



# Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family

*Condoleezza Rice*

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Condoleezza Rice has excelled as a diplomat, political scientist, and concert pianist. Her achievements run the gamut from helping to oversee the collapse of communism in Europe and the decline of the Soviet Union, to working to protect the country in the aftermath of 9-11, to becoming only the second woman - and the first black woman ever -- to serve as Secretary of State.

But until she was 25 she never learned to swim.

Not because she wouldn't have loved to, but because when she was a little girl in Birmingham, Alabama, Commissioner of Public Safety Bull Connor decided he'd rather shut down the city's pools than give black citizens access.

Throughout the 1950's, Birmingham's black middle class largely succeeded in insulating their children from the most corrosive effects of racism, providing multiple support systems to ensure the next generation would live better than the last. But by 1963, when Rice was applying herself to her fourth grader's lessons, the situation had grown intolerable. Birmingham was an environment where blacks were expected to keep their head down and do what they were told -- or face violent consequences. That spring two bombs exploded in Rice's neighborhood amid a series of chilling Klu Klux Klan attacks. Months later, four young girls lost their lives in a particularly vicious bombing.

So how was Rice able to achieve what she ultimately did?

Her father, John, a minister and educator, instilled a love of sports and politics. Her mother, a teacher, developed Condoleezza's passion for piano and exposed her to the fine arts. From both, Rice learned the value of faith in the face of hardship and the importance of giving back to the community. Her parents' fierce unwillingness to set limits propelled her to the venerable halls of Stanford University, where she quickly rose through the ranks to become the university's second-in-command. An expert in Soviet and Eastern European Affairs, she played a leading role in U.S. policy as the Iron Curtain fell and the Soviet Union disintegrated. Less than a decade later, at the apex of the hotly contested 2000 presidential election, she received the exciting news – just shortly before her father's death – that she would go on to the White House as the first female National Security Advisor.

As comfortable describing lighthearted family moments as she is recalling the poignancy of her mother's cancer battle and the heady challenge of going toe-to-toe with Soviet leaders, Rice holds nothing back in this remarkably candid telling. This is the story of Condoleezza Rice that has never been told, not that of an ultra-accomplished world leader, but of a little girl – and a young woman -- trying to find her place in a sometimes hostile world and of two exceptional parents, and an extended family and community, that made all the difference.

## **Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family Details**

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Rice**

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### Jenny says

I had the opportunity to see Ms. Rice speak during the author's breakfast at last year's Book Expo America (May 2010) in New York City. She gave a compelling speech that even led Jon Stewart, host of the breakfast, and political adversary - if you will - to state, "Don't.Make.Me.Like.You...." I think hers was a story worth telling, for sure. She grew up in Birmingham, Alabama during the 1960's in the middle of the civil rights movement. Yet, her parents didn't allow the discrimination, inherent at the time, to stop them from achieving success.

Much of this book seemed a tribute to Ms. Rice's parents. She wrote about her childhood and the wonderful influence of her parents. Parents who insisted she achieved an education, they provided her with all their love and made her believe through their encouragement and nurturing that, despite the racial tensions and, despite any and all possible barriers, that she could be whatever she wanted. There's a picture of Condoleezza standing in front of the White House when she was about 8-years-old; though she doesn't remember it, Condoleezza stated her parents reported her saying she would work there one day. And as we all know, she was right! "Condi's" story is also, then, a testament to the power of education.

One of the aspects of this book that I really enjoyed was getting to know her parents. For me, personally, it was inspiring to see an example of really good parenting and how well the child turned out. Considering I teach parenting and work fully in the field of child welfare, where people believe that a child can't be raised well without beating into submission, or feel that there are just too many barriers to even dream of any success, or feel that criticizing or ignoring their children is better than encouraging and supporting, this story was a breath of fresh air. I think that almost no one can compare themselves to Condi growing up during that time in the United States and excelling to where she is now, and abjectly state that there's just too much to overcome.

But that being said, there were moments when I felt Condoleezza chronicled her childhood a little too thoroughly. Then, contrastingly, the second half of the book jumped through the rest of her years to where she is now. I had invested so much time into her grade school years that to fly through her twenties, thirties, and forties was a little disconcerting. In the second half of the book, she talks more about her education in soviet policies and her political work at the White House. I did find this part interesting, to a degree, but felt it didn't flow well with the nature of the first part of the book. She could easily have made this book into two.

So, while I felt these aforementioned things, I still would definitely recommend this book for those interested in Condoleezza's background or for those looking for a good memoir about how she overcame obstacles to find the success she has today. There is also apparently a young adult version of this book, Condoleezza Rice: A Memoir of My Extraordinary, Ordinary Family and Me, that may be a good way to reach those younger readers (though it should be noted I haven't read any of that version).

