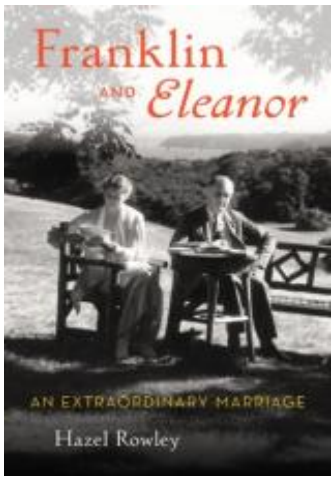
Franklin and Eleanor: An Extraordinary Marriage

by Hazel Rowley



About the Book

Theirs was a marriage that made history, yet surprisingly few historians have examined Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt?s private life. Despite the public?s enduring fascination with the Roosevelt legacy, their relationship has been steeped in lore and speculation --- until now. Drawing on an archival trove, the acclaimed biographer Hazel Rowley presents a bold, surprising, and ultimately inspiring examination of the partnership that sustained Franklin and Eleanor?s professional and personal aspirations. Rowley also brings to life the ways in which their partnership sustained the nation during economic collapse and world war, despite the controversies surrounding such an unconventional first couple.

From the earliest days of their courtship to FDR?s less-than-secret affairs and the rumors of Eleanor?s romantic liaisons with women, Rowley?s research takes a fresh approach, capturing the couple?s remarkable transformation from Victorian traditions to a radical alliance of equals. A book with enormous relevance to contemporary dialogues about the power of the presidency, **Franklin and Eleanor** brings the concept of political power brokers to life in a new way. We hope that the following suggestions for discussion will enrich your experience as you explore this intimate portrait of an extraordinary couple and their lasting effects on American life.

Discussion Guide

1. What qualities attracted Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt to each other? What fundamental differences existed in their personalities and aspirations? How did these differences enhance the relationship?

2. How were Franklin and Eleanor shaped by the shadow of their parents? How did Eleanor?s father affect her expectations of men? How did Franklin?s mother influence his approach to women?

3. What did you make of Eleanor?s zeal for mediocre, modest White House cuisine, despite FDR?s protests? Was she simply trying to be mindful of the millions who were struggling in poverty, or was it a more personal test of wills with

her husband?

4. Discuss Franklin?s affair with Lucy Mercer and Eleanor?s attachment to Lorena Hickok. Did Lucy and Lorena share any traits? What do these choices in companionship reveal about Franklin and Eleanor?s emotional needs?

5. Hazel Rowley reminds us that FDR?s plans for economic recovery --- from the creation of Social Security to the Works Progress Administration --- and Eleanor?s commitment to eradicating abject poverty were considered radical and, to some (even within J. Edgar Hoover?s FBI), anti-American. Would 21st-century America elect FDR? Could Eleanor get elected today?

6. Discuss the turning point represented by the onset of Franklin?s polio. How did his attitude toward his political responsibility and his marriage seem to change? In what ways did the disease strengthen him? How might his marriage and his political life have been different without his disability?

7. The media guarded FDR?s physical image, publishing only photos that made him appear to be capable of standing on his own. Why was this? How has the media?s approach to political reporting changed since the Roosevelt presidency?

8. How did Eleanor enhance Franklin?s image among world powers? How did their marriage shift under the stress of a world war? What sustained FDR?s political life, which consumed nearly all his married years?

9. How did Franklin and Eleanor shape each other?s identities over a lifetime? What transformations did you observe in the way they interacted, and the way they viewed the world, throughout their decades together?

10. Were you surprised to read about Eleanor?s exhaustion as a parent, and her consenting to have six children despite her lack of enthusiasm for baby care? How did her maternal instincts manifest themselves in other ways? How did her close relationships with her grown children reflect a new chapter in her marriage?

11. Did FDR?s personality as president reflect his personality as a husband? Did he and Eleanor manage their marriage in the same way they managed their political work?

12. As Franklin?s fifth cousin and Eleanor?s beloved uncle, Teddy Roosevelt in some ways launched a family political dynasty. What does it take to create a politically successful family in America? Is our presidential term limit a good thing?

13. The Roosevelts viewed their wealth and privilege as a responsibility to serve those less fortunate. What prevented them from becoming materialistic? Did social justice motivate Franklin as much as it motivated Eleanor, or was his ambition rooted in something other than philanthropy?

14. Discuss Eleanor?s life as a widow. How was she helped and hindered by FDR?s lengthy time in office? Was she liberated by her return to private life, or (especially in the face of McCarthyism) was she rendered powerless?

15. What does the Roosevelts? relationship say about the definition of a good marriage?

16. Barack Obama?s presidency has been widely compared to FDR?s, while the Roosevelt marriage has been compared

to Bill and Hillary Clinton?s. Are these apt analogies? What could Obama and Roosevelt have learned from each other? What similarities and differences do you see in how Eleanor and Hillary addressed infidelity and saw the role of first lady as an opportunity for public service?

Author Bio

Hazel Rowley was born in London and was educated in England and Australia. She is the author of three previous biographies: **Christina Stead: A Biography**, a *New York Times* Best Book; **Richard Wright: The Life and Times**, a *Washington Post* Best Book; and **Tête-à-Tête: Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre**, which has been translated into 12 languages. The recipient of fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute and the Rockefeller Foundation, she lives in New York City.

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