



Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr

Nancy Isenberg

Download now

Read Online ➞

Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr

Nancy Isenberg

Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr Nancy Isenberg

This definitive biography of the revolutionary era villain overturns every myth and image we have of him

The narrative of America's founding is filled with godlike geniuses Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson versus the villainous Aaron Burr. Generations have been told Burr was a betrayer of Hamilton, of his country, of those who had nobler ideas. All untrue. He did not turn on Hamilton; rather, the politically aggressive Hamilton was preoccupied with Burr and subverted Burr's career at every turn for more than a decade through outright lies and slanderous letters.

In *Fallen Founder*, Nancy Isenberg portrays the founders as they all really were and proves that Burr was no less a patriot and no less a principled thinker than those who debased him. He was an inspired politician who promoted decency at a moment when factionalism and ugly party politics were coalescing. He was a genuine hero of the Revolution, as much an Enlightenment figure as Jefferson, and a feminist generations ahead of his time. A brilliant orator and lawyer, he was New York's attorney general, a senator, and vice president. Denounced as a man of extreme tastes, he in fact pursued a moderate course, and his political assassination was accomplished by rivals who feared his power and who promoted the notion of his sexual perversions.

Fallen Founder is an antidote to the worshipful biographies far too prevalent in the histories of the revolutionary era. Burr's story returns us to reality: to the cunning politicians our nation's founders really were and to a world of political maneuvering, cutthroat politicking, and media slander that is stunningly modern.

Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr Details

Date : Published May 10th 2007 by Viking Adult (first published January 1st 2007)

ISBN : 9780670063529

Author : Nancy Isenberg

Format : Hardcover 540 pages

Genre : History, Biography, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Politics

 [Download Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr ...pdf](#)

Download and Read Free Online Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr Nancy Isenberg

From Reader Review **Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr** for online ebook

Stuart says

Yes, Aaron Burr was scheming a lot to invade Mexico and Florida, but the author makes the point that there was a lot of that going around. During Polk's presidency we did end up annexing Mexico. And Andrew Jackson went into Florida, creating the crisis that allowed us to buy it. Burr may have been just as interested in claiming Mexico or Florida for the US as setting up a new Republic. But there was no truth to the charge that he also was going to invade Washington and take over the US government.

As to the aspersions that Burr had no values himself but was just a vicious schemer, the author shows that there are many quotes against Burr, but very little coming from him. He usually was very gracious to most people. And interestingly, he and his wife were big fans of Mary Wollstonecraft and raised their daughter in those progressive feminist beliefs which was very rare for the time.

He seems to be a victim of the infighting between Federalists and Republicans as well as between Virginian Republicans and New York Republicans, and even between different factions of New York Republicans. It would be interesting to know how history would have been different if Hamilton had killed Burr instead.

Mark Desrosiers says

One of the most interesting -- and overlooked -- aspects of Aaron Burr's life is his deep and abiding friendship with philosopher Jeremy Bentham -- an intellectual kinship that led to Burr lodging in Bentham's London residence, the "Bird-Cage", after Burr's public disgrace and legal exoneration in 1807. Hell, Burr even crawled through Bentham's attic to retrieve and read some manuscripts, such was his interest in the utilitarian's work and thought.

Burr's lodging with Bentham is a perfect window into the nature of a misunderstood "traitor", who we often see as a devious Macchiavellian schemer and rake. Well, the rake aspect has some truth to it, and Isenberg has a lot of fun recounting Burr's coded letters to his daughter depicting his sexual exploits well into his fifties. But as a schemer and traitor, I think Isenberg makes it clear that Burr was no different from his nemeses Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson, and indeed it was his sense of principle that stood him apart from them.

A curious incident -- which is still included in sketches of Burr's life, often without rationalization or explanation -- was his farewell speech to the U.S. Senate as Vice President on March 2, 1805, which reduced grown men to real tears: "My colleague, General Smith, stout and manly as he is, wept as profusely as I did. He laid his head upon his table and did not recover from his emotion for a quarter of an hour or more." Isenberg not only unearths the nature of this speech, but gives is a picture of why it had its effect: he was able to rise above petty resentments to offer real truth and sincerity and a picture (soon to be forgotten) of the Senate as a citadel against corruption.

One thing that I think is missing from this new biography is more of a connection between Burr's ideology -- his utilitarianism and his feminism -- and his actual political activities. In New York State, he is seen as

being more of a democratizing force, but he also seems, even in Isenberg's account, to be doing this solely to increase the power of his Burrish faction. And unlike, say, Thomas Jefferson or James Madison, he doesn't seem to have been interested in writing political tracts or engaging in high-level constitutional debates. His ideology, curiously, seems disconnected from his political life.

Another thing that Isenberg tries to underscore is just his appearance and demeanor. This was, in many ways, the source of his power and charisma, why people both loved and hated him -- at one point she compares him to Humphrey Bogart or Clint Eastwood, someone possessed of nonchalant "effortless effort". Hell, when he was on the run during the Burr Conspiracy wind-up, he was captured in Alabama heavily bearded with a slouching broad-brimmed hat, kerchief round his neck, and a tin cup and butchers knife on his belt -- but he was identified as Aaron Burr nonetheless: "The outfit did not fit the profile of the dapper Burr, known for his stylish dress and genteel manners. But something gave him away: 'His eyes,' attested Perkins. Burr had glanced at Perkins, then quickly withdrew his gaze; yet the land registrar was convinced he had identified the stranger... 'Mr. Burr's eyes mentioned as being remarkably keen, and this glance from him strengthened my suspicions.'"