Taken from [www.takemawayreading.com](http://www.takemawayreading.com)

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### Abdul says

What a fascinating woman and journey. Too bad that she used her talents and skills to support a war we had no business engaging in. It was a good well thought out page turner.

## Carol says

I expected to like this book a lot, but it just rubbed me wrong. Almost every page repeated how difficult it was to grow up black in the South (which I'm sure was true) and that she is faced every day with the fact she is a black woman. Did someone react to her in a certain way because she is black? Did she get noticed and rewarded because she was black? She did benefit from affirmative action and discusses this several times. The book is an homage to her parents who were educated themselves and provided their daughter with every educational and cultural experience possible. She is extremely bright but was also in the right place at the right time to benefit from affirmative action. I guess I have never thought of myself as a 'white woman' and what being white meant positively or negatively. I don't think of myself as different from anyone else. There have been restrictions as well as benefits to being female, but it had nothing to do with color. It is time to get over the racial thing.

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## Scott Taylor says

During the Bush years, I was always impressed at how level-headed Condi seemed. This book confirms that it was more than an act, she actually appears to be very similar in her real personality. Steady, stable, good background, avoided many of the pitfalls people fall into during their youth. She was a practiced and accomplished pianist, figure skater, and diplomacy nut. Her family provided her with a framework that really allowed her to accomplish anything she set her mind to doing.

That being said, I didn't learn a whole lot else from this book. She was nice, her family was nice, despite having some troublesome times in Alabama growing up she lived a fairly sheltered existence. The moments where she discusses her politics and beliefs, and how these came about, were the most interesting. Her father became a Republican simply because they allowed him to vote whereas the Democrats in the south at the time did not. She also differs from many of the GOP in some of her thinking. Just goes to show that people are individuals in spite of their affiliations.

The version I read was the audio book read by Condi herself. Well done and added that unique touch of extra meaning that can only be had from the actual writer.

Thanks for reading.

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## Fletcher says

I live in Birmingham. I grew up in the segregated south. I am impressed with anyone (white or black) that can come out of the mess of those times with such grace and forgiveness. She is an amazing woman. She sets the bar high and has little sympathy for folks who cry discrimination. She holds only herself accountable for her strengths and weaknesses. She credits her incredible parents for her work ethic and for always believing in her.

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## Gordon Nickerson says

Growing up in Birmingham, Alabama as a black American during the Civil Rights era and remaining completely unscathed would undoubtedly be impossible. Though throughout much her of childhood, Condoleezza Rice's parents were able to insulate her from the most obscene of Birmingham's racism. However, by the early 1960s it grew impossible to shield her from such heinous crimes as the church bombings and neighborhood shootings that were becoming ever more common. But as her memoir Extraordinary, Ordinary People shows, Condoleezza managed to get through it with a surprising amount of forgiveness and her dignity intact, holding only herself, not any seemingly-restrictive circumstances, responsible for her successes and failures. Her extraordinary parents made an immense effort to provide her with an ordinary life by making considerable sacrifices to better her chances of success. One quote in particular stood out: "We love you and will give you everything we can to help you succeed. But there are no excuses and there is no place for victims." Condoleezza followed in her parents footsteps, becoming an extraordinary person of her own unwilling to accept her disadvantageous situation as an excuse for failure. Yes indeed, the title is fitting.

Condoleezza Rice candidly shares all the moments, joyful and heavyhearted, that shaped her in this engaging and insightful book on race and family. She is both assertive and empowering in style, but still satisfyingly simple. There is no attempt at elegance in her writing, the simple insight into her life is enough to provoke meaningful thought. Simple does not equate to poor or boring writing; I was consistently engaged by both these thinking points and the abundance of vividly personal historical detail and knowledge that only a first hand account could contain.

For a story that could have easily been emotionally charged and heart-wrenching, Condoleezza manages to keep her own emotions at bay. She does not play upon the reader's emotions either--the story in its simplicity is enough to make it moving. And while she is quite a brilliant mind and an accomplished person, she remains understated throughout. I would think someone who was in college at age 15 and played piano with Yo Yo Ma and for the queen would want to toot their own horn, so to speak, but Condoleezza remains steadfastly humble.

Condoleezza shares some powerful messages in her story that an array of audiences will be able to appreciate. Though, I think that any minority, not just racial, and youth will find some of her words of wisdom particularly inspiring. One idea that pervades the story is disallowing yourself to "play the victim." Condoleezza was at a disadvantage from the outset, but she did not allow her circumstances and background to stop her from achieving great things. I realize after reading this book that it doesn't matter where you are from, it only matters where you are going.

