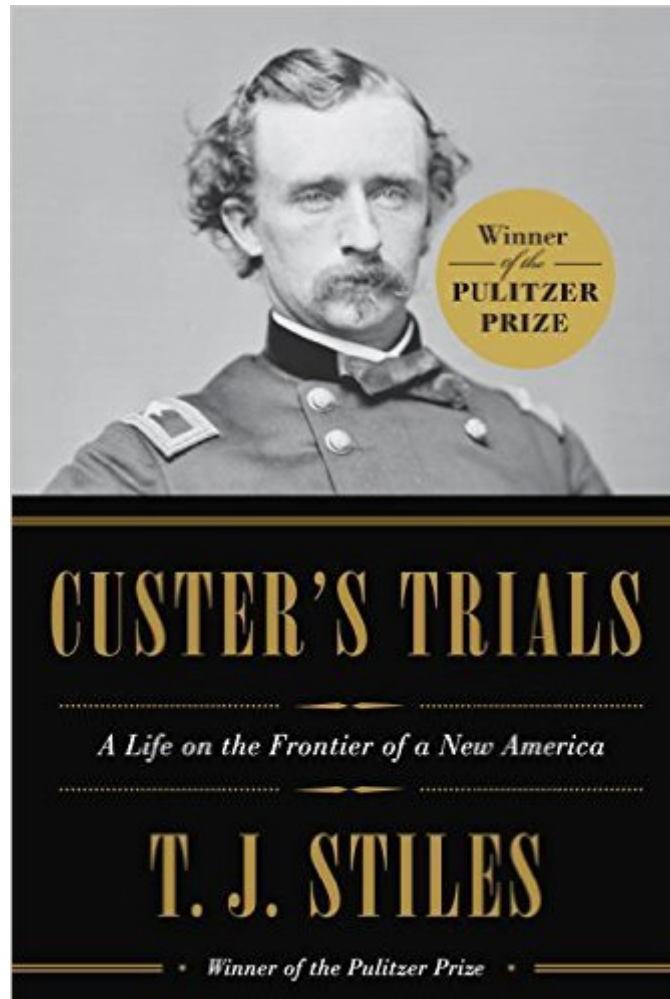


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Custer's Trials: A Life On The Frontier Of A New America



Synopsis

Winner of the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for History From the winner of two Pulitzer Prizes and a National Book Award, a brilliant biography of Gen. George Armstrong Custer that radically changes our view of the man and his turbulent times. In this magisterial biography, T. J. Stiles paints a portrait of Custer both deeply personal and sweeping in scope, proving how much of Custer's legacy has been ignored. He demolishes Custer's historical caricature, revealing a volatile, contradictory, intense person—capable yet insecure, intelligent yet bigoted, passionate yet self-destructive, a romantic individualist at odds with the institution of the military (he was court-martialed twice in six years). The key to understanding Custer, Stiles writes, is keeping in mind that he lived on a frontier in time. In the Civil War, the West, and many areas overlooked in previous biographies, Custer helped to create modern America, but he could never adapt to it. He freed countless slaves yet rejected new civil rights laws. He proved his heroism but missed the dark reality of war for so many others. A talented combat leader, he struggled as a manager in the West. He tried to make a fortune on Wall Street yet never connected with the new corporate economy. Native Americans fascinated him, but he could not see them as fully human. A popular writer, he remained apart from Ambrose Bierce, Mark Twain, and other rising intellectuals. During Custer's lifetime, Americans saw their world remade. His admirers saw him as the embodiment of the nation's gallant youth, of all that they were losing; his detractors despised him for resisting a more complex and promising future. Intimate, dramatic, and provocative, this biography captures the larger story of the changing nation in Custer's tumultuous marriage to his highly educated wife, Libbie; their complicated relationship with Eliza Brown, the forceful black woman who ran their household; as well as his battles and expeditions. It casts surprising new light on a near-mythic American figure, a man both widely known and little understood.

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Customer Reviews

I thoroughly enjoyed this biography of George Armstrong Custer. Having focused on Civil War history in college and grad school most of my prior learning on Custer pertained to his role in that conflict. This biography encompasses his life from West Point to The Battle of Little Bighorn and includes so much more than just his military service. Stiles details both the major events and important relationships in Custer's life but also the more minor events and personal happenings that shaped the man he became and, ultimately, the choices he is both famous as well as notorious for. The preface is not to be skipped. It places Custer in the context of our ever changing American lexicon. There's so much to learn about Custer. Many aspects of Custer's life can and have been dissected to the extreme. Carefully reading the preface and going back and skimming it a few times during the book allowed me to see the forest while reading about the trees. The detail Stiles includes is incredible. He paints the picture of Custer the man, not just Custer the cadet or young general or infamous leader. With a legend like Custer it's unique to see him portrayed as a teenage troublemaker, a romantic with a wandering eye, and a man grappling with his career and the politics of the day. The writing is objective, almost to a fault. Everything presented is matter of fact and without injections of opinion. I like this. It's refreshing to read a biography with both mass appeal and an academic air. As a woman and wife I found the information on Elizabeth Bacon particularly interesting. Stiles writes about her early life as well as the back and fourth courtship between her and Armstrong. Her role in Custer's life is included and discussed throughout the book.

This is an extraordinary biography of General George Armstrong Custer. I won't be surprised to see it win many awards. General Custer is best known, and by some almost entirely known, for Custer's Last Stand where he and the portion of the U.S. 7th Cavalry regiment he was leading were lured into a trap and killed to a man by Sitting Bull and the Sioux Indians. This tragic event led to besmirching of Custer's name with all the negative qualities of his personality and leadership coming to the fore. While certainly flawed in many ways, Custer was much deeper and more nuanced than the standard narrative of his life. T.J. Stiles fills that gap admirably. Custer grew up relatively poor, the son of a blacksmith in Monroe, Michigan. Stiles does not go into much detail on his early life, although he was a clearly a good politician at an early age as he wrangled a

nomination to the military academy West Point “ where he finished at the bottom of his class. And his contrarian nature and lack of respect for the chain of command and rules showed at West Point as he broke the record for demerits and was even court martialed but finagled his way out of punishment. Given the outbreak of the Civil War, West Point cut the five year program to four and Custer was able to join the regular Union army but soon entered the volunteer army where he was more likely to earn higher rank. He soon found himself on General George B. McClellan’s staff and was a worshiper and friend of McClellan’s for the rest of his life, despite some of the trouble that could potentially cause him after McClellan’s loss favor with the government and lost to Abraham Lincoln in the presidential election of 1864. What many don’t realize about Custer is that he was a genuine Civil War hero.

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