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John James Audubon came to America as a dapper eighteen-year-old eager to make his fortune. He had a talent for drawing and an interest in birds, and he would spend the next thirty-five years traveling to the remotest regions of his new country—often alone and on foot—to render his avian subjects on paper. The works of art he created gave the world its idea of America. They gave America its idea of itself.

Here Richard Rhodes vividly depicts Audubon's life and career: his epic wanderings; his quest to portray birds in a lifelike way; his long, anguished separations from his adored wife; his ambivalent witness to the vanishing of the wilderness. *John James Audubon: The Making of an American* is a magnificent achievement.

## **John James Audubon Details**

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Author : Richard Rhodes

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## **From Reader Review John James Audubon for online ebook**

### **Marty says**

As a birder, I've always known that we owed a lot to John James Audubon. But until I read this biography, I hadn't realized quite how much American ornithological history owes to one man's quest to document the species of birds found in this country (or at least, once did).

This book was given to me by a friend almost a year ago, and it took me this long to give it the attention it deserved. The biography covers the life - and times - of John James Audubon, author and illustrator of the "Birds of America" book that would define the species that existed in the times that a new country was forming.

Not only does it give us a detailed look at Audubon's life - French ex-patriot, store owner, husband, adventurer, father, writer, ornithologist and artist - but it gives us a good look at the time period in which he lived, framing it in his quest to produce the massive tome of illustrations, but still giving us valuable insight into how the world was - particularly the fledgling United States - in those early years.

Author Richard Rhodes does a remarkable job at giving the reader a solid and thorough accounting of Audubon's remarkable life story, starting with his illegitimate birth to his rise to become the most famous birder in the world. Through a combination of thorough research and remarkable records of letters, journals and thoughts from contemporaries, we get to see into the mind of this artist as he took a remarkable habit and turned it into an art and then into a lifestyle.

Perhaps just as important as the story of Audubon's own life is the story of the world around him at the time, and his views on that world. We learn what it was like in the late 1700s in America, as the populace struggled to define themselves and survive the frontier they were trying to tame; we see the world of the expanding U.S., seeing the territories of Kentucky, Louisiana and the rest through the stories and records of a remarkable man. And interestingly, we get to see what might have been the first conservationist, as Audubon looked upon the 'advancement' of the American peoples at the expense of the natural settings and creatures he loved so much.

No review in this space can truly grasp the enormity of the information captured in this book. Part biography, part natural history and part world history, "JJA: The Making of an American" is a book that will appeal to birders, obviously, but will also find a special place with anyone who loves to learn about where we came from as an American people.

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### **Zeb says**

I finally finished this book this AM, and I am really happy I took the time to learn about the man whose name has become synonymous with bird conservation in the US.

The diligence, energy, and passion Audubon had for his desire to document the birds of America is astounding and probably difficult to find in many others in our present technological age.

The author of this book unearths interesting facts and excerpts from Audubon's journals throughout the book.

I really enjoyed the thoroughness of the text as well as the window into the world of travel and exploration in the late 1700's and into the 1800's.

I recommend this book to any birder or conservationist. I think they will find Audubon's life inspiring.

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### **Charles says**

Well-researched and informative. Great insights into Audubon's life and career. Better insights into the American frontier during the early 19th century. For the first hundred pages, I was a bit put off by the author's sentence structures and turns of phrase, but Audobon's story is deeply engaging--full of twists, turns and trials. Rhodes has provided us with a monumental portrait of a monumental man, and an insight into the mania, triumphs, and setbacks that punctuate the lives of artists.

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### **Rivers says**

great writer....semi-boring subject?

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### **Jonathan Ashleigh says**

I get caught up in the belief that I am going to enjoy true-adventure stories, but they usually let me down. I get that John James Audubon was an amazing individual who did something that set him apart from other explorers; I just don't need a five-hundred-page account of where he was when he painted every bird he ever found. The story is lacking something and needs to be sexier.