This is a great biography, and it underscores something we should all remember: the founding of our country was a wild chaotic ride filled with mistakes, charlatans, double-agents, and villains. Burr was one of the least villainous and most principled of the lot.

Kathy Pedersen says

Lots of good information, but it was a little dry. I think reading a print version vs. the audio (which I listened to) would help me get into it a little more. Lots of names and trials and so forth.

One tidbit that stood out for me...."founding fathers" weren't perfect, and idealizing them is a grave mistake. Burr was a feminist and that's part of the reason he was excoriated. I admire a lot of his views, but there are gaps and it's difficult to tell the true aims. He still owned slaves, so he was as flawed as anyone. Maybe Lin-Manuel Miranda can make a follow up musical about the young hottie antagonist to Hamilton!

Mary says

It has not been too often in the history of our country that the Vice President of the United States kills the former Secretary of the Treasury and gets away with it. But then, rancorous as our current political scene might be, it barely holds a candle to the extreme partyism of the era when political parties - in this case the Federalists and the Democratic Republicans - first appeared. The truth is that the toxic enmity between the Vice President (Aaron Burr) and the former Secretary of the Treasury (Alexander Hamilton) went WAY back and their infamous duel merely represented it's logical conclusion. It was mostly a question of who would kill whom, not if. And though they were men with very different temperaments (Hamilton - a hot head/ Burr - maddeningly cool), both were passionate about protecting their "honor," even though, by standards of subsequent generations, they didn't have much honor to protect. Both of their lives give a whole meaning to the notion of "founding fathers." Their affairs with women were widely known at the time; both were accused of having "too much interest" in the young men who surrounded them, and Burr was even suspected of incest with his daughter. Burr would eventually adopt at least three boys who supposedly were

his so they would have "proper" last names. Not BAD for the grandson of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" evangelist Jonathan Edwards! But those juicy details are not the only thing that has made Burr a "fallen hero" in most of the histories, biographies and fictional accounts that have been written about him. Much more it was his Machiavellian approach to politics that got everyone's attention - his ability to test which way the wind was blowing and to go there. His greatest fault was his ambition. And most of the time those who have chronicled his life, like most of his critics then, felt he was a man without principle. In today's political world that would probably not garner a raised eyebrow, but historically we have liked our heroes to be firmly committed to the right causes for the right reasons at the right time, and Burr was anything but. Or so it has been said over and over and over again.

In this rather exhaustive and carefully researched biography of Burr, Nancy Isenberg says otherwise. While she does not paint Burr as a total hero, neither does she immediately dismiss him as a complete villain. In some respects, he was a man ahead of his times. For one thing, unlike almost all of the Founding Fathers, he was a strong advocate for women's rights. He and his wife Theodosia, both ardent fans of Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women*, attempted to have an "equal partnership" and, after Theodosia's untimely death, he worked very hard to make certain that their daughter, also named Theodosia, would have a solid academic education to prepare her for life in the real world he envisioned would come soon enough. For another, he was a pragmatist who was willing to compromise, to see the middle way in a political climate which pushed for ideological purity. He was a good organizer who managed to get things done. Unfortunately that did make him suspect to members of his own party and a bitter enemy in the eyes of his opponents who resented the fact that he managed to drive wedges between them. He made "deals" -- seeing them as temporary evils to accomplish the ultimate good. Others did the same thing in clandestine ways -- he did it in broad day light. And thus he earned the ire of such notables as George Washington, James Madison, Thomas Jefferson --- and, of course, Alexander Hamilton.

Isenberg also portrays his shortcomings. For example, he had a penchant for managing to get himself into debt - seriously in debt - which lead to a number of schemes to get out of debt which were questionable at best. He didn't exactly swindle people -- but one can say he borrowed with no intention to pay back-- and it wasn't just money he borrowed, but good names, good will and good reputations. One of his schemes - to raise a private army in order to capture Mexico from the Spanish - ultimately got him tried for treason against the United States when President Jefferson was convinced that what he REALLY wanted to do was increase the size of the American west and then get it break away from the United States and form a separate country which he (Burr) would lead. Ultimately the only thing that saved Burr was that the one witness who had what was considered "material proof" of his conspiracy (a letter he had supposedly written) was unable to produce it. The whole thing makes for an amazing read.

So would I recommend this book? If you, like me, despair of our current political morass, this book is a great antidote! Things COULD be worse ---- and, in fact, they have been worse! Personally, I appreciated her careful research and her very balanced discussion. It was good to be able to see Aaron Burr in a more complete light and to appreciate in a new way the complexity of what it means to be a mere mortal in a world and culture that longs for its leaders to be without flaw or blemish. The insights she provides into the humanity of Aaron Burr in his time might be a helpful antidote for what currently ails us in our time, as well.

Doug DePew says

"Fallen Founder" by Nancy Isenberg is probably the first time anyone since the 19th century has seen the real

Aaron Burr. He has become a parody and most historians ignore his important, nearly unique voice in the founding of our country. He was good looking, intelligent, and passionate. The book is very meticulously researched with massive notes in the back. It is well written and covers Burr's professional, political, and private life as completely as will probably ever be done. It provides a rare glimpse inside the terribly cutthroat and dirty business of politics in the early days of the Republic. We tend to turn the popular founders into stone statues when they were really just men...men with flaws like all of us. Burr was no different. I got this book from a book club prior to its full release because I was excited to hear about this shadow character, and I was not disappointed.

