthy biography (464 pages) takes the reader to the point in Clinton's life where, as governor of Arkansas, he makes his momentous announcement that he will run for President in 1992. William Jefferson Blythe was born in Hope Arkansas in 1946. Blythe never met his biological father who was killed in a car accident before he was born. His mother soon remarried a hard-drinking, car dealer, Roger Clinton. Clinton never adopted his stepson, however years later Bill legally changed his name to show solidarity with his younger step brother, Roger Clinton. Bill did well in high school academics, and excelled as a saxophone player in the school band. One of his crowning moments was when he met and shook the hand of John F. Kennedy as a 17 year-old delegate to the American League Boy's Nation. Clinton subsequently attended Georgetown University, where the author noted he was "first in his class in terms of political will and skill." Clinton went on to secure a Rhode's scholarship allowing him to study two years at Oxford College in England. These were also the tumultuous Vietnam War years. Being strongly against the war, Clinton managed to avoid the draft by deftly maneuvering between a purported graduate ROTC program and a high draft lottery number. After Oxford, Clinton returned to the States to complete Yale law school. At Yale he met Hillary Rodham, who was his intellectual match and complemented Clinton in political shrewdness. While Clinton excelled at story telling and gregariousness, Rodham was financially astute and disciplined. Hillary married Bill Clinton with "open eyes" regarding Bill's notorious philandering, however they were both committed to a political partnership that would benefit them. Clinton became the multi-term governor of Arkansas on a platform of "jobs creation, education reform, and an overhaul of the welfare system." This platform would service him well in his upcoming campaign against President George Bush. This was a good "early life" biography, however I felt the author was perhaps a little too lenient on Clinton's weaknesses, especially his philandering tendencies. Clinton was no less immoral than previous Presidents (especially Kennedy and Johnson), however the author failed to develop these tendencies in the same thorough manner as other biographers might have done. Otherwise, this was an insightful character study of a soon-to-be President.

Joe says

Clinton's life up to running for president: here, you have the Rhodes scholar, the law student, law teacher, his first campaigns, and other chapters. Hillary also gets good coverage, especially in contrast with Bill (Hillary is the harder, financial minded one, while Bill is portrayed as softer). This is also about the Baby Boomer generation: that's the "class" in the title, so there is a focus on Clinton's life as representative of the challenges faced by the generation that was drafted to go to Vietnam.

Po says

Okay, the only reason this is on here is that Nate made me read it-in the 7th grade!!-b/c he didn't want to waste his time on it if it wasn't any good. So I did; I hauled it to Study Hall every day. It's now a running family joke.

Stephanie says

This is a fascinating read and take on the Force that is Bill Clinton. The most interesting part of the book to me was a surprise: it was reliving the Vietnam years and their effect on Clinton and his peer group (to which I belong). Maraniss's recounting of the frustration we felt made me relive the entire rotten time--his narrative

was a true and effective recounting of that time. The most surprising part of the book to me was that Clinton knew and advertised from such an early age that he intended to make a life of politics. His peers and contacts believed that he would go far, and many of them were by his side when he was President.

Aaron Million says

In this age of extreme partisanship it is difficult to find a neutral book about Bill or Hillary Clinton. While most politicians manage to antagonize one side or the other (or both), feelings about the Clintons are hyper-ventilated. Many people fall into one of two camps: the Clintons are evil and represent all that is wrong with politics, or they are two people who have devoted their lives to serving the public and making things better for working-class Americans. One of the reasons that David Maraniss's biography of the early Bill Clinton is so engrossing is because he neither has an ax to grind with the Clintons, nor does he think that either of them are remotely close to pillars of virtue.

This book was written during Clinton's presidency, in the mid 1990s, and takes us only through Clinton's decision to formally announce his candidacy for the presidency on 10/3/91. Maraniss focuses on who Bill Clinton really is, or perhaps a better way to phrase it is that he *tries* to focus on who Bill Clinton really is. As Maraniss notes, Clinton (and Hillary too later on in the book) is a rash of contradictions: someone equally at home in a rural black church or playing golf at a ritzy country club where all the members are white. Clinton was constantly seeking the middle ground with people, something which was a harbinger of what he tried to do later as president.

