



**George, Being George: George Plimpton's Life as
Told, Admired, Deplored, and Envied by 200
Friends, Relatives, Lovers, Acquaintances, Rivals--
and a Few Unappreciative ...**

Nelson W. Aldrich Jr. (Editor)

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Norman Mailer said that George Plimpton was the best-loved man in New York. For more than fifty years, his friends made a circle whose circumference was vast and whose center was a fashionable tenement on New York's East Seventy-second street. Taxi drivers, hearing his address, would ask, "Isn't that George Plimpton's place?" George was always giving parties for his friends. It was one of the ways this generous man gave back.

This book is the party that was George's life—and it's a big one—attended by scores of people, including Peter Matthiessen, Robert Silvers, Jean Stein, William Styron, Maggie Paley, Gay Talese, Calvin Trillin, and Gore Vidal, as well as lesser-known intimates and acquaintances, each with candid and compelling stories to tell about George Plimpton and childhood rebellion, adult indiscretions, literary tastes, ego trips, loyalties and jealousies, riches and drugs, and embracing life no matter the consequences.

In *George, Being George* people feel free to say what guests say at parties when the subject of the conversation isn't around anymore. Some even prove the adage that no best-loved man goes unpunished. Together, they provide a complete portrait of George Plimpton. They talk about his life: its privileged beginnings, its wild and triumphant middle, its brave, sad end. They say that George was a man of many parts: "the last gentleman"; founder and first editor of one of our best literary magazines, *The Paris Review*; the graceful writer who brought the New Journalism to sports in bestsellers such as *Paper Lion*, *Bogey Man*, and *Out of My League*; and Everyman's proxy boxer, trapeze artist, stand-up comic, Western movie villain, and *Playboy* centerfold photographer. And one of the brave men who wrestled Sirhan Sirhan, the armed assassin of his friend Bobby Kennedy, to the ground.

A Plimpton party was full of intelligent, funny, articulate people. So is this one. Many try hard to understand George, and some (not always the ones you would expect) are brilliant at it. Here is social life as it's actually lived by New York's elites. The only important difference between a party at George's and this book is that no one here is drunk. They just talk about being drunk.

George's last years were awesome, truly so. His greatest gift was to be a blessing to others—not all, sadly—and that gift ended only with his death. But his parties, if this is one, need never end at all.

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From Reader Review George, Being George: George Plimpton's Life as Told, Admired, Deplored, and Envied by 200 Friends, Relatives, Lovers, Acquaintances, Rivals--and a Few Unappreciative ... for online ebook

Martin says

Ok. I really really wanted to love this. Have always been a big fan of Plimpton the writer as well as Plimpton the raconteur, Plimpton "the brand"...but sad to say this book just did not grab me at all...in fact i was only able to get about two thirds of the way through it (if that) before giving up. It mostly had to do with the way it was put together...brief one or two paragraph recollections on a variety of topics from various (dozens) former colleagues, co-workers, friends, lovers, spouses, relatives, etc etc. Interesting concept in theory I suppose, and it would have probably made for an entertaining/engaging long-form magazine piece, but over the course of an entire book it just becomes mind numbing. Maybe I'm just lazy and the simple task of trying to keep up with who these commentators were (many of whom appear and then disappear for long stretches of narrative) and what their relationships to Plimpton might have been over the course of hundreds of pages was just too daunting for my feeble brain. I'm sure someone could make that case. But in the end, for me at least, it was just too much work in exchange for too little payoff.

That said, there are some great stories and anecdotes included here, and at times the narrative is very entertaining. I just wish it had been presented in a more cohesive way. At times this just seemed a quick fix way to get these stories out there without bothering to tie them together into a more coherent narrative. Basically a book of bullet points. From what I did read here I would love to read a more traditional biography of Plimpton, as he was an intriguing character who led a fascinating life. Unfortunately, for me this book, as a whole, was neither intriguing or fascinating. Some books need editors. This book needed a writer to tie it all together.

-m

Casey Logan says

loved it. this will sound like a complaint (though it's quite the opposite): after reading 300+ pages full of thoughts by the people who seemed to have known him best (including the two women he married), he's still an enigma. amazingly approachable and yet totally unknowable; remarkably warm and yet oddly cold in certain circumstances. loved it.

Jim says

I read this because I'm interested in people living more fulfilling and memorable lives, and Plimpton certainly belongs to that group. Growing up, I mostly knew him as the WASPy sounding Coleco pitchman and actor, and was unaware of the extent of his accomplishments, which include boxing with world

champions, wrestling the gun out of Sirhan Sirhan's hands, and setting off a myriad of illegal fireworks.

