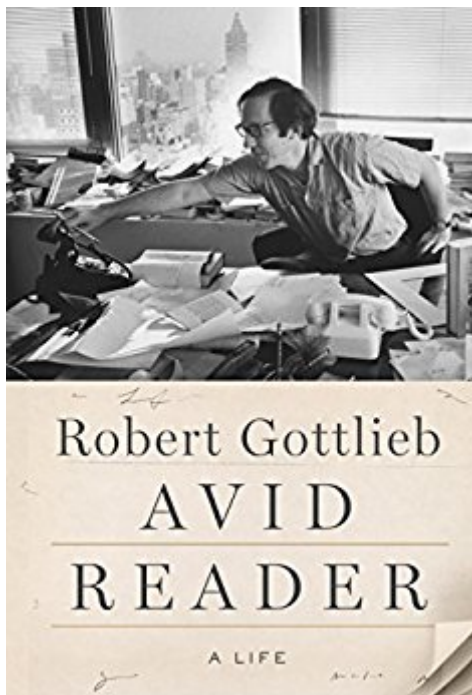


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# Avid Reader: A Life



## Synopsis

A spirited and revealing memoir by the most celebrated editor of his time After editing The Columbia Review, staging plays at Cambridge, and a stint in the greeting-card department of Macy's, Robert Gottlieb stumbled into a job at Simon and Schuster. By the time he left to run Alfred A. Knopf a dozen years later, he was the editor in chief, having discovered and edited *Catch-22* and *The American Way of Death*, among other bestsellers. At Knopf, Gottlieb edited an astonishing list of authors, including Toni Morrison, John Cheever, Doris Lessing, John le Carré, Michael Crichton, Lauren Bacall, Katharine Graham, Robert Caro, Nora Ephron, and Bill Clinton--not to mention Bruno Bettelheim and Miss Piggy. In *Avid Reader*, Gottlieb writes with wit and candor about succeeding William Shawn as the editor of *The New Yorker*, and the challenges and satisfactions of running America's preeminent magazine. Sixty years after joining Simon and Schuster, Gottlieb is still at it--editing, anthologizing, and, to his surprise, writing. But this account of a life founded upon reading is about more than the arc of a singular career--one that also includes a lifelong involvement with the world of dance. It's about transcendent friendships and collaborations, "elective affinities" and family, psychoanalysis and Bakelite purses, the alchemical relationship between writer and editor, the glory days of publishing, and--always--the sheer exhilaration of work. Photograph of Bob Gottlieb © by Jill Krementz

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## Customer Reviews

By the time he was four, Bob Gottlieb's grandfather had taught him to read. Whereupon he became a compulsive reader, spending his entire boyhood, adolescence and college years skipping class and with his nose in hundreds of books. The regimen was broken only by spending what little money he had sitting in the cheapest seats of Broadway plays and musicals, agog at the playwrights and the magic created by the performers. After a series of false starts, Bob found his niche at Simon & Schuster and later Alfred A. Knopf working with authors to create best sellers. In over 60 years punctuated by a stint as editor of *The New Yorker* he wound up knowing and being loved by everybody who was anybody in the worlds of literature and entertainment on both sides of the Atlantic. Yet his life was devoted to his work. He wrote: "I hated dinners out. Restaurants didn't appeal to me. I didn't go to movies or parties, play sports or watch sports. I literally didn't know how to turn on the TV." He would leave the office and go home to work sometimes pulling all-nighters in behalf of the people he loved and their books. He took no vacations and long holiday weekends meant he could get more work done. Gottlieb's avalanche of best sellers and the movies they spawned represent hundreds of millions of dollars pouring into the bank accounts of his publisher employers, Hollywood studios and the bank accounts of his authors. If only he had had a piece of the action. . . Yet money was never the driving force. When he and Bob Bernstein were negotiating his departure from Simon & Schuster to run Knopf, he writes: "The usual key issue of recompense didn't come up; I said at once that I didn't want to be paid more money than I was then making (I think it was forty thousand dollars a year, a lot in those days); this was a life decision, not a financial one, and I didn't want to confuse the two things." Gottlieb's intimate recollections and portraits of the twentieth century's leading lights are riveting seemingly hundreds of them including Joseph Heller, Gloria Vanderbilt, Katherine Hepburn, Bob Dylan, Katherine Graham, Lauren Bacall, Doris Lessing, Robert Caro, Nora Ephron and Bill Clinton to name a small fraction. Gottlieb was modest about his work.