If you would like to learn about the founders from a new perspective, I recommend this book highly. It is well done and provides a picture of Burr the man, not Burr the cartoon. Nancy Isenberg has done a fine job on this biography.

Christopher Saunders says

Nancy Isenberg's **Fallen Founder** offers a nakedly revisionist biography of Aaron Burr, best remembered as the damn fool who shot Alexander Hamilton, then ran off to the Mississippi Valley for a bizarre filibustering scheme whose details remain unclear. Rather than the conniving, unprincipled villain so often depicted, Isenberg sees Burr in flattering terms: not a heartless schemer but a pragmatist more interested in political success and functional government than high-flown ideologies; not a debauched rake but a devoted husband and father and early feminist; not unprincipled at all, but indeed a man devoted to progressive politics and good government, albeit visions of both at odds with his fellow Founders. What a swell guy. Isenberg's portrait is convincing in some areas, less convincing in others; as revisionists are wont to do, she'll often exaggerate a commendable, if commonplace trait of Burr's (for instance, his ambivalence towards slavery) into something truly heroic (just short an all-out abolitionist). That said, I did find her depiction of Burr's role in the Western Conspiracy (arguing that he was more willingly manipulated by others than actively heading the scheme) more convincing than I expected. It's hard to tell with a person like Burr, who's so easily forced into an ill-fitting mold, whether an extreme corrective's the only way to balance the ledger. Still, it's more palatable than most, and at least ensures that future historians take a more sympathetic look at a man reviled as a villain.

Cyrano says

Isenberg starts out by assuring me that the scurrilous lies about Burr, the Nearly Stolen Election, the Western Treason charges, his reputation as a depraved sexual libertine, are totally trumped up charges and everybody else was doing it too.

I threw up my hands and said "Relax, book, I don't know ya boy Burr, except for that 'Got Milk' commercial. But I've met some Richard III apologists and so I can understand where you're coming from." And knowing how books like Chernow's Alexander Hamilton played him as their bete noir, the nemesis that great heroes need, I could believe that he'd gotten a bad rap.

But the problem with apologists is they often seem to spin too far in the opposite direction. I found it hard to believe in or appreciate the gleaming alabaster monument that strode through New York streets, star pupil at Princeton and leading feminist figure. Unfortunately, most of his personal papers were lost when his

daughter's boat disappeared at sea, which leaves us with much less source material than we have for the rest of the Founding Fathers crew.

It also means that we hear a lot about other people, and a lot about how other people reacted to Burr. And because the goal here is to show Burr as a man of his time and deny the excesses attributed to him, we see a lot of 'how everybody else was also shady'. Nearly every one of the founding fathers seems to have died penniless from incompetent land speculation, for instance, an area Burr could point to in his favor, having died only mostly penniless.

The author paints Burr as something of a judgemental prig, which I suspect would not have been an easy image to maintain while working in law at the time. And something happened around 1800 when he became Vice President to make the entire political world turn on him and actively plot his downfall. The Virginians hated him because he was a Northerner, New Yorkers hated him because he was the wrong faction of Republican, and other people just felt threatened by his manliness or something. In any case, everybody ganged up to make his plans to invade Mexico with a private army (Which **everybody** was doing, and was totally normal, says our author) look like a sinister attempt to take over the country. Of course, the time when they said he was marching on Texas, he was actually in court in Kentucky attempting to fight off another legal snarl. So while I doubt his hands were quite as clean as they are presented, there does seem to have been a faction willing to do some skullduggery to bring him down.

I don't recall much talk about Burr in the Jefferson book I read, but there was a lot of Jefferson in this book. I'm not certain if it's because Burr wasn't really the political threat Isenberg paints him as, or if Meacham's book glosses over Jefferson's dealings with Burr, deeming them as painting his hero as too petty.

All in all, I understand that historical biographies are constrained by the facts, which makes it difficult to give your hero a character arc or at least a story to follow through, but I never got much of a feel for Burr inside and the outer events felt very much like "He did this. Then he did this other thing, which everybody did then. And then he did this." With very little in the way of connective tissue, it felt too much like a series of unconnected events. And when one of the popular myths you're trying to disprove is that Aaron Burr didn't have a coherent political philosophy, it's not enough to just point at Hamilton and say "He was a political opportunist too!"

Carl Rollyson says

"It is time to start over," contends Nancy Isenberg in her iconoclastic "Fallen Founder: The Life of Aaron Burr." Burr is, of course, infamous for killing Alexander Hamilton in a duel. But historians have also branded Burr a Machiavellian villain who schemed to deny Thomas Jefferson the presidency and most likely committed treason, even though he escaped conviction.

Ms. Isenberg faults historians and biographers for not examining Burr's papers — although many were lost, thus obscuring the man, she acknowledges. In popular fiction, as well, she notes, Burr has been portrayed as a Gothic villain, highly sexed and unscrupulous, a depiction that derives from the notion expressed, for example, in the "Federalist No. 6," that "sexual corruption (i.e., seductive women) could be equated with disunion." Yet, she adds: "It should be clear that Hamilton was not one degree less libidinous than Burr:"

If one reads the newspapers, rather than simply relying on the papers of prominent founders (Hamilton, Jefferson, Adams), it soon becomes clear that sexual satire pervaded politics. The sexualization of Aaron

Burr was a means for his opponents to increase their political capital, because the vocabulary to do so was already part of the political scene — not because of Burr's particular shortcomings.