I loved the "oral biography" format - a more multifaceted approach than you can achieve when all the interviews are filtered through the thesis of a single biographer.

Aaron says

In this oral history/hagiography of George Plimpton, we are treated to over-the-top antics of the patron saint of Upper East Side privilege. At times the breathless tone seems overblown, given that his three miracles appear to be:

1. Being born rich
2. Being born well-connected
3. Being not quite as snobbish as someone that rich and well-connected typically is.

It's hard to talk about a book like this and not make it a referendum on the subject. I hope my complaints are more about the book itself than Plimpton. My main concern is that it seems like there were some rather uncritical choices in editing. For example, Aldrich really tries to present the notion that however elitist Plimpton was, he was most definitely not a racist WASP, going as far as including a quote from Mailer: "You know, where does this guy get that absolutely extraordinary, unique sense of cool? That's why blacks loved him." Of course, when it comes to actually interviewing one of these blacks, Aldrich either couldn't find one who wanted to praise Plimpton, or he simply couldn't be bothered to look. As far as I could tell, the only non-white voice in the project was a paragraph from Jamaica Kincaid praising Plimpton's common-man-amongst-professionals approach as fundamentally American.

Equally telling is the near-silence from his children. While both of his wives' anecdotes are strewn throughout the book, his kids are only interviewed for two pages, with his son offering a single paragraph praising his dad for being slightly less uptight as he got near death. That would have been fine enough, but the editor includes countless comments from his peers assuring us that while George might not have been around a lot, when he was he was an awesome father. It's one thing if this discrepancy was there to draw attention to the difference in the perception of George versus the reality of his character. However, the structure makes it feel like that the glowing praise of the father was supposed to help the reader gloss over George's status of absentee father.

The book does offer a look at how the upper crust of New York partied in the 70s (at Elaine's, with lots of alcohol, with a surprising smattering of orgies), how they thought of themselves (absolutely brilliant) and how they talked (precisely, with hearty inclusions of the argots of lit theory and therapy). Hearing about it all through the focus of someone who was absolutely agog about the whole thing makes for a rather fun and breezy read.

Mark Feltskog says

I remember the "Paper Lion" special on television as well as George Plimpton's amusing guest appearance ("I'll go back to doing whatever it is that I do") on "The Simpsons." I've always found him an appealing and sympathetic figure, so I suppose I was predisposed to like this. Nonetheless, it is a fine book, and well worth a read.

Christina says

This was interesting, but maybe not as well done as George would have done it himself.

Simon says

It's compulsively readable, of course, given the people that Plimpton knew (Ric Burns floats in for a one-shot statement, for example). What it doesn't really do is establish why he was important to anyone but his friends, since it really doesn't establish the Paris Review's place in literary history --- it sounds more like a Mickey/Judy "let's put out a magazine!" project. I was flabbergasted by the list of books Plimpton wrote at the end, most of which aren't mentioned at all. And while it is a little squeamish to mention it, the descriptions of his marriages were so elliptical that it is hard to understand why Freddy and Sarah Plimpton married the man. The book stresses his charm, which must have been enormous in person, but which fails to convince on the printed page. All of which makes the book sound dreary, which it isn't in the slightest. So maybe his charm came through after all.

Jim says

This oral biography of George Plimpton has the feel of a chat over drinks with friends of a celebrity. You hear lots of great anecdotes, get some sense of what it must have been like to know him, but don't run into a lot of deeply considered evaluations.

He comes across as starting out a life of incredible privilege (cocktails with young Jackie Bouvier, dinner with Princess Elizabeth of England) and then stumbling into publishing *The Paris Review* because his literary friends from college thought he might be able to find money. What happened from there is a little hard to understand fully.

While he continued to run *The Paris Review* for the rest of his life, some reports make it sound like a hobby that only took a few hours a week and others make it sound as though he worked endlessly. Plimpton had input into what appeared in the magazine, but it seems as if he gave the editors final word. Of course, he recruited the editors so his influence showed there.

Discussion of *Paper Lion* and his other works of participatory journalism are similarly limited, and ultimately we are left with the notion that he knew how to give a great party and did some literary things during the day.

Perhaps the answer is just to enjoy the great gossip and wait for someone else to write about the substance of his work. Gossip is part of life, too.

Ryan Chapman says

We all know a word cannot be defined by reiterating the word itself: "Confusing? That's when you're, you know, confused about something." This same idea is why this is a thrilling biography. Some will see it as its main weakness, but for this reader it's its strongest suit. Let me explain.

Two of the most common phrases in this oral biography of blue-blood *Paris Review* editor and bon vivant George Plimpton are, "George was George," and "That was just George, being George," as if adjectives would ultimately fail to describe the man. As if he was his own adjective. This is malarkey, of course--you wouldn't write seriously that Kafka was Kafkaesque, because there's an understood distance between the artist and the art, between the human and the work.