When *Catch-22* lighted up the literary sky, Joseph Heller kept heaping praise on his editor. "Joe was so eager to give me credit that I had to call him one morning, after reading an interview he had given to the Times, to tell him to cut it out. I felt then and still do, that readers shouldn't be made aware of editorial interventions; they have a right to feel what they're reading comes direct from the author to them." Yet Gottlieb could be tough with his authors. He showed Lauren Bacall a proof of the jacket of her autobiography with a picture of her with Humphrey Bogart on the back. Gottlieb writes: "Absolutely not, she exploded; this was her book, not his. That really pushed my buttons. 'Listen, Bacall,' I said, 'people want to know about you and him, and you've written hundreds of pages about him. It's my job to sell your book, he's the major selling point, and he's going on the back cover.'" "Fine," she said. "Gottlieb was fearless even with a former President of the United States. About his first meeting with Bill Clinton, he wrote: "Then eager to show me that he was looking forward to our collaboration, he said something like 'We're going to have a good time. Ask anyone here. You'll find that I'm very easy to work for.' That, for me was the moment of truth. 'Actually,' I said, 'I have to point out that in this instance I'm not working for you, you're working for me.' It was cheeky, and it was deliberate. If he didn't understand that in an editorial relationship there has to be an equality, or at least a balance, or it was going to fail. Editors can't do their work properly if they're hired hands." BTW, do not be put off by the title *Avid Reader*. Normally reading is hard work and books about writers and writing are usually sure cures for insomnia. Not Gottlieb. His insight into the editing process and how to work with authors is invaluable. His prose is breezy, deliciously gossipy and frequently self-deprecating. And he drops cascades wonderful bon mots: He described Mrs. Alfred Knopf as "a tiny woman who looked as if she had gone straight from Dachau to Elizabeth Arden. No wonder everyone was scared of her." "People were rushing around on the kind of sugar high that only great junk food can trigger." But what was truly fascinating is that Gottlieb stuck with what he knew well even though his employers tried to steer him in other directions. When Si Newhouse broached the idea of his replacing Bob Bernstein, Gottlieb wrote: "Three times in five years Si asked me to replace Bob Bernstein as president of Random House, and I said no three times, each time more emphatically and ungraciously. First of all I would have never done that to Bob, who had been extraordinarily good to me through the years. I kept telling Si this would be yet another extreme example of the Peter Principle at work. Why take me whose talents lay in editing,

publishing, and presiding over a small harmonious group of people and give me a job isolated from the real workers and the real work, making decisions about such matters as how much more warehouse space was needed in Maryland? Besides, although I didn't say this, what was in it for me? I made enough money, I had enough responsibility, my reputation in the business was secure, and I had heard enough from Bob over the years to know just how knotty and daunting were the problems he faced and I would have to face." The message to the money-driven Mad men and millennials of today is "Become the best in the world at what you do and shoemaker, stick to thy last." And Bob Gottlieb's legacy is one that will last and last and last.

What a magnificent life! Denny Hatchdennyhatch@yahoo.com

This wonderful book races along....don't fall off! If you are a booklover you will be charmed by Mr. Gottlieb's life, and his good fortune to live that life just as he dreamed. This reader is having such a good time as he shares his memories!

In general, I'm not a big reader of biographies, though I do occasionally enjoy a dip into an autobiography. Reading this autobiography, however, I experienced something very rare: I was jealous. Mr. Gottlieb has lived a career I've often dreamed of for myself. For those who don't know, Mr. Gottlieb's long career in publishing has included being editor at Simon & Schuster, an editor at Knopf, and an editor at The New Yorker before ending up back at Knopf. Simply spending a lifetime whose main pursuit is reading books is enough to spark my envy. Add to that the number of important authors whom he's known and with whom he's often become friends (Heller, Caro, Tuchman, Crichton, Cheever, etc.) and it becomes easy to wish yourself into another life. If there's a warning to be found in Mr. Gottlieb's life it's that it is almost entirely dominated by work. Though he talks a bit about his youth, marriages, and other aspects of his personal life, this book is about his labors, by far. This is not problematic for those of us obsessed by books. He gives us real insight into what it takes to be an excellent editor of other people's work. And one of those appears to be: workaholism is the best way to editorial success. OK, so not everything about Mr. Gottlieb's life is desirable. If there's a theme that runs through the lives of people at the top of their profession it must be that only single-minded dedication to the work gets it done. I also have little interest in his enjoyment and involvement in modern dance. Still, for

the most part, his life as an “avid reader” is a fascinating one.

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