Gore Vidal made the same point in "Burr" (1973), which Ms. Isenberg briefly mentions, but she does not acknowledge that her book validates Mr. Vidal's view of a man abiding by important principles the shifty Thomas Jefferson never respected, and living by a code of honor that the scandalmongering Alexander Hamilton could not fathom. Surprisingly, Ms. Isenberg spares not a word for William Carlos Williams's essay on Burr in "In The American Grain" (1925), which portrays the fallen founder as the very feminist Ms. Isenberg lauds, a man who believed in equal rights for women and practiced his principles in regard to his wife and daughter.

A man with an excellent war record as a staff officer under Washington, attorney general of New York, then a senator, Burr received 30 electoral votes for the presidency in 1796, and tied Jefferson in 1800. Indeed, many electors favored Burr over Jefferson because Burr was a man of both action and principle. He had an admirable reputation in New York —arguing for lower and fairer taxes and various public improvements — that aroused the envy of his rival, Hamilton.

There is no evidence that Burr tried to undermine Jefferson's election — Burr was quite amenable to serving as Jefferson's vice president. But Burr did resent Hamilton's swinging his support to Jefferson in the 1800 election, and the tension between them increased when Hamilton bruited about charges that Burr was a "despicable" man and public servant. Burr demanded that Hamilton explain what he meant, and Hamilton waffled, giving his version of "it depends what you mean by sex."

Hamilton accepted Burr's challenge to a duel in New Jersey (where such affairs of honor were legal), even though Hamilton claimed he opposed dueling. Hamilton left word that he would not aim to wound his opponent. Yet, as Ms. Isenberg notes, Hamilton carefully examined the dueling ground, took up various positions to check the sun's angle, and then put on his spectacles — not exactly the behavior of a man who did not intend to shoot straight. Afterward, Gouverneur Morris, a man who was an excellent "bullshit detector" (to use Hemingway's term) doubted the veracity of Hamilton's pre-duel pacifist declaration.

While many condemned Burr — even alleging that he had somehow got the drop on Hamilton (it is not clear who shot first) — many believed he behaved like a gentleman, and his popularity soared in the South. Jefferson had no qualms about dining several times with Burr after the duel, and all charges against Burr were eventually dropped. He returned to Washington, D.C., and presided with dignity and acumen over the impeachment trial of Justice Salmon Chase, drawing praise even from his political enemies.

But Burr's political career in New York was over. As many Americans did then and since, he went west, hoping to recoup his political power, and earned the admiration of men like Andrew Jackson. Burr's enemies said he was forming an army to occupy the West and overthrow Jefferson's administration. Jefferson himself, besotted with suspicion after reading Republican newspapers and relying on doubtful intelligence, rigged a treason prosecution. Already acquitted by three grand juries, Burr faced trial in Richmond, emerging triumphant both in the jury's verdict and in Chief Justice John Marshall's judgment. At worst, Burr was guilty of a misdemeanor, for organizing a "filibuster," a private army intent on liberating Mexico from the Spanish — although no proof was ever produced that such an army actually existed.

As in Mr. Vidal's novel, Thomas Jefferson emerges in Ms. Isenberg's biography as a chief executive who never seems to have understood the crucial importance of an independent judiciary or of the rule of law. It was sufficient for him to believe the "will of the people" had turned against Burr and therefore he should be punished. Burr, for his part, submitted himself to the legal process again and again, trusting in the courts. He

was a brilliant lawyer, of course, but his exoneration was no mere "technicality."

I haven't done justice to Ms. Isenberg's scrupulous handling of evidence. Her work is profoundly original, and if American historians do not "start over again," they will be doing their own profession — not to mention the history of their country — an injustice.

Cheryl says

When I picked up this book the only thing I knew about Aaron Burr was that he killed Hamilton in a duel. I gave it 2 stars (instead of 1) because I felt the author did her due diligence and portrayed the facts of history accurately. Had she stopped there, the book would have been excellent.

Her mistake was, first, in muddying the waters of history with rumor and innuendo. The minute detail with which these were portrayed left readers more confused than informed. What was more annoying was that at every turn, it was these rumors and innuendoes that ultimately "proved" Burr as a moral and upright person. As if the simple fact that gossip exists somehow means it must be false.

In the end, I tried to focus merely on the facts of his life, and judging from those, I came to the conclusion that he was probably guilty of most, if not all, that he was accused of. The exact opposite of what the author was suggesting.

To put matters more into perspective, I took into consideration what prominent people of the time thought of him. For instance, George Washington refused to give him a commission in the revolutionary war, though Burr tried for over a year to get one. However, he was given a commission by none other than Benedict Arnold. Not only that, Arnold tried to promote him to others to advance his career. Enough said about the company he kept.

I was very disappointed in the book, but, setting aside the superfluous and the illogical conclusions, I did learn what I set out to... The history of Aaron Burr.

Andrew Murch says

Aaron Burr is often seen as the villain of the founding generation. Most people don't realize that the man who killed fellow founder Alexander Hamilton in a duel was also the grandson of famed preacher Jonathan Edwards, as well as the 3rd Vice President of the United States. If things fell a little differently in the election of 1800, Burr's name would have forever been cemented among the legacy of the founding generation of Presidents.

Isenberg seeks to rescue Burr's reputation, laying out a case that his image as a villain is the product of an overblown smear campaign straight out of the book of late 18th-century/early 19th-century politics. She recasts Burr's life from start to finish, clearly operating with the agenda of restoring (or at least re-examining

in a more positive light) the legacy of this fallen founder.