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### **Pamela Mikita says**

An amazing and engrossing biography of Audubon. Really enjoyed learning about the artist and naturalist that was such a lively and admirable character.

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### **Isobel says**

Audubon was clearly a really interesting and driven person so it was interesting to read about him, and the book also painted an interesting picture about life and society in the US during that time period which was really eye-opening. I just feel like the narrative was overburdened with too much detail from journals and letters, so it felt like a bit of a slog to read at times.

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### **Andrew says**

Rhodes delves deep into Audubon's correspondences and reveals a man's struggles to attain his ambitions and sustain his family's fortunes. Much of the book reads like an epistolary novel, with Audubon and his wife Lucy expressing their love and doubt as Audubon tries to make it as a naturalist and artist in the elite circles (comprised of those willing to buy Audubon's engravings) of Europe and America's coastal cities. Rhodes does a good job illustrating how Audubon responds to historical winds, including the economic depression that drove him from trading in Kentucky to full time bird illustration. Though we get a glimpse into the late Audubon's thinking about environmental destruction, the Audubon Rhodes portrays is mostly cool to the death that his art requires. He mixes adoration for brave eagles and tenderness for certain birds with a general indifference (or blindness?) towards killing thousands upon thousands of birds big and small. I found this the hardest to wrap my head around. Having read nothing about Audubon, I assumed he would become a conversationist late in his life. But he seems instead to be a typical European coming to the new world and treating its resources as though they were inexhaustible. This view never really changes, and I was disappointed to end the book learning nothing about how this hunter and artist of birds became so singularly tied to habitat and wildlife conservation. Though disappointed to learn nothing of this, I still enjoyed Rhodes' story, which unfolds at a steady pace. He knows much about the American frontier at the time and illustrates Audubon's world well, including the social dynamics between England, France, and the planters of the American south. The need for honor, distinction, and the need to maintain one's station (or rise above it) pervade Audubon's relationship with his family and those who assist and challenge him over his career. Fortune shifts over time as characters meet success and failure at different junctures in their lives. The American frontier was anything but stable for those making do from it in the early 19th century.

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### **Stephen says**

Exceptionally well written biography of an American who made significant contributions to the world of art and science. It's a wonderful way to learn about Audubon and the history of our nation simultaneously. Passionate people do remarkable things, and without question, Audubon was one of the most passionate of Americans during his time.

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### **Dennis says**

Although Audubon was a Frenchman, he became an American in the truest sense of the word. As a businessman he lost everything in the panic of 1819. He then reinvented himself as an artist and naturalist, becoming one of the most famous men of his time. He devoted his life to *Birds of America*. He also witnessed and chronicled the beginnings of the destruction of the American wilderness by the people who thought our resources were limitless.

This is a fine, well written account of this life, and I would recommend to anyone loving biography, American history or natural history.

Heads up. The Longmont museum will be having an exhibit of 45 Original Audubons in June.

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### **Grady McCallie says**

This excellent and very detailed biography of John James Audubon left me with three main insights:

\* Unlike many of the gentlemen naturalists of the Royal Society (as described in *The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science*), or such Victorian era scientists as Charles Darwin, John James Audubon was not monied, and both he and his devoted wife Lucy worked hard most of their lives.

\* Rhodes makes a strong case that Audubon was a good businessman and a daring entrepreneur. After an early business failure, he developed his vision - compile and ultimately publish the highest quality and most complete catalog of North American birds - and then he worked relentlessly for years to accomplish that. He weathered false friends, production difficulties, and the emotional challenge of separation from his wife and sons for several years; and nonetheless managed to raise the equivalent of \$2 million in funding through subscriptions, admission at gallery shows, and ongoing sales of paintings to cover production costs. Audubon comes across in the biography as both a gifted artist and a man of incredible practical will.

