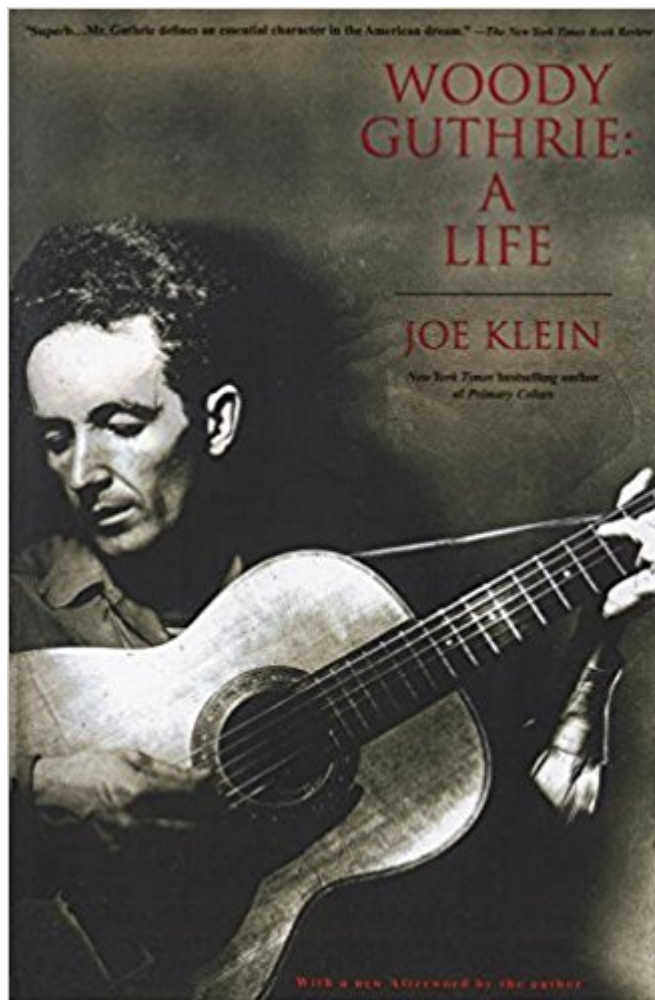


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Woody Guthrie: A Life



Synopsis

A biography of the influential American folk singer, Woody Guthrie, who lived a life on the edge of tragedy but inspired a generation of songwriters, including Bruce Springsteen and Bob Dylan.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Before he became Anonymous, author of the political novel *Primary Colors*, Joe Klein wrote this intelligent biography of America's legendary folksinger-activist. Klein's first book may not have created the fuss that *Primary Colors* did, but it attracted the attention of no less a celebrity than Bruce Springsteen, who used to cite it with respect during concerts before singing Guthrie's most famous lyric, "This Land Is Your Land." Klein's unearthing of two politically radical verses usually omitted from that song is just one instance of the solid research underpinning his vivid narrative of Guthrie's often tragic life (1912-67). Before Woody turned 15, his sister died in a fire and his mother was committed to an Oklahoma insane asylum with a mysterious disease he later learned he inherited; Klein's chilling description of Huntington's chorea is one of the book's strong points. Its heart is a full rendering of Guthrie's restless wanderings across Depression-era America, which fired his lifelong radicalism, and a scrupulously unsentimental account of Woody's oft-sentimentalized personality. He may have been a genius and a staunch advocate of the common people, but Guthrie was also a bad husband, neglectful father, and difficult friend, as Klein shows. He pays Woody's life and music the tribute of assuming they need no sanitizing, and this biography is all the more interesting because of it. --Wendy Smith

Joe Klein, a journalist for nearly three decades, is a political correspondent for Time magazine. In addition to *Primary Colors*, his previous books include *Payback: Five Marines After Vietnam* and *Woody Guthrie: A Life*. He has written articles and reviews for *The New Republic*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Life*, and *Rolling Stone*.

I finished this book this past summer. Did anyone else who read this great book cry their eyes out during the last 60 or so pages?? I was getting my car fixed one day, waiting for the mechanics to finish, while reading this book in their lobby. Then I got to the part near the end where Klein describes Woody's stay in the hospital as he got sicker and sicker from Huntington's disease. The lobby was littered with folks waiting just like me and I read those passages, then my eyes started to swell and tear up. "Oh lord," I thought. "I'm gonna lose it." I set the book down and quickly ran into the bathroom where I had a good private sob. I haven't cried like that in years. The last book that did it to me was Cormac McCarthy's *"The Road."* Woody was such a blast to read about. Every time I picked up the book it was like hanging out with a friend. It was like, "hey I wonder what Woody's up to?" Then you pick up the book and find out. Quite a guy. Quite a life! A life full of high highs, and low lows. Highly recommended. There is a lot of humanity in this book. I'll probably pick it up again in the future when I want to visit my friend Woody once again.