Not so much with George Plimpton. This is a biography of a persona, not a person. Even his two wives seem to talk around their ex-husband, instead of saying anything directly about him with any strength of verisimilitude. As we read of his many, many exploits and his many, many parties, below the glimmering surface a subtle portrait emerges. The book is nothing more than a palimpsest over a void, barely acknowledged. In this balance we have the *jouissance* of Plimpton's public life (almost redundant) and only a tangential peek into the abyss of whatever he was while alone. I doubt this was the editor's intention, but his subject attains a tragic stature this way, if only by backward means.

John Hood says

<http://miamisunpost.com/archives/2008...>

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A Gentleman Among Men

George Plimpton Was All That and Then Some

By John Hood

George Plimpton and I first met at his Manhattan home back in '90 or '91 when he hosted a wedding reception for then Paris Review Senior Editor Fayette Hickox. I was just coming into my ego then and still a bit reticent around celebrity, but Plimpton made me feel immediately welcome into his world. That his world consisted of every 20th century writer of any merit, not to mention more bold-faced names than any three compendia on fame, only made his welcome all the warmer — and all the more cool.

The next day Plimpton had me up to his place again, this time so I could interview him for Paper Magazine, and again he insisted that I call him "George." It wasn't an easy move for me to make — his stature suggested a definite "Mr. Plimpton" — but he was adamant. Besides, George was simply too damn agreeable to argue with. We collided a couple more times over the years, most notably when Brian Antoni threw a

Black & White Ball to celebrate the release of Truman Capote, and on each and every occasion George remained the consummate gentleman — impeccably mannered, effortlessly elegant and genuinely kind.

Of course I'm just one of the thousands upon thousands who encountered George throughout his long and robust life, and hardly one of his intimates. Had we been closer I'm sure I'd be among the many remembrances in the remarkable *George, Being George* (Random House, \$30), an oral history that includes looks back from the likes of Gay Talese, Gore Vidal, William Styron and Peter Matthiessen.

Subtitled *George Plimpton's Life as Told, Admired, Deplored, and Envied by 200 Friends, Relatives, Lovers, Acquaintances, Rivals — and a Few Unappreciative Observers*, and expertly edited by his pal Nelson W. Aldrich Jr., *George* is not just the sort of oral history very few people deserve, it's the sort George himself would've definitely approved of. Why? Because it was a form he perfected with the books *Edie* and *Truman Capote*.

Yet neither Warhol's tragic superstar nor the noted "non-fiction novelist" even came close to covering as much ground as George Plimpton, who was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, died the talk of the town, and in between lived enough lives to account for any 50 people, provided those 50 never stopped fully living throughout their entire lives.

I'm talking a man of action as well as letters, and quite often both at the same time. As a participatory journalist for *Sports Illustrated*, George went three rounds with then light heavyweight champ Archie Moore, quarterbacked the Detroit Lions, goaled for the Boston Bruins, hit the PGA Tour alongside Arnold Palmer and Jack Nicklaus, and flew through the air with the Clyde Beatty-Cole Brothers Circus. Each of those feats and more are talked about in *George*, some with envy, some with pride and all with utter awe.

But beyond the books and the exploits, George will perhaps be remembered for *The Paris Review*, which he helmed for the last 50-plus years of his life.

Founded in '53 by Peter Matthiessen and Harold "Doc" Humes and basically given to George shortly thereafter, *The Paris Review* remains perhaps the most influential literary journal in history, mostly on account of its interviews, which began with E.M. Forster and number virtually every writer to have picked up a pen since.

Hemingway, Ellison, Faulkner, Greene, Burroughs, Miller, Bellow ... name a 20th century heavyweight and *The Paris Review* chatted 'em up. Some of those immortal interviews can now be found archived online, but to read them as they really were meant to be read, I wholeheartedly recommend you pick up Pantheon's *The Paris Review Interviews* (Picador, \$16).

Of the three volumes currently available, it's impossible for me to pick a favorite, so I'll just mention personal highlights from each.

In Volume I I'm most partial to James M. Cain, Richard Price and Dorothy Parker. Not because I don't dig Borges and Bellow and Hemingway and Vonnegut (all of whom are also included), but because I double-dig crime and wisecracks, and if Cain's *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and Price's *Clockers* don't epitomize crime writing and Parker wasn't the embodiment of a wisecrack, then I'll eat my hat.

For Volume II I'll stick with Graham Greene and William Faulkner, first because of *The Comedians* and *Our Man in Havana*, and second because of *As I Lay Dying* and *The Sound and the Fury*, all of which I discovered back when I was broke and a book was all the sustenance I needed to get through a New York

night.