\* America changed so much during Audubon's life, from virtual wilderness on the frontier, to tame - even worn out - landscapes in some of the same places just a few decades later. Rhodes' narrative picks up on revealing changes in the landscape, society, and the economy, from the greater comfort in the Atlantic crossing brought by steamships, to the line of advance of the domesticated honeybee in the mid 1840s (somewhere along the Upper Missouri), to this reflection of Audubon's, traveling down the Mississippi after his first return from England in 1829:

"When I see that no longer any aborigines are to be found there, and that the vast herds of elks, deer, and buffaloes which once pastured on these hills and in these valleys... have ceased to exist; when I reflect that all this grand portion of our Union, instead of being in a state of nature, is now more or less covered with villages, farms, and towns... when I remember that these extraordinary changes have all taken place in the short period of twenty years, I pause, wonder, and although I know all to be fact, can scarcely believe its reality." (p337).

In that sense, while this is a comprehensive biography of Audubon, and brings him very much to life, it's also a terrific on-the-ground complement to broader political and economic histories of America in the first half of the 1800s. Thanks to Audubon's many moves and travels - in Virginia and Pennsylvania, along the Ohio, down to Louisiana, to New York, Charleston, and Florida; to Maine and Labrador - the book gives a rich and geographically diverse view of America in this era as well.

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## **Denise says**

i loved this book- but i'm a bird nerd and love books set in frontier america. richard rhodes must have lived and breathed james audubon for years to come up with such a rich and compelling picture of audubon, america and europe in the 1700's.

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## **Jennifer says**

"Wherever there are birds there is Audubon: rara avis."

I very much enjoyed this biography of John James Audubon. Richard Rhodes quotes at length from Audubon's journal and many letters, so I came away with a much better idea of who Audubon was and how

he saw the world, especially his beloved birds.

"The Birds of America" is Audubon's most famous and important work, and his efforts collecting specimens, preparing drawings, and marketing the book provided an excellent framework for tying the whole biography together. "The Birds of America" is so important that it really seems like it would be best to read this biography with a copy of "The Birds of America" within easy reach to get the full effect. While the book included two sections of beautiful color plates prepared for "The Birds of America," including some of his most iconic drawings, it also made reference to others that were not shown. And they really couldn't have been; "The Birds of America" contains around 400 plates. At any rate, this book made me want my own copy of "The Birds of America," whereas before I hadn't given it much thought.

Audubon seemed particularly prescient about the fate of America's wilderness, and some of the species he drew (among them the passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and possibly the ivory-billed woodpecker) are now extinct. Audubon was an amazing artist, and in addition to enjoying his work we can take important lessons for the future from it.

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### **Sara says**

I'd give this six stars if I could. Rhodes knows his stuff. He's a meticulous researcher, but even better, he tells a riveting tale. I had trouble putting this down, and Jeff began to curse Audubon. If you want a true story of love and hardship, adventure and art, perseverance and foresight . . . well, this is it. Rhodes draws on journals as well as personal and business letters to make his tale personal, detailed, and poignant. Loved it.

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### **Elizabeth says**

I sometimes have trouble with nonfiction, but this book is well-written and thoroughly entertaining. It is a story not only of an extraordinary man and his extraordinary wife, Lucy, but a real tale of early America. The reader gets an intimate view as to the trials and tribulations of a person living in the early 1800s, beset by risks physical and financial. The effects of disease and lack of medical advancement are quite different. The state of dentistry was rather appalling.

It's also interesting to see how much activity was uncontrolled and unregulated. There are many scenes of parties travelling up and down the river, feeding themselves on whatever they could shoot. I can't imagine someone getting away with that today. Also, currency was not uniform at that time, and laws were local enough that if someone wanted to abscond with one's property, it was pretty easy for them to escape the law just by leaving the area.

During the course of Audubon's life, America changed a lot as it became more populated and developed, and as species were slaughtered by overhunting and by habitat destruction. It's apparent that people thought that the quantity of these species (such as the passenger pigeon and the bison) would never be exhausted, which we know in hindsight was wrong. This book also chronicles the decline of many of the Indian populations.