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## Demetria says

I love Extraordinary, Ordinary People: A Memoir of Family, by Condoleezza Rice, because it speaks to me. My parents grew up in the South, but my family has none of the experiences that most people think of when they think of the southern living in the 50s. There are three reasons for this:

1. My grandparents were educated .My grandmother was a midwife who worked in the local community. I don't know what my grandfather did for a living but I know he worked outside of the home.
2. My grandparents owned their land. They farmed and often employed people in the community to help in the fields.
3. My grandparents raised their children away from racism and segregation. They had a big family so they

are at home and avoided issues like “white only” restrooms when raising their kids. My mother and her siblings went to the private family school so there was no segregation on that front either. My grandparents had their own car so there was never an occasion to sit at the back of the bus.

This means that my mom grew up in middle to upper middle class home. That is a stark contrast from what most people think of when they think of the deep south in the 1950s. The standard portrayal usually involves uneducated black people in the service community. People tend to ignore the stories of people who do not fit that image. *The Help* is an example of this type of “love to adore the servant black character” fiction and it is disgusting when a book like that gets such rave reviews for reinforcing negative stereotypes by having boring characters filling roles that we have seen over and over again. I often wonder if the people who give books like this great review are nursing some desire to return to a world like that.

Reading Condi’s book felt like coming home. It was the first time that I read a book about a black family in the south that resonated with me. Her stories are similar to my stories. I enjoyed reading about her journey because it was more similar to my journey than anything that I have previously read. I was pleasantly surprised by her commentary on why she dislikes the term African-American and prefers being called black. Her arguments are the same as mine, and I like knowing that there are other people like me. It saddens me that the book is nonfiction and will only be read by people who read biographies. I wish there was more fiction written with these characters in the major role.

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### **Michelle Wegner says**

I have always admired Condoleezza Rice from afar. She seems poised, put-together, confident, yet humble. Reading her memoir was truly a delight. I was interested in her life, but ended up fascinated by it.

The thing that drew me in to her story was the relationship she had with her parents. She never claimed her parents did everything right, or were perfect, but what they did do right was stellar in my opinion. They were raising a leader intentionally from birth, and we have tried to raise our 3 girls in the same way.

It was encouraging to read a story about someone who had every odd stacked against them and their family, yet persevere and do what was right and expected. Condoleezza and her family lived through radical segregation in Birmingham Alabama. People they knew died because they were black. Children they knew were killed because they got in the way. Like every young American, I have seen movies and read books about the deep south and how difficult it was (and in some cases still is) to survive, let alone come out with a passion for leadership and love for people. Reading the stories from her perspective as a child growing up there sounded more like living in the middle of a war zone than “segregation.” This backdrop of segregation provided a unique perspective for Condoleezza as she went on to have an extraordinarily successful career.

I really enjoyed the stories she told from her political life that could never be on the news. Her brief meeting with Boris Yeltsin was especially funny and again, showed her remarkable leadership skills.

I really hope to meet her someday just to chat. That would be awesome.

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### **Natalia says**

I would probably not have picked this book up on my own, but my book club selected it, and I'm so glad I had a reason to read it.

As the book is focused on her parents' influence on her life, it starts with her childhood and ends with her father's death. Unfortunately, this means that the book leaves out her time serving as Secretary of State. In fact, it's probably not a huge loss, since the end of the book is a lot less candid than the beginning. It makes sense, since the people she talks about at Stanford and in her political career are people she still interacts with and anything she talked about would still be recent. It's hard to really lay things out on the table before some time has passed and everyone gets a little distance.

I really had no idea what the experience of middle class black families in the south was like during and soon after segregation. Most of the histories of the time seem to focus on lower- and working-class people, so she paints a picture that was really new to me.

Dr Rice herself has had an extraordinary life. She is very accomplished and I enjoyed reading about it. She's very inspirational. On top of all the historical context, I simply enjoyed reading about an ambitious and successful woman.

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## **Cher says**

### **4 stars - It was great. I loved it.**

This was the most interesting memoir I have ever read, though to be fair the memoir genre is not one I frequently visit. Condoleezza Rice has led a fascinating life, and I view her as a highly intelligent, independent, sophisticated, well-rounded, graceful, courageous, self-sufficient, determined woman that is leading a very fulfilling life, which includes choosing a childfree path for herself. You could say I'm a fan.

I was impressed reading about her experience at Stanford University and her quick achievement of turning the university profitable and maintaining that status during her time of managing the university budget. When difficult decisions had to be made, she was able to accomplish what those before her could not. Why haven't we placed her at the head of the US government budget? Of course we haven't even had a budget for the last several years, but I digress...