Maraniss begins by discussing the death of Clinton's father, William Blythe, in an auto accident before Clinton is even born. As one can imagine, this has a profound effect on Clinton's life (he was born William Jefferson Blythe but later legally changed his last name to Clinton) as he grew up without a father. This caused Clinton to continually seek out potential father figures as he grew up and even when he was a young adult. While his fun-loving mother, Virginia, remarried, Clinton had an uneasy relationship with his alcoholic and abusive step-father Roger Clinton. This affected Clinton too - probably much more so than he let on with friends as he would talk about his biological father's death but kept fairly mum about Roger Clinton and his excesses.

From boyhood, Clinton alternately attracted and repelled people. Many people were drawn into his orbit by his charm and charisma. Others were put off by his glad-handing and apparent deviousness. Maraniss traces these qualities through Clinton's youth in Hope and then Hot Springs, his high school years, his college years at Georgetown, then Oxford as a Rhodes scholar, and then Yale Law School, and then throughout his rise in Arkansas politics. One quality that Maraniss notes but does not dwell upon is the penchant that Clinton had (and probably still has) for distancing himself from someone once that person is no longer of much use to him. This is especially true when Clinton was a young governor in Arkansas, willing to sacrifice staff members in order to push blame for something off of himself and onto them. I remember this trait coming up while I was reading Dan Balz's book about the 2008 presidential primaries and election, when he was describing Bill's forlorn efforts to help Hillary try to win the Democratic nomination. It is just something that stuck out to me from my reading that book, and Maraniss happened to hit on the same trait.

This is an excellent, non-partisan look at the rise of Bill Clinton (and Hillary as well). Highly recommended for anyone interested in the Clintons, presidential biographies, or Arkansas politics.

Grade: A

Tim says

Read this one back in 2004.

Before reading this book, I thought nothing but ill of Bill. I was amazed by Clinton's life: impressed by his early religion (Southern Baptist), envious of his education and travels, and thoroughly astonished by his resiliency, personal and political. Maraniss actually has me thinking there are ways I need to be more like Bill Clinton, especially his attention to details of others' lives. There's plenty more to say of Bill's life, and Maraniss does not get into the sordid stories. Even so, I loved this book.

Peter Wolfley says

Love him or hate him, there's no denying that the Bill Clinton story could only happen in America. This was a very fairly written biography that doesn't shy away from any of Clinton's flaws but also doesn't dwell on them to the point of hysteria like so many other books on this subject. Some of the big take aways are that he essentially had his eye on the white house since middle school and would often make decisions, very early in his life, based on if it hurt his electabilty or not. That's a strange way for a kid to think. Another thing is that losing a parent in adolescence jacks you up.

Patricia says

After reading a biography of Obama, I started researching biographies on other Presidents. I downloaded several to my Kindle, and this is the first one I'm reading. While the writing is no where near the quality of that of David Remnick's in The Bridge, I am nevertheless fascinated. Since Clinton is only a two years older than me, the historical context is real and vivid. Since he grew up in the South as did my ex-husband, I can't help but notice parallels there as well. The writing is clunky, but the research seems thorough and I got quite a bit of what I was looking for--i.e. a peek at the boy, youth, man who became president. There were times when I felt hoodwinked by a smooth talker back when I voted for him to be president. There's no doubt he is a flawed human being as are we all. This begs the question: How do one's flaws inform one's actions as a political leader for better or worse.

Since this book only takes the reader to the moment when he announced his candidacy for presidency, I don't have the information that might answer this question with regard to Clinton. In my quest to learn more about presidents, I think I'll have to read another book on Clinton, this time one that focuses on his presidency.

Prateek says

I find Bill Clinton endlessly fascinating. Much of my fascination comes from the character that emerges from this biography. From the first sentences, we're invited into a life that has no parallel in modern American history. His father dead, raised by a young free-spirited mother, Bill seems destined to follow the path of so many other poor southern boy. Raised amidst domestic violence (much more harrowing than reported), Bill

Clinton develops into a bright, eager-to-please man on the make. The portrait is balanced -- his genuine care for policy and the "little guy" are presented alongside his reckless philandering. This book probes more deeply into this dichotomy than the president's own (highly readable) memoir.