I'm obviously not good at summarizing things, but I do highly recommend this book, both as a biography and as a picture of the era.

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## **Molly says**

This was a slog. More than 400 pages of small print, but what made it difficult is that there are hundreds of names and dates that turn out to be insignificant to the layperson, but the (conscientious) reader doesn't know what's going to matter so has to read them all, and it's slow going. I think the book is meant to be a scholarly, comprehensive biography of Audubon (1785-1851), but its audience is likely not scholars. I learned some things, like for how much of a marriage couples might live apart in frontier days (though the Audubons were unusually much separated), and about early American economic crises and mass bankruptcies (e.g., following the War of 1812 and the Louisiana Purchase).

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## **Shelli says**

Excellent research and writing. This was a wonderful window into a fascinating time period in our country's history and about a unique passionate and driven man. However, I can't say that I would've wanted to be his wife!

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## **Cheryl says**

I'm not very good at this book review thing. My grandfather did it professionally and he was a master at it. I enjoy reading as much as he did but I lack the ability to put into words at a lofty and intellectual level, why I specifically liked it. I mention this only because I think this book should get a better review than I'm going to be able to provide, mine being, I fear over-simplistic....

This was a wonderful book about an intriguing man, his family, and also, in some ways, about the changing landscape and society of post-Revolutionary War America. This was meticulously researched and very well written. I'm a bit of a bird nerd, a sucker for "mountain men in the wild" tales, and non-fiction (and fiction) about early America and this certainly fit the bill. The imagery was so vivid and the characters came alive. I especially enjoyed the information on Audubon and his wife, Lucy. In my mind, she was interesting enough to have her own story!

Audubon is historically important because his "artwork" is really the only available pictorial detail of wildlife in early America. Under any circumstance, this was an amazing feat, even more incredible, given how difficult travel was throughout the country, and the world, at that time without the luxury of a camera, lugging around all of the trappings required of an artist and painter.

This was a very satisfying history lesson!

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## **Charles Matthews says**

This review ran in the San Jose Mercury News on October 17, 2004:



John James Audubon produced his paintings of the birds of America by killing, skinning and dissecting thousands of them. Those astonishing images of birds full of life -- flying, fighting, mating, preening, feeding their young -- were achieved by mounting dead birds on a contraption of his own devising: "Sharpened wires embedded in a board onto which he could impale his fresh specimens in lifelike attitudes," as Richard Rhodes describes it.

We cringe at facts like that, and I wouldn't be surprised if someone who reads Rhodes' brilliant new book quits the Audubon Society and joins People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals instead. But though it may be a sin to kill a mockingbird, how else are you going to depict a mockingbird accurately if you have no cameras, no color film, no telephoto lenses?

Rhodes' marvelously detailed and readable new biography lets us see anew what an extraordinary achievement Audubon's "Birds of America" was. Audubon's contributions to art and science not only earned him recognition as a Fellow of the Royal Society of London -- only the second American (the first was Benjamin Franklin) to achieve that honor -- but also, Rhodes points out, directly influenced Charles Darwin. One of the revelations provided by history and biography is how the world changes. Rhodes' account of the life and times of Audubon is not only a portrait of an amazing man, it's also a look at untamed America in the early 19th century, a journey into a wilderness that was vanishing before Audubon's own eyes -- so fast that in 1833, 30 years after he first set foot in America, he wrote, "Nature herself is perishing."

When the 18-year-old Frenchman came to the United States in 1803, he was only a few years younger than the country itself. He came from a country that had recently experienced the grisly turmoil of the Reign of Terror, and that now threatened to draft him into the army Napoleon was assembling to conquer Europe. France had a population of 27 million; there were only 6 million people in the United States, Rhodes tells us, "two-thirds of them living within fifty miles of Atlantic tidewater."

