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Book Review
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Morris, Edmund. The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt. New York, NY: Modern Library, 2001.

Author's Purpose: Edmund Morris sets out to paint a vivid, lasting image of our 26th president. He skillfully addresses the unstoppable energy that burst through Roosevelt like a prism, revealing a broad spectrum of personæ that made up the man. Originally intended as a screenplay, the tome reads like one. The reader is led arduously through the early life of an extraordinary man, with dutiful emphasis on the experiences - large and small - that shaped him. Early signs of ambition, persistence, and a thirst for knowledge, honor, acceptance, and greatness are sprinkled throughout the pages. Morris seems intent on showcasing the fruits of exhaustive research, but also his own penchant for psycho-history. There is always a feeling of omniscience as the reader plods along through the trials, triumphs, travails, and tribulations that mold young Theodore. Further, with this analysis Morris succeeds in giving the reader a sense of what created the fiery, complicated, and sometimes mythical progressive. If Roosevelt is arguably the scion of the modern presidency as well as the progressive movement, then his tale is one that mirrors the development of both.

Chronological and Topical Scope: The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt spans Roosevelt's birth in 1858 to his bittersweet vice-presidential election in 1900, with an epilogue of September 1901, ending abruptly with the death of President McKinley. Morris dedicates his chapters to various stages of development. The reader surveys a weak, curious boy who fights valiantly through fits of asthma and "*cholera morbus*" and

begins quite early his career as a naturalist. Each chapter adds a layer of complexity to TR's character: romance, travel, his intense relationship with his father, Harvard, Columbia, political machines, the New York State Assembly, the West, failed campaigns, Civil Service Reform, family scandal, Police commissioner. The lists is seemingly endless. One does not take a solitary journey with Theodore Roosevelt, one hopes to catch a glimpse of the many roads he travelled.

Sources: Morris draws from exhaustive research, but gets the wealth of his material from Roosevelt's own words. TR's diary is a font of insight, as he is often quite frank. He writes in time of joy, sorrow, frustration, anger, confusion, and triumph. In addition, Morris gives credit to Carleton Putnam's 1958 Theodore Roosevelt: The Formative Years, calling it an "essential source for students of TR's youth." An extraordinary amount of diaries, interviews, memoirs, scrapbooks, reminiscences, and other first hand accounts shed further light on his subject.

Author's Thesis and Main Points: Edmund Morris gives the reader a balanced and fascinating account of the first forty years of Roosevelt's life. More recent biographies of American icons seem to fall into two categories: iconoclasm and name-clearing. That is, some seek with clear intent to show the more fragile, corruptible facets of a great hero. Others have sought to give these figures a new or more enlightened image. Recent biographies of Warren Harding and U.S. Grant would fall into the latter category. The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt does not have such lofty historical aims, although it is a work that enriches our history nonetheless. Morris's book, though often wordy and

arguably self-indulgent in frivolous use of the language, will engage readers from many circles. A master of candid description, the author vividly details so many players on the Roosevelt stage, from his father to Joe Ferris, a Canadian guide in the Dakotas. Regardless of the screenplay feel, Morris does incorporate one theme throughout. He supports the notion that Roosevelt seemed destined for greatness. This is shown again and again through observations of family and strangers alike. Some even go as far as to predict his future presidency. The sense of destiny is further reinforced by the many changes of course in TR's life. It seems as though every gut-wrenching failure, as well as merit won, contributes to an ever straightening path toward the White House. Guiding him on this sojourn is an acute moral compass. There is a great swell of duty in his heart, and it drives him to action when countless men would lay silent or fall prey.

A study of TR's life must include a survey of Theodore Roosevelt Senior. Morris seems to hold the same reverence for the man as his son. The reader gets an unwavering sense of patience, kindness, strength, discipline, love, duty, self-control, and honor. Indeed, Morris reinforces this image several times with contemporary references. If the author gushes with affinity of Theodore Senior, than the son worshipped him. There never seems to be a time where the invisible hand of the father does not guide his son through difficult waters. His untimely death cripples TR, and it is a great deal of time before he moves on from mourning.