Keith Rackley says

Maraniss documents, in rich detail, the genesis and life of a complex, gifted, and flawed individual. There is balance in his presentation. He portrays Clinton as extraordinarily gifted, with IQ and EQ, making him the perfect politician; Clinton demonstrates an amazing ability to connect with every person he meets and still be a policy wonk. Despite Clinton's amazing gifts leading to Oxford and Yale success, as well as his early life political conquests, the seeds of the most difficult chapters of his life are evident early. The author explores the origins and the evolution of trust issues, the darker side of a tendency to manipulate, and the womanizing.

With all of the gifts Clinton has and the time he comes of age, it is difficult not to think of Malcolm's "Outliers". There is a very real thread in Clinton's history of being in the right place, at the right time, even with an admission that he would make the most of those opportunities.

I would recommend this strongly to anyone who has interest in Clinton or the times in which he matured. My only complaint is that the timeline covered fails short of Clinton's presidency. I only hope that Maraniss will have a follow-on work, with more depth, than his easily panned "The Clinton Enigma".

Steve says

<https://bestpresidentialbios.com/2019...>

David Maraniss's "First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton" was published in 1995 and remains one of the most popular biographies of Clinton. Maraniss is an author and journalist who won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 1993; he was a Pulitzer finalist in 1996, 2002 and 2004. Among his other books are biographies of Barack Obama, Roberto Clemente and Vince Lombardi.

Written during the early years of the Clinton presidency, this 464-page biography covers his first forty-five years (to his announcement he was running for president). Coverage is generally vivid and thorough, but Maraniss warns readers to expect relatively little coverage of the Whitewater controversy and Clinton's personal indiscretions. Nevertheless, one need not look very hard to see the shadows of his numerous former girlfriends and casual flings scattered throughout the narrative.

Much of the book is based on Maraniss's reporting during Clinton's presidential campaign (for which he received the Pulitzer). But while neither Bill nor Hillary were interviewed for the book, Maraniss did speak with nearly four-hundred of Clinton's friends and colleagues who provided a robust collection of diaries, letters and oral histories. It is hard to imagine any future Clinton biographer unearthing a comparable cache of new material.

Given his subject's polarizing personality, Maraniss demonstrates remarkable objectivity and balance. And despite prescient foreshadowing by several of Clinton's childhood acquaintances, the image of him which emerges from these pages is not one of obvious presidential timber. Instead, Maraniss's portrait incorporates a complex and contradictory combination of characteristics: intelligence, extroversion, compassion and a tireless energy but also amorality, extreme duplicity, an odd indolence...and irrepressible ambition.

Although the book is essentially a classic presidential biography, it represents the confluence of traditional biography, political biography and character analysis. Almost every major event in his early life is well-covered, wonderfully described and keenly analyzed. Background and context are rarely forgotten and only occasionally does the reader find him- or herself so close to the action that the “big picture” becomes hazy.

The best aspect of the biography is probably its coverage of Clinton’s first three decades – the years preceding his political career in Arkansas. Readers get to meet an enormous number of Clinton’s influential friends, teachers and other mentors. And many of these figures receive colorful, captivating introductions of their own.

This book may well provide the best coverage of a subject’s pre-presidency I’ve read since LBJ (Caro) or JFK (Nigel Hamilton). The reader almost gets a sense of having walked the high school halls with Clinton, spied on him during bull sessions at Georgetown and journeyed with him across the Atlantic during his travels to Oxford.

Hillary is integrated into the narrative with a perceptive and revealing fifteen-page mini-biography which astutely captures her personality and attempts to decipher their mutual attraction. But Maraniss does not treat her as just any supporting character; given the nature and import of their “pragmatic partnership” Hillary appears regularly throughout the last half of the book.

Maraniss provides the most detailed and nuanced analysis of Clinton’s determined efforts to avoid the military draft that I’ve ever read. Like an accomplished prosecutor, Maraniss establishes the facts and then carefully dissects the mishmash of contradictory and dishonest statements Clinton later made regarding these events.