For my money, I don't really buy it. Though Isenberg is a compelling writer, time and again it feels like her agenda to rescue Burr from himself falls short. Everything from Burr's legendary promiscuity, to his shifty financial deals, to his questionable political aspirations are glossed over and recast as simply a function of the times. The main argument is basically, "That's the way everyone operated." In the end, the image we get of Burr is that of a man who was completely misunderstood, and in Isenberg's view almost entirely above reproach. It comes off as more than a little flexible with the facts that have been passed down through the generations. In sum, I think 'Fallen Founder' is a classic revisionist text, obfuscating the traditional reading of Burr's life in order to prop up a man whose legacy as a nefarious character was certainly earned.

David Eppenstein says

In the course of my readings of the early history of our country the name of Aaron Burr has popped up several times. I admit that prior to reading this book I didn't know much about this man other than what most others knew. I knew that he almost stole the presidency from Jefferson in 1800 and that he killed Hamilton in a duel. I believed, from my reading, that he had been something of a vain political opportunist and a scoundrel. I recently ran across his name again and decided that I had to know more about this man if I was going to continue reading the early history of the U.S. I found this book and have read it but I am now at a loss on just how to rate it. I give it 4 stars because it is richly informative and enlightening but I am torn because it is also disappointing. My disappointment has me thinking it deserves a lower rating but you should read it and decide for yourself. My disappointment comes from the tone of the author's presentation. While I expected an objective scholarly examination of the facts and an evidence based conclusion that wasn't what I read. Instead what I read was a partisan advocacy for the restoration of the character of Aaron Burr. Now as a trial lawyer I will not deny that the author's advocacy is something to be admired and it would appear that her facts compellingly support her premise. Unfortunately, she isn't an advocate she is a scholar. The author, nevertheless, has succeeded in intriguing me about the character and correctness of Burr's place in history. Those of you that are my friends or follow my reviews know of my fascination with Benedict Arnold, well I now believe we have another example of an American patriot that was wrongfully abused and dishonored by selfish interests. Isenberg could have settled the question of Burr's mistreatment by an objective treatment of the facts that allowed the reader to draw their own conclusions. Her choice to launch into intentional defense of the man causes me to be skeptical. I am bothered by the fact that she is the only one that has taken this position while everybody else seems to paint Burr in much darker hues. Why? I now must search for other biographies and see if Isenberg's facts are accurate and complete or has she cherry picked them to suit her argument. So I guess I am somewhat grateful that the author has presented me with a mystery but I wasn't really in the market for such a quest. Aside from this criticism the book was extremely informative which is always welcome to anyone interested in history. I was always of the opinion that Burr's failure to bow out of the 1800 tie vote with Jefferson clearly demonstrated his selfishness and opportunistic nature. I was completely wrong. The author establishes that Burr had clearly made it known before and after the election that he had no intention of competing with Jefferson for the presidency. Unfortunately, because of the way elections were decided in 1800 Burr had no choice but to remain in the race. The Federalists didn't care what Burr's wishes were. As long as there was a tie vote Jefferson couldn't become president and that is all that mattered to the Federalists. If Burr had dropped out then Adams, as number 3 in electoral votes, would move up to take his place and Burr would have been left out of a job. So there wasn't any attempt by Burr to steal the election. What is also made clear is how untrustworthy Jefferson and his henchmen were. In fact this book does much to reinforce my long held opinion that Jefferson was our first sleazy president and that Hamilton and he are responsible for laying the slimy foundation of our present

system of party politics. What I never knew was that Jefferson and Burr had made the same sort of arrangement in the 1796 election that they had in 1800. However, in 1796 the Virginians knifed Burr in the back by only delivering 1 electoral vote for him and thus publicly humiliating him in his own state of New York. His N.Y. followers came away believing that Burr had no influence with the leader of their party, Jefferson. Why Burr trusted them again in 1800 is a puzzle however. Of course after 1800 Burr was a marked man by Jefferson. It wasn't that TJ had any reason to not trust or dislike Burr but Burr wasn't a part of TJ's Virginia family. As VP Burr was considered TJ's heir apparent and that wasn't what TJ wanted. TJ wanted Madison to succeed him so TJ had to remove Burr as a viable political successor or spoiler and therein was the basis of much of Burr's misery to come. Burr's life is certainly interesting and his treatment, if the author is to be believed, is both tragic and outrageous. His crime seems to have been to be a talented and successful outsider in a game reserved only for insiders, or so they believed.

Tom Meyer says

This was a very irritating biography.

To her credit, Isenberg is less credulous than other Burr biographers and generally brings a healthy level of skepticism to some of the more fantastic claims made about him. Her discussions of Burr's marriage and parenting of the younger Theodosia are also good.

Isenberg is significantly less successful in her treatment of Burr's politics. Though her description of Burr's political niche is excellent, her attempt to portray him as politically principled completely fails. Burr was a moderate and an opportunist: his default politics were those of an urban Republican, but -- with only slight modification -- he could turn into a populist Federalist. If Burr's politically principled, so is Bill Clinton.

Isenberg also has a habit of insulting other biographers that I found deeply off-putting. She accuses Ron Chernow of painting an unflattering portrait of Burr (there is some merit to this, though not as much as she implies) while she paints an equally nasty and unfair one of Hamilton. She also takes multiple, nasty shots at Burr's previous biographer, William Lomask, on one occasion denigrating him for the sin of lacking a PhD.

