

MAYOR

roger smith

- A -
- follows Times style, as requested. You do it. Thomas
- ① handy anyone
- ② This is an excellent job. Your kind of assignment, I guess
- ③ personally, I don't like a little ease on the eastern and
- Snow-year-friend elements of this book. But that's
- Your judgment
- ④ The 2d + 31 Ps from the end seem redundant. But that's
- a quibble. Overall, this is a fine review

MAYOR: An Autobiography. By Edward I. Koch. 364 pages.

Simon and Schuster. \$15.95.

One should not be misled by the subtitle of this book. It is far from being an autobiography. The story of New York City mayor Edward I. Koch's life prior to his entry into politics is confined to a single paragraph that provides a bare minimum of biographical data. The author's military service, for example, is summed up in four words: "I went to war."

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"Mayor" is a candid political memoir, published, unlike most books of its kind, while the author is still in office.

The mayor explains in a foreword that his friends and advisors advised him against publishing the book now because it would make new enemies for him and damage his political career. He decided not to follow their advice because he didn't want his book to suffer the usual fate of political memoirs that are "purchased and placed on coffee tables and read by very few and have no major impact."

"Mayor" seems certain to command a wide readership. It is written in a breezy, unpretentious style and is full of amusing anecdotes about prominent politicians.

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More often than not, those politicians are portrayed in a less than flattering light. From the author's point of view, City Council ~~chairwoman~~ ^{president} Carol Bellamy appears ~~as~~ a weak and incompetent ^{person} (he describes how she once broke into tears in his office over a minor setback), former ~~g~~overnor Hugh Carey a doltish blunderer, former deputy mayor Herman Badillo a self-centered man who ~~is~~ ^{is} impossible to get along with, and former mayor Abraham Beame a ⁱpolitical hack, to cite just a few examples.

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Describing a visit to Gracie Mansion shortly after he was elected to his first term as ~~mayor~~, the author says he was flabbergasted when the Beames referred to one another in his presence as "Mr. Beame" and "Mrs. Beame" while addressing him as "Ed." The mayor-elect was told by the incumbent that Mrs. Beame had decided to take piano lessons because there was a piano in Gracie Mansion. "I could hear 'Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle' in my head," he recounts.

The author seems to relish the opportunity to depict his political foes and subordinates in their weakest moments. He gives the reader a sense of ^{his} ability to cut through pretense in his dealing with others and to analyze shrewdly their actions and motives. But he seems at times to have been lacking in ~~empathy~~ ^{Sympathy}. . . . "You don't care about personal relationships. . . . it's one of your defects," a subordinate who had just been demoted told the author.

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This cuts wrapping

The author has no hesitation about pointing out his virtues, and at times his self-congratulatory prose can have a numbing effect: "I have a very stick-to-it kind of personality. If I undertake something, I can't be intimidated, and I move ahead. I'm really very good at getting things done. I'm a very pragmatic guy."

"Mayor" takes the reader chronologically through

Keach's
the author's

years as a reform Democrat in Greenwich (he honed his debating skills as a soapbox speaker on behalf of Adlai Stevenson), Village ^A his unsuccessful campaign for a New York state

assembly seat and his election to the City Council,

his fight to save the city from financial collapse, his

confrontations with ^{minorities} ^A over issues such as the closing

of Sydenham Hospital in Harlem, his ebullient leadership

during the 1980 transit strike, his strained

relationship with President Carter during the 1980

presidential campaign, and his unsuccessful ^S run for ~~the~~

governorship (which he concedes was a mistake).

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The reader gets the impression that the author never was as liberal as he was thought to be in his early days as a reformer, committed to eradicating the style of politics practiced by men such as Democratic leader Carmine DeSapio ("the boss of bosses, a backroom man, a cutter of deals"), or ^{during} his tenure ^{an antiwar} as congressman. He never identified ^{with} the left wing of the Democratic Party, and he had little use for radical politicians such as Bella Abzug. ~

At times, "Mayor" provides a self-portrayal of a politician who seems to be incorruptable because of his almost fanatical devotion to causes such as the defense of Israel. But the book also presents an unmistakably opportunistic side of the mayor, especially when it describes his relationships with the Carter and Reagan camps' during the 1980 campaign and his attempts to extract concessions from the two candidates in return for his support.

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*and that you know
why? because he has
a personal life*

The mayor provides almost no information about his personal life, and it is curious that his friend and cultural affairs commissioner Bess Myerson is not mentioned. He does, however, deal indirectly with the often raised issue of whether or not he is a homosexual by saying that he is certain that his opponent in the 1977 Democratic primary for mayor, Mario Cuomo, was behind a smear campaign to portray him as a homosexual.

"Mayor" was written in collaboration with the author's press secretary, William Rauch. Much of the book is in the form of dialogue that the author wrote in a notebook from memory at periodic intervals during his tenure as mayor. Many of the conversations were sound as if they ^{were} paraphrased.

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The author dictated parts of the book into a tape recorder, and his press secretary helped him assemble the taped recollections into book format. That the book could have used more judicious editing is apparent in places such as the chapter on the 1980 presidential election, with its seemingly endless repetition of positions the mayor took on Israel.

The book is also burdened by cumbersome footnotes which are used to identify political figures or events with which the reader might be unfamiliar. "Mayor" succeeds because of the author's skill as a raconteur. Integrating the material in the footnotes with the text would have improved the flow of the story.

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