Woody was born in Okemah, OK. 7/14/1912 As an adult he moved to Calif. and was horrified by how the migrant Okies were treated in the fields. He became a communist originally because of this. Later he really started to believe in what they stood for. I always thought Woody was a hobo and never worked but that is not true. He had a band, he drew cartoons, he had a radio show and he wrote news paper articles. He was in the merchant marines (2x) and the army. Woody was such a simple person that some thought him mentally slow at times. He would marry 3 times and had 8 children but he was never good at family life. In his later years he knew that he was starting to get the same disease that his mother had. It would eventually kill him. Was Woody a good man ?... I am not sure.... he never took care of his loved ones and would disappear from their lives for long periods of time. Was he a musical genius... YES. He became a folk hero at a time when he was too sick to be able to enjoy it. I must make a comment on the author--JOE KLEIN.... what a great job he did. This is a fine piece of work. He can be proud. Woody died 10/3/1967. I was 18 yrs old then--I knew who he was because of Bob Dylan & he was a proud Okie..... I am also a proud Okie.

Highly recommended. I loved reading this book, especially the first half. The only comment I'd make would be in the lackluster editing of the third hundred pages, in which author Klein included many letters between Guthrie and his wife. It would have better served the book to NOT include so much of that material. A lot of the letters were private correspondence between husband and wife. I don't need to know that much about Guthrie's love for his own penis. Later in the book Klein fairly skips over Guthrie being sent to jail on pornography charges. THOSE letters should have been included in "A Life"'s text. Just a small reservation. Well worth the time. The first 200 pages are about as good as bios get.

One of the most touching stories I've ever read, this biography makes Woody Guthrie come alive as the fabulous, impossible, creative genius he was. In perfectly-tuned, lively prose, Klein covers Guthrie's amazing story, from his childhood in a temporarily well-to-do Southern family whose patriarch was smart and successful until he wasn't. The family fell into deep poverty, the mother succumbed to insanity and was confined to an insane asylum after years of erratic and dangerous behavior, and the children were left to fend for themselves. Woody Guthrie hit the road as a teenager, and hardly ever settled down, anywhere, thereafter. He was the genuine article, a wandering minstrel chronicling his living experience of the Dust Bowl, the Depression and World War, and all the travails of that time in our nation's history. We see Guthrie's political awakening; and once awakened, he never looked back, never compromised his grass-roots principles, never sold out. How does a person stay that pure when there's money to be made from his talent and popularity, and his children are living in poverty? By being completely uninterested in money--Woody Guthrie seemed to view it as something evil--and by being unconcerned with the way other people see him. The book is filled with sad and funny anecdotes about Guthrie's uncouth behavior and unwashed presence, causing dear friends and admirers (or their wives) to turn him out of their homes. He was clearly more at home *without* a home, riding the rails with hoboes, sleeping on people's couches, even enjoying the times (several) he spent in jail, where he felt right at home and made friends with inmates and guards alike. In one incident, when he was released just before Christmas, he was irate because he had promised to give a performance there and insisted on returning to sing for the inmates. Another telling anecdote: he was invited to dinner at a friend's home and insisted on eating his dinner standing at the kitchen sink. He just didn't conform to the norms of civilization, yet he seems to have had the most generous heart in the world. Even when his catastrophic illness forced him to live most of the time in mental hospitals, his overriding interest was the plight of his fellow patients, whose disturbances he observed with compassion. We read the

story knowing all through what the outcome will be; and as the Huntington's chorea takes over more and more of his faculties, we grieve along with those who lived through it with him. A profound question, nicely articulated by the author, is how much of Woody Guthrie's art and lifestyle was shaped by the disease: "It was impossible to say where the disease left off and Woody began." Many of the symptoms coincide with Woody's own quirky rhyming and verbal cadences, his razor-sharp cleverness and silly excesses and uninhibited social behavior, his inability to stay in one place. So as I was finishing the book, I looked up the music of Woody Guthrie, Cisco Houston, Leadbelly, and the other folk and blues artists whose stories are told here, and listening to them, I now recognize the difference between "authentic" and "commercial" folk music. It may be that the Kingston Trio and other groups popularized Guthrie's songs, but we wouldn't even know their names had they not had this material to work with. The original balladeers' music is funky, flawed (which adds to its charm), recorded with primitive equipment and often hard to make out, but it's exquisite. It's right there right then. Try listening to "Hobo's Lullaby" without being moved to tears. Or, listen to the music, then read the book, and then listen to the music again right afterward. You'll never hear it the same way again. Woody Guthrie was complex but simple: kindly and compassionate, childlike and innocent, crude and crazy and bawdy, brilliant, uncivilized, pure, and completely fearless.

Woody Guthrie is one of the people who you hear about all of your life and you know something about him as a one of the original folk singers. This book by Joe Klein is well written based on interviews of family, letters and other sources. Interesting story about a very interesting man. A poet who could play guitar.

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