Which brings me to the book's greatest failure: as narrative. Isenberg is a competent and clear writer -- no small feat, that -- but is incapable of telling a good story. Though Lomask made a number of mistakes that Isenberg has corrected, I found his biography as compelling and interesting as its subject. Isenberg, however, has managed to write a rather dull book about a decorated combat soldier, leading trial attorney of his generation, creator of American machine politics, rival of two of the most powerful men in the country (one of whom he shot to death), the subject of a sensational treason trial, and -- by all accounts -- a great and prolific lover.

No small feat, that.

David Longo says

Only about one year ago I logged onto Goodreads. So occasionally I go back and write a review of something I read many years earlier. This is the case with "Fallen Founder" by Nancy Isenberg.

Overall, I did not enjoy this book. I found Isenberg's take on Aaron Burr having been misjudged by historians rather incredulous. I have read countless books on the Revolutionary Era, the Founding Fathers, the duel between Burr and Hamilton, three separate biographies on the man who died as a result of said duel, and about five biographies of Thomas Jefferson who Burr served under as vice president. In addition, I have taught the aforementioned for the better part of two decades. I do know of what I speak. This is not to take away from Nancy Isenberg's hard work and knowledge. But to paint Burr in a positive light and suggest everyone else somehow misunderstands him is extremely difficult to wrap my brain around.

Burr, by nearly all accounts outside of Isenberg, was a power hungry snake-in-the-grass who was a danger to the young republic. I simply cannot buy the author's woe-is-Burr synopsis. It's a little like being a moon landing denier, in my opinion. I seem to recall Isenberg discussing her lineage, and telling of a distant connection to Burr, though a connection nonetheless. It felt at times Isenberg was defending her family. Personally I'd rather her defend the American experiment of that time.

About the coolest thing I can say about this book is I once saw a Rolling Stone magazine photo of Bruce Springsteen in his den with a stack of books behind him, one of them being "Fallen Founder." I'd like to think The Boss felt the same way about this read as I do which is: I wasted my money and time on this one. I hope my review will spare others the same fate.

Christopher says

How you approach a biography of one of the truly mysterious figures of America's Founding Era?

Well, if you're Nancy Isenberg, you make it clear to the reader in the Introduction that you are the first PROFESSIONAL historian to write a biography of Aaron Burr and that everything you've read about him is WRONG. How do we know this? Because this book was written by a PROFESSIONAL historian. And being written by a PROFESSIONAL historian, you know what's you're about to read is PROFESSIONALLY written, by a PROFESSIONAL. Professionally.

Soooo, that's how this work starts. Seriously.

Burr is one of the greatest myteries of the early republic. Almost universally portrayed as a kind of mad villain, he's always been a fascinating character. At times he seems to have been hated by everyone--yet somehow rose to become Vice President under Jefferson in the latter's first term before shooting Alexander Hamilton in a duel, being tried for treason for an abortive fillibustering expedition to Mexico and ultimately fleeing to Europe for several years until he quietly returned nearly two decades later.

That received history on Burr (traitor, cad, murderer, etc) is almost certainly false or exaggerated in several respects. But from reading Isenberg's "Fallen Founder"--you're left with the impression that Burr was a superman of unmatched ethical, military, political, legal, and even moral billiance doomed to suffer persecution based on those jealous of his sheer awesomeness.

Isenberg does an excellent job of relying on Burr's surviving papers and correspondence which give a glimpse into his character (or at least, that glimpse he wanted to commit to paper), but she takes every written word at face value. In an era rife with hypocritical characters (Jefferson, Monroe, Hamilton, Adams) that would publicly say one thing but privately write something else, Isenberg never critically examines Burr in the same manner and assumes that he is always forthright and upstanding in what he says.

The best parts of the book are the descriptions of Burr's courtship of his wife, Theodosia, and their commitment to raising their daughter in an admittedly progressive manner, consistent with Rousseau and Wolstoncraft's philosophies. Also of great value are the portions dealing with his legal practice and treason trials where Isenberg draws on court records/transcripts to recount the extensive arguments and legal wrangling contained therein.

Where the book falters is that it never critically examines WHY Burr was simultaneously so popular and so hated. Those that passionately supported him simply did and those that so passionately opposed him simply did. But there's little-to-no examination how HOW Burr was able to generate such devotion and opposition. The best Isenberg does is to present the position of his detractors who called him a political seductor of young impressionable men. Yet, she never gives the reader a sense of how or why he was able to accomplish this--either via a unique personal political philosophy or via his particular strength of personality. He was Aaron Burr and he was awesome. That's it.

I couldn't help but think of Ron Chernow's excellent biography of Alexander Hamilton while reading this book. Like Burr, Hamilton had devoted followers as well as enemies. Those that hated him did so with a passion. But Chernow had the ability to help the reader understand WHY both sides held the positions they did as a result of Hamilton's actions/positions/writings/etc (or the perception of the same). And while Chernow clearly sympathized with Hamilton, at least the reader was generally free to make their own assessment.

Isenberg's Burr just comes across as a constant victim, a man out of time, so progressive and enlightened that he was made to suffer the calumnies of those beneath him. Yet due to his sheer magnanimity, he would never lift a hand or pen to those against him. It's all a little too much.

Ultimately, because it's one of the few books devoted exclusively to Burr, it's worthwhile, but the overwrought praise of the man detracts from the overall quality of the work.

Michael A says

I usually do my best to avoid bad books, but here I accidentally ran across one and I recommend that you stay away.