What better place for a man to reinvent himself? And Audubon was already adept at reinvention: He was born out of wedlock to a chambermaid on his father's sugar plantation in what's now Haiti, and until he was 8 years old his name was Jean Rabin. When his father's wife agreed to raise the child, he was renamed Jean-Jacques Fougere Audubon. He later began calling himself John James LaForest Audubon, and throughout his life he made up stuff about himself: that he had studied with the artist Jacques-Louis David, for example, or that he was born in Louisiana.

Audubon's fibs have not endeared him to some people. Rhodes quotes, for example, the art historian-critic Robert Hughes' characterization of Audubon as "self-inflated, paranoid and a bit of a thug." But Rhodes presents us with a very different Audubon, one who was many things: a handsome, charismatic, driven artist; an intrepid woodsman; a meticulous researcher; a perfectionist; an extraordinarily successful self-promoter; and a devoted husband and father.

Audubon's was an epic life. Slipping free of the constraints and bloody conflicts of early 19th-century Europe and the raw new civilization taking hold in the eastern United States, he made his way into the wilderness of the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. He married a woman nearly as intrepid as he -- Lucy Bakewell, who had emigrated from England with her family. They tried to make a go of it running a mill in the rough little river town of Henderson, Ky., but you sense that Audubon's fascination with birds, which he had already begun to paint, was a distraction that would doom any mundane business he put his hand to. When the business failed, he supported his family by teaching art and painting portraits -- much in demand in that time before photography -- in Louisville and Cincinnati, while continuing to build up his portfolio of American birds. Eventually, as Rhodes puts it, he "reimagined himself as a one-man ornithological expeditionary force" and in 1820 he set out downriver, leaving Lucy behind to raise their two sons. The next decade of the Audubons' married life would be a series of long separations and brief reunions as he assembled his collection of images and sailed to England to try to get it published.

As Rhodes observes, "Europe was more curious to know America than America was yet curious to know itself." Audubon's work caused a sensation in England and France, and the publication of "Birds of America" gave this self-made American fame and fortune.

It won't surprise anyone who read Rhodes' Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Making of the Atomic Bomb" that his Audubon biography is a masterly piece of storytelling. To be sure, the documentation available to him was generous -- Audubon left a clear paper trail; he was a prolific journal-keeper and letter writer, and the long separation of husband and wife made dutiful, detailed correspondence necessary, even though their letters would sometimes take many months in the delivery. But it falls to Rhodes to give Audubon's story texture and shape and significance, and he succeeds splendidly.

If I had to fault the book, I'd say that Rhodes never quite puts his finger on the source of Audubon's compulsive devotion to painting birds. Following the lead of one of Audubon's autobiographical writings (not always, as we've seen, the most reliable source), he ascribes it to a desire to "revivify the dead," born of the young Audubon's witnessing of cruel death during the Terror. But nothing will ever quite explain the passion that drove Audubon to walk hundreds of miles in uncharted land, to plunge into snake-infested swamps and dense forests and in one instance that Rhodes beautifully re-creates, to climb inside a hollow tree swarming with chimney swallows, all in pursuit of knowledge of bird life.

Rhodes is simply awed by what Audubon accomplished: "When he set out to create a monumental work of art with his own heart and mind and hands, he succeeded -- a staggering achievement, as if one man had single-handedly financed and built an Egyptian pyramid." Rhodes hasn't built any pyramids, but he should be fairly proud of his own achievement: an absorbing, revealing, entertaining biography, the best I've read this year.

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## **Katie says**

I've decided reading biographies is quite strange. How weird it is to experience a person's entire life, from birth to death, griefs and hopes, failures and victories, empathy and apathy. Autobiographies, I think, are much more biased, as people want to present themselves in a certain light. But a biography...a biography doesn't turn away when bankruptcies come, children die, sickness ravishes, and friends turn away. Good biographies flip your emotional state like a child playing with a lightswitch.

As far as a review of the book, I would say it was an average or above average biography. It seemed very well researched, and fairly well presented. (100 pages of notes and citations always impresses me.)

As far as a review of the life it concerns: can anyone really rate someone's life? But it was indeed quite interesting, I learned a lot, and I felt very deeply.

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