In III I'll take Raymond Carver, Norman Mailer and Martin Amis. Carver's ultimately inimitable short stories still floor me, and on a couple occasions I got to meet Mailer, so his entry gets extra credit. Amis, I'm proud to say, I too had the privilege of interviewing.

And that kinda brings me full circle. Like George I believe in both word and action, and by George I'm inspired to fully use both. And while I might not do so with such grace and good manners, I've at least been given a blueprint. And so now have you.

Joe says

5 stars for George himself, but only 3 stars for a pretty lightweight read. Carry the one...

Kent says

A terrific recounting of a life richly lived but always wanting, George Being George is structured as an oral history of George Plimpton's life. Rather than take the form of a traditional narrative, the book is a collection of brief anecdotes, observations and snippets harvested from interviews with Plimpton's friends and associates from his youth on the Upper East Side, to his New England schooling, the founding of the Paris Review, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and Plimpton's growing celebrity upon his return to in New York. Those interviewed include Norman Mailer, Gore Vidal, William Styron, Calvin Trillin, the co-founders of the Paris Review, ex-lovers, ex wives.

The structure is fitting of man who was blessed with the ability to make all of his associates feel as if they were among his closest friends. The structure is both fitting and ironic. Fitting in that some of his own greatest work was editing interviews with others. Ironic in that an author who was renowned for placing himself at the center of his writing, his "official" biography is a collection of third party observations rather than an autobiographical memoir. Much as we looked to Plimpton to relate the experience of being an NFL quarterback, a major league pitcher or the timbalist in the symphony, who wouldn't want Plimpton to describe what it was like to be Plimpton for a day? However, the third party structure works. The reader is treated to an honest (at times uncomfortably so) multi-layered, multi-perspective description of the man.

Plimpton was filled with joyous exuberance, childlike curiosity and all too adult flaws. As I mentioned to a friend after completing this book, it is filled with "such incredible, raw insight into the power we each have to bring immeasurable joy to the world, while suffering alone, surrounded by friends." George Being George is a view into a central figure in 20th century literature and pop culture.

theresa says

meh, didn't love it. liked reading about plimpton but didn't like the set-up of scattered anecdotes by people who knew him

Michael Backus says

Diverting in its way. You come to understand that Plimpton was who he seemed to be; an old style WASP who had a pathological need for company. Somehow though nothing terrible comes down about him, I liked him much less after reading it than before. Ditto on Peter Mathieson who somehow manages to come off as snarky, passive-aggressive and mean-spirited towards Plimpton with every quote. Not sure it adds up to anything, maybe the presentation of a life that had genuine literary promise and degenerated into something else.

Robert says

As I read this book, I was reminded of James Thurber's Walter Mitty who escaped the boredom of his life and the miseries of his marriage by imagining himself in all sorts of situations that are far more exciting and (especially) much more glamorous. Having an equally active imagination, George also proceeded to do (or at least attempt to do) whatever seemed like "fun" while living an already exciting and glamorous life that included relationships with those who share their reminiscences and observations in this book. The several hundred contributors include (listed in alphabetical order) Arnold ("Red") Auerbach (former coach of the Boston Celtics with whom George also played briefly), Bill Curry (former NFL player and head coach of Alabama and Kentucky), Hugh Hefner (founder and CEO of Playboy Enterprises), A.E. Hotchner (Hemingway authority as well as co-founder and partner, with Paul Newman's Newman's Own food products), Alex Karras (All-Pro defensive tackle with Detroit Lions), Norman Mailer (author of 37 books), Freddy Espy Plimpton (George's first wife), Sarah Dudley Plimpton (George's second wife), Gene Scott (widely recognized as "Tennis's Renaissance Man," "the most controversial figure in the game," and "the conscience of tennis"), William Styron (author of many works that include *Lie Down in Darkness* and *Sophie's Choice*), Calvin Trillin (staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 1963), and Gore Vidal (author and playwright).

Each of these and the other contributors share her or his reminiscences of "George, being George" from his student years at various schools and then Harvard, through his lengthy association with *The Paris Review*, until the years immediately prior to his death when health issues precluded almost all physical activities and yet he still retained (in his words) "the gumption to get out and try one's wings." Together, the mini-contributions -- from so many different people, recalling different moments in different places at different times - create a multi-dimensional portrait of a truly unique person. Almost a century ago in a speech delivered at the Sorbonne, Theodore Roosevelt praised what he called "the man in the arena." He could well have been describing George Plimpton: "Credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat."

If asked to respond to Roosevelt's description, contributors to this book would probably explain "that's just George, being George."