The only thing I agree with the biographer about is that Aaron Burr deserves a fresh, balanced treatment -- he is indeed so poorly and, at times, so one-sidedly mentioned in other books that this is not fair to him and to us as readers of popular history books.

But I have to agree with some of the other lower-star reviewers here -- there is just too much subjectivity and idiosyncratic interpretation here to be good history or even a reasonable biography. I understand that writers of biographies necessarily need to admire or respect their subjects, but this borders on an unconditional love for her subject -- an apology for his life really.

For one thing, she chooses to slander Hamilton (and Federalists to a lesser degree) any chance she gets. Now I know Hamilton was a major political player in that turbulent decade of 1790s American politics and that he was a moral hypocrite about his sexual affairs with Maria Reynolds. Most historians (and certainly most

people living at the time) have not disputed that assessment. But she takes it too far. Let's look at some examples here from the text:

P.119: "Though [Hamilton] himself the beneficiary of a prudent marriage, nothing would prevent Hamilton from dying in debt." -- Despite what she would have you believe, Hamilton did not engage in reckless speculation as Burr did (and claiming, in Burr's defense, that "everyone in his cohort borrowed and speculated" as in p. 155 is a terrible way to defend him). It is true Hamilton made a huge mistake in allowing Duer to help him run the treasury in its early days, but he was entirely honest about finances. If you're going to call out and criticize Hamilton on the basis of his sex scandal, then you should be honest enough to admit Burr had a fairly large money problem during most of his life after getting involved in politics. Nor does she mention that one reason why Hamilton ended up partially in debt was because he had to give up his law practice while serving as treasury secretary. An unfair, gratuitous attack on Hamilton in my opinion. Next passage..

P.181: "This was business as usual. It is hard to imagine that Hamilton or Schyuler lost any sleep over the decision to bribe Cazenove." -- This is in reference to a deal that Hamilton tried to push through in order to help his father-in-law's canal company stay afloat from foreign funds; of course, Burr did something similar a year later that was a success and supposedly caused Hamilton to envy him. First, there is no citation backing this up and, second, the tone is so spiteful you think she'd shoot Hamilton herself if she could go back in a time machine and meet the man personally.

A final example (though there are many more): P.141 -- "The Federalists' talented, charismatic leader was not the heir apparent to Washington in 1795, because the ornery, yet statesmentlike, John Adams was. Hamilton would never be elected senator or governor, let alone president of the United States. Universally regarded as the most ambitious among ambitious men, he would never claim the "Empire's highest seat." Burr, on the other hand..blah blah blah..was both electable..blah blah blah..and a "seeming successor to Jefferson."

Yeah Hamilton take that! You never got to be VP, much less a lowly senator! Burr did -- WHO'S THE BOSS NOW HAMILTON? Not only were you universally, monomaniacally ambitious, but YOU FAILED!

The ironic thing about this assessment is, to me, that from a long-term point of view, Hamilton had the most lasting impact and, if she had bothered to read Chernow fairly, would have known the fact that Hamilton intentionally stepped down from politics at that time to get more financially stable for the sake of his family. It's also tempting to point out that the treasury secretary at that time was far more powerful than any senator ever could have been -- much less a VP since pretty much every VP early in the republic hated the job and had no significant role in the administrations.

There are also a couple of things that bothered me here from the little bit I read:

-- She comes down way too hard on Jay's treaty. It was probably the best the USA could have hoped for at the time and avoided an unnecessary second conflict with Britain. She treats it here almost as if she were a Jeffersonian living in the 1790s and unequivocally bashes it.

-- She treats Citizen Genet with far too much leniency. Imagine someone from a different country showing up at your doorstep, ignoring all diplomatic rules of etiquette, believing he is exempt from all the laws of the land, and orders you to do things as he wishes and only as he wishes..even Jefferson gave up on the guy after he realized he was intractable and an embarrassment. From her account, you would think it was all those evil Federalists who spread gossip about him who brought him down. The logic here baffles me.

This isn't to say I found everything in the book worth criticizing.

Burr is no doubt a character and a fascinating person. I was quite interested in his early days as a brilliant scholar, his enlightened attitude to his daughter's education, his early feminism and a remarkable partnership with an older woman, his early childhood full of death. His later life -- I didn't read about it here though -- is also quite fascinating with the sexcapades, Jefferson's desire to prosecute him for treason and his activities in the west, and his general outlaw status by the end of his life. Not to mention his duel with Hamilton!

All that being said, she didn't convince me about his abolitionist side. How can someone who owned slaves be an abolitionist at heart? Saying that all the other significant founders owned slaves is a blatant attempt to ignore the issue entirely -- even if it's true, it's not justification. Aside from his fascinating individual quirks, as well, this book failed to make a strong case in arguing for why someone should consider him to be a founder alongside the ranks of Franklin and Washington. He wasn't a major player in anything except the election of 1800 and, in that case, he was there because of his desire for political power just like many others at the time.

Overall, I was left with the impression of a bitter author ranting about how great Burr was no matter his flaws and unfairly attacking people who got in his way (especially Hamilton). This is not the book that a complex and controversial figure like Burr deserves. I suppose we will have to wait for someone else to come along and do a fair, honest job of it.

(I'm also perfectly willing to admit that Chernow may have just as one sided of a viewpoint in regards to Hamilton, but he didn't display the flaws she has as a writer here.)

E.M. says

If Nancy Isenberg's research, premise and conclusions are all correct, then Arron Burr is the most maligned man in American History. He's also the grandson of Jonathan Edwards...what a crazy small country we used to have!