There is little about this biography which is not “first class.” But given the excellent roll-out which characters such as Robert Reich and Hillary Rodham receive, I would have expected a more compelling introduction to Dick Morris. And Clinton’s lengthy career of public service in Arkansas, which includes large stretches where nothing seems to happen, is comparatively dull and its timeline is somewhat murky.

Overall, however, David Maraniss’s 1995 “First in His Class: A Biography of Bill Clinton” provides a wonderful introduction to this president-to-be. It is regrettable Maraniss has not yet followed up with a volume covering Clinton’s life in the White House. But anyone hoping to learn about Bill Clinton’s formative years needs look no further; “First in His Class” is the perfect place to start.

Overall rating: 4½ stars

Diener says

In 1992, I was a college freshman voting for the first time. I initially supported Perot because he was from my hometown of Dallas (not a good reason I guess), but switched to Clinton after Perot dropped out for a few weeks. The 90s represent a most excellent time in my life and because Bill was president during that time I associate him with all of the things that made my 90s so good - Nirvana, three Super Bowl wins for the Cowboys, living out my dream of becoming a sportswriter, traveling abroad, meeting Lefty (the best dog I will ever have), and, at decade's end, meeting my wife. This book has nothing to do with that time in my life. It is not about the Clinton presidency, but about Clinton's life before he became president. Found it very interesting. Clinton is the quintessential political animal, which makes him deplorable, but at the same time, his keen intellect and lifelong interest in books and learning fascinate me.

Dan says

An excellent objective biography of Bill Clinton from the Pulitzer Prize Winning author David Maraniss. This biography was published in 1995 and covers Clinton's life up to his Presidential campaign announcement in 1991.

If you want a better understanding of the genesis of Bill Clinton as an intellectual and a politician, along with all the warts, then this is a fascinating book. I would break down the book as follows:

1. An early father-less childhood raised by a praise-heaping mother Virginia with problems and loving grandparents and then eventually a troubled and alcoholic step-father.
2. An ambitious, brilliant and politically motivated teenager elected as one of two Arkansas Boy's State Senators who then traveled to Washington D.C. where he dazzled congressmen and shook John F. Kennedy's hand.
3. A well liked Georgetown college student who stayed very active in politics and worked in the back office of congressional offices
4. Ongoing maneuvers and connections that allowed him to evade the Vietnam War draft. This section coincided with his time as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford and his travels throughout Europe including Russia.
5. Yale Law School student where he met Hillary.
6. An early law school faculty position in Fayetteville and then marriage to Hillary.
7. An attorney general position and first governorship and Hillary's involvement in commodities trading, Whitewater deals etc. Increasing concern about his sexual dalliances.
8. More campaigning and then highly popular terms as a second go-around governor. A rise to national prominence where he passed on a run for the presidency in 1988 due to the recent sexual allegations.
9. Polling and decision to run for President in 1992.

The writing in this book was highly prescient. Many of the self-inflicted problems that Bill and Hillary created later in their careers are foreshadowed in this book. Bill's sexual liaisons foreshadowed the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Bill's ability to wiggle out of the worst public scandals were already well honed before he entered law school. Hillary's public face and support of Bill despite dozens of allegations of marital misconduct and Bill's seeming inability to reform were front and center. Bill's lack of interest outside of politics and general boredom but unbridled energy, Hillary's financial insecurities, their joint desire to make huge impacts on the world were all there long before the Clinton Foundation. Also on display later in the book were many of Hillary's positive attributes; hard work, dogged determination, perseverance in spite of the double standards. But there were many prescient episodes of tone deafness on her part as well.

In the fall of 2016 during the last days of the campaign, I heard a lot of comments from those people that I grew up with in Michigan that there weren't any good candidates. As I made the drive along the backroads from the U.P. of Michigan to Colorado, I only saw one "Vote for Hillary" sign that I remember. Record numbers of people it seemed didn't like either candidate but in the rural areas that I drove through it was far worse for Hillary. If you consider Bill and Hillary as a package as many Americans do, then I think this book at least hints at some of these feelings that have been there for decades, rightly or wrongly.