From the start, there is a backdrop from which the boy cannot be separated. Roosevelt finds himself immersed in the natural world, with interests ranging from geology to amateur taxidermy. Much to the chagrin of a family firmly embedded in polite society, formaldehyde and snake skins waft through the hallways and drawing rooms as

often as the scent of rich mahogany and salty sea air. His focus on natural history borders on obsession, but his father does encourage what he believes to be a “noble field.”

Privilege, too, is an inescapable theme. Although descended from Manhattan pig farmers, TR is born, silver spoon in hand, heads above the rest of society. Morris never makes the assertion directly, but it is clear that the author credits the man much more than his status for what Roosevelt achieved. At times, the author pokes fun at his subject, overdressed for most occasions and describing him as prudish at best. More importantly, young Roosevelt makes himself comfortable in conversation among various levels of social strata. From the lumber camps of Maine to the dingy political dens of Manhattan, he may acknowledge social class, but he prides himself on his ability to connect on a visceral as an intellectual plane.

Further, Theodore (as he preferred to be called - “Teddy” was just too informal) was a prolific writer. From *Birdsongs of the Adirondacks* to *The Naval War of 1812* he showed a remarkable persistence and grit for research. Writing seems to have been an issue of personal pride, one that relieved him of embarrassment, shame, and pain. Some would later say that his thirst for war had the same effect.

It is impossible to talk about TR without mention of the West. “Here, the romance of my life began,” he said after his first trip to the badlands. After a soggy and pseudo-successful buffalo hunt that left his guides exhausted, his 5th Avenue polish started to fade. Recalling TR on that first visit, young host Lincoln Lang said that physically, he was “none too robust, yet everything about him was force.” The impact of his love affair with the natural wonder of America and its healing effects on him extends to this day though his great future work in conservation.

TR’s courtship provides more awkward and emotionally accessible fodder for the reader, as well as it cements him as a man of great love and loyalty. Although his romantic prose is

limited to what Morris calls "Victorian clichés," one does not doubt the devotion of the husband. In all aspects of his life, Roosevelt seems to be the quintessential idealist overachiever. There is no stopping him once his mind is set, as his Alice found quite early. She torments him for a time, but he persists, just as he does with his health, his family, and the cruel mistress that is politics.

Morris deftly explains the dirty game that politics was in the gilded age, providing many direct examples of patronage, graft, and general corruption that will serve a history teacher well in the classroom. His experience in Albany is particularly enlightening, and also aids in adding continuity from that sometimes cloudy era into the modern progressive world that Roosevelt helped to usher in. His ascendancy to the Governor of the Empire State is a jagged, treacherous one - but any student of Roosevelt knows that is what made it "fun." Although initially shocking and offending polite society with his entry into such sordid practices, his quixotic career does seem to bring him friends as loyal and persistent as his enemies. And though various trials and tribulations, the reader cannot help but be struck by that time honored side effect of consuming biography - a deep sense of respect and adoration for such a courageous subject. There is inspiration to be had in such strict adherence to moral duty, regardless of its consequences on one's own reputation. It is difficult to refrain from comparing this sense of urgency in elevating one's nation to new heights to the sense of decline in our nation at present. Where are these men and women? Who will truly lead, speaking frankly of sacrifice and honor? Although his political career was akin to the incredible feats of mountain climbing he would undertake, Roosevelt no doubt had more highs than lows. Morris finds Roosevelt standing on a peak - perhaps symbolically - in Upstate New York, at the end of his first volume on the bespectacled American. He sees a ranger approaching with a telegram, and as Morris says, "he knew what message that man was bringing." Indeed, he always knew. Destiny had called Theodore Roosevelt, quietly at first, and the man who did not do anything without giving it everything answered. He knew the value of good men in government, and he cherished the nation that gave him that opportunity. In his own words, "I am an American; free

born and free bred, where I acknowledge no man as my superior, except for his own worth, or as my inferior, except for his own demerit.”