Political history is written by political victors, and Aaron Burr had many successful political enemies, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. No wonder people thinks so badly of Burr today.

A.J. Howard says

Nancy Isenberg has a valid argument that Aaron Burr has been grossly misjudged by history. However, her restoration is tainted by her devotion to the man. Isenberg's Burr is a brilliant, progressive, selfless hero who

deserves a spot on the pantheon of America's founders. His enemies were small, vainglorious, hypocrites who only served their own interest. She attacks other writers, such as Ron Chernow, for upholding the standard story. Isenberg may have a point, but I think the truth lies somewhere between Chernow's version and her own version of history.

At some point, I realized that I no longer trusted the credibility of Isenberg's version of the facts. This started when she described the Jay Treaty. The Jay Treaty was widely criticized at the time but the majority of recent scholars have recognized the pragmatism behind it. The young republic had to make certain tough concessions to Great Britain but it was worth it in the end. Eventually, a large segment of the contemporary American populace recognized the benefits of the treaty, and the Jeffersonians were actually hurt by their continued denunciation of it. Isenberg does not attempt to delve into any sort of nuance whatsoever. Instead, she accepts Jeffersonian propaganda for what it is, using it to highlight Burr as a hero of the masses, and his opponents as craven elites. This type of sloppy history persists throughout the book. Isenberg's Federalists are villains, except when they are supporting Burr. Whenever Burr dirties his hands he is being a rational, whenever his opponents do they are playing dirty politics.

Fallen Founder seems at times to be more devoted to restoring Burr's reputation than being solid history. For example, Burr went from being a consensus Republican vice presidential candidate in 1800 to being blacklisted completely and humiliated in the New York Governor's race in 1804. There must be more to this than Isenberg's attribution of scheming of Dewitt Clinton and Thomas Jefferson. She also whitewashes Burr's activities in the western frontier that led to his treason trial. While his actions may not have justified the government's prosecution, he was definitely up to something not completely legal and legitimate. Isenberg paints Burr as a great progressive, years ahead of his time in woman's rights, but she only glosses over the fact that he was a slave-owner for the majority of his life. Sure, many of the founders owned slaves but their modern biographers don't attempt to make them out to be modern defenders of liberty.

Isenberg also never really proved that Burr belongs with Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton and others in any supposed pantheon. Burr served with decent distinction in the Revolutionary War but played no part in the debate over the Constitution. Burr seems to be no more or less principled than any other politician in that era. Like most politicians, he seemed to let his principles fluctuate with the times. His greatest accomplishments, other than his treason acquittal and his duel with Hamilton, seem to be his coalition building efforts, which invite comparisons with Martin Van Buren. The argument could be made that, if anything, Burr was a politician ahead of his time and a less successful Van Buren.

There are some joys in the book. If condition yourself to look past some of Isenberg's apparent biases, there is some interesting stuff, particularly about 1790s New York politics. But Isenberg lets her affinity for her subject get in the way of solid history. It really is a shame, because Burr's story at least deserves a balanced, objective telling.

Chris Yorgason says

I learned a lot about Aaron Burr, which was why I bought the book. But I only give the book two stars because I felt the author tried way too hard to justify Burr's decisions. I felt like I was reading something written by his daughter or granddaughter and found it tiresome. I would have been happy just reading about Burr, the life he led, the decisions he made, etc., without the constant attacks on Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton and other Founding Fathers. Further, the constant references to progressive feminism were a bit

much for me and detracted from what could have been an otherwise enjoyable read.

Alexander Hamilton says

I am unsure of how to even begin with this book. Isenburg paints Burr as a true hero of America and consistently rails against historians for their "unfair" portrayal and misrepresentation of Burr and just accepting historical myth as fact; however, in the same breath, she accepts certain other propaganda as fact without ever questioning it.

It seems like it's never Burr's fault, it's everyone else's and anyone who opposes Burr is vainglorious, bumptious, arrogant, and, in almost all cases, out to get Burr and ruin his reputation.

The only reason I gave it 3-stars is because at least it's an entertaining read and had me constantly huffing and puffing at it.

Meg says

Spent a lot of this wanting to give Nancy Isenberg a hug. It's okay, Nancy, I would say to her. It's okay. I know all those people who wrote all those other books said mean things about Aaron Burr. I know. It's okay. But look! You have this opportunity here to tell me all about him in clear and precise language! And sometimes you totally are accomplishing that, and sometimes you are being awfully reactionary and shadowboxery. I did not write the lousy things about Aaron Burr, after all. I actually didn't know too much about him before I started reading your book. And now I kind of know more, except also, I am not sure how much I trust you. Because of all the reactionaritude. Because of all the "JUST BTW HIS SEX DIARY* WAS TOTALLY NORMAL!!!" which, I guess I could believe, it's just the way in which you present it that makes me think you're protesting too much. I ultimately don't care if he's considered a Founding Father or not, that's not an argument I'm invested in. I'm just curious about this guy. His life was completely unique and that alone is interesting, without all the fighting.

(Also, the thing about defending a guy, is that sometimes you should acknowledge his flaws. Really do it, not just "yeah okay this was weird HOWEVER." It helps.)

Anyway, I did learn a lot, although to be honest the exhaustive report of his treason trial almost defeated me and in the end I am still unclear as to what his actual motivations were. Enough so that I might have to pick up another book to get a new perspective. Don't be mad, Nancy. I just want to understand.

*Yeah. Sex diary. Oh Aaron.