Her memoir is surprisingly light on government politics, though there is a lot of discussion regarding university politics. I do not agree with all of her political beliefs, and nor do you need to in order to enjoy this book (I'm a Libertarian so I don't agree with 99% of current or recent politicians). If you have little interest in general in politics, I would say that less than 15% of the book was directly related to federal politics, so please don't let that keep you away from this inspiring read.

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Favorite Quote: Because my father never made reason and faith enemies of each other, my religious conviction was strengthened.

First Sentence: John and Angelena Rice were extraordinary, ordinary people.

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## **Jean says**

Condoleezza Rice (1954-) is a Stanford University professor. She was the youngest provost in Stanford history. She was the first black woman to be the National Security Advisor and the first black female

Secretary of State.

Rice was born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. She grew up during the civil rights battles in the south. Her father was a minister and educator; and her mother was a teacher and musician. Rice trained to be a concert pianist before changing her university major to political science. Her expertise is Soviet and Eastern European Affairs. she learned the Russian and Czech languages. Her professor and mentor was Madeline Albright's father, Josef Korbel (1907-1927), at the University of Denver.

The book is focused on her early childhood in Alabama during the fight for Civil Rights. The story is mostly about her parents and the forces that shaped the generation of black middle-class families. Toward the end of the book, Rice tells of her time at RAND and her research work there and how she started at Stanford. In her first year of teaching, Rice won the highest award at Stanford for teaching. She tells of working for President George H.W. Bush and a little about working for President George W. Bush. That time is covered in another book.

The book is written more in the style of a journalist rather than the academic style expected of a professor. The book is eminently readable. I enjoy Rice's style of writing.

I read this as an e-book on my Kindle app for my iPad. The book is 370 pages long and was published in 2011.

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## Mary says

I recommend the audio version, because Dr. Rice reads it herself. I don't agree with many of her political viewpoints, but I respect and admire her immensely. She is a smart, thoughtful, educated woman who believes in hard work and determination. She also describes how she and her family would engage people who held views different from their own, and respect people with different opinions. I think we all could learn a lesson from the Rice family when it comes to being good citizens.

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## Sarah says

While not elegantly written, Ms. Rice's memoir is compelling, direct, and almost charming. It is also exceedingly well titled. John and Angelena Rice were indeed a fairly ordinary couple of citizens (their relative prosperity and comfort in 1960s Birmingham notwithstanding), but their devotion to their daughter's education was certainly a bit extreme, and her subsequent success was (and is) without a doubt extraordinary.

I wasn't necessarily surprised that Ms. Rice started college at 15 or that she seemed to meet with success at every turn, but I stopped reading in order to exclaim aloud, "did you know she dated professional football players?" And somehow the details of her competitive figure skating years were lost on me during the Bush administration.

As the title indicates, the book is not about politics or government. But there are plenty of political moments. Because her focus was family, the narrative leaves off when her father died, just after George W. Bush was "elected" (quotation marks mine). Therefore, the reader gets a fascinating glimpse into the fall of Communism and the Baltic conflicts of the H.W. Bush administration, but almost nothing of our current

century. Her forthcoming book, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington*, will likely fill that hole.

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### **Darrell says**

Superb. Condoleezza Rice's book chronicles her family history and carries us through the decades before she serves in the country as Bush's Secretary of State. As a little girl, she became a first-hand witness to the racial drama occurring in Birmingham during the turbulent 1960's. But the most memorable thing in this book is the story of the sacrifices that her loving parents made so that she can shoot as high as she can and become the Condoleezza Rice that we have seen in the public eye. Rice spins a wonderful book here. Check it out for yourself.

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### **Melinda says**

The title of this book definitely fits the bill; all of the Rice's were just that, absolutely extraordinary. I listened to this book, and loved that Condoleezza Rice was the narrator. Not only did I learn immensely about the author, but I also grew to appreciate her and admire her myriad of accomplishments. It interested me to discover that she had ties to Colorado, having graduated from DU, and having lived in Denver for several years. I liked how she said that she feels a great connection and love when in the Rocky Mountains, and that it was while in Denver that she pursued figure skating. She offers fascinating insight on affirmative action, racism, academia, education, the plights of those living in poverty, the benefits of a strong family unit, national security, U.S. and Russian relations, and weaves this plus more into an entertaining narrative. She is definitely the beneficiary of a strong family; and it was endearing to hear about the sacrifices her parents made to help her succeed in all of her many pursuits. Her parents were equally captivating individuals, who believed firmly that good education, religion and family were necessary for success. It was also interesting to notice how many prominent political figures she had the pleasure to meet when she was younger (her family lived next to the Netanyahus, her mentor at DU was Madeleine Albright's father, to name a couple) which notoriety served her well as her academic and political career advanced. All throughout, Rice is extremely modest, truthful and sincere as she reflects on from where she has come. A truly exemplary character!

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