



## Evel

*Leigh Montville*

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**From *New York Times* bestselling author Leigh Montville, this riveting and definitive new biography pulls back the red, white, and blue cape on a cultural icon—and reveals the unknown, complex, and controversial man known to millions around the world as Evel Knievel.**

Evel Knievel was a high-flying daredevil, the father of extreme sports, the personification of excitement and danger and showmanship . . . and in the 1970s Knievel represented a unique slice of American culture and patriotism. His jump over the fountains at Caesar's Palace led to a crash unlike anything ever seen on television, and his attempt to rocket over Snake River Canyon in Idaho was something only P. T. Barnum could have orchestrated. The dazzling motorcycles and red-white-and-blue outfits became an integral part of an American decade. Knievel looked like Elvis . . . but on any given Saturday afternoon millions tuned in to the small screen to see this real-life action hero tempt death.

But behind the flash and the frenzy, who was the man? Bestselling author Leigh Montville masterfully explores the life of the complicated man from the small town of Butte, Montana. He delves into Knievel's amazing place in pop culture, as well as his notorious dark side—and his complex and often contradictory relationships with his image, the media, his own family, and his many demons. Evel Knievel's story is an all-American saga, and one that is largely untold. Leigh Montville once again delivers a definitive biography of a one-of-a-kind sports legend.

## Evel Details

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## From Reader Review Evel for online ebook

### Bill Sleeman says

Evel: The High-Flying Life of Evel Knievel: American Showman, Daredevil, and Legend by Leigh Montville.

My sisters had the Beatles and my older brother had Hendrix but I...I had a scrap wood ramp and a Huffy bike ... with these I would jump over anything, anywhere (sometimes I even made it). My brother and sisters may have had rock stars to idolize but I had Evel Knievel! Any kid who grew up in the seventies who didn't try to be Evel at one time or another wasn't paying attention. And, as this book demonstrates, by the mid-1970s the man was everywhere. Like thousands of fans I saw the George Hamilton movie, I had the Evel Knievel action figure and motorcycle and I even saw the man himself jump his motorcycle at Cobo Arena in Detroit. Growing up I was mad for Evel, and I wasn't alone in this fascination, kids, men and women (plenty of women if the stories are to be believed) were all perfectly willing to spend their money and more to see him jump and if he crashed, well all the better. It was mad and author Leigh Montville in this excellent biography captures all of the madness that was Evel's life!

For a book about a self-made legend it is well researched and it moves along at a breakneck pace that seems wholly appropriate to the subject. Knievel was a master showman, a character larger than life as Montville shows but he was also a drunk, a cheat, a swindler and a wife beater and the author doesn't shy away from this but helps the reader understand how these were all parts of what made Knievel such a success. He lived his life his way and despite the flaws, of which there are many, he deserves the excellent and perhaps final (finally) complete biography that Montville has written.

This is one exciting, funny, and sad book A must read for everyone who survived the seventies or wants to better understand a key moment in pop culture.

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### Don says

This book has two niches--one as a document of American hucksterism, similar to a book about PT Barnum or Col. Tom Parker, and one as a riveting historical document to whoever happened to be an adolescent boy in the 1970s. I fall into the later group. My interest was further picqued because I recall so little of actual Evel Knievel. I caught him a time or two on Saturday afternoon TV, but I didn't know how to see the jump over (into) Snake River or some of his more famous stunts. That didn't stop Evel from being a daily topic of conversation, especially with any buddy who happened to own their own Evel stuntcycle. So the play by play of the Snake River jump is probably boring minutiae to most--I was on the edge of my seat. That Evel turns out to be a boor, misogynist, hypocrite, felon, etc, is of little consequence--he mainly lived in our minds as a little rubber figure who had no fear.

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### Alan says

To an American boy in the early 1970s, Evel Knieval was a member of the Trinity. He, along with the Fonz and Steve Austin (the six million dollar man), defined awesome for my generation. His Snake River jump in

1974 remains as indelible an image my mind as the moon landings.

As this biography shows, he was not the man we 8 year old boys thought he was. He was kind of a jerk. Still, Montville manages to show why he was so compelling, despite all his flaws. He embodied a certain ideal that middle America, scarred by the Vietnam war, frightened by the counter-culture movement and feeling betrayed after Watergate, desperately craved.

The adult in me can sadly shake his head at the fallen icon, but the boy in me still misses playing with the Evel Knieval action figure on his Skycycle with rev-up action.

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## **Paul Pessolano says**

“Evel” by Leigh Montville, published by Doubleday.

Category – Biography/Motor Sports

This is one of the most fascinating biographies that I have read. True, it may not be about a great ruler, scientist, or discoverer. It is about Robert Craig Knievel, or as he is better known, “Evel Knievel.

Evel Knievel may well have surpassed P.T. Barnum as the greatest con man that ever lived. Evel was born in Butte, Montana and from his earliest days displayed a temperament that would last throughout his life. He was a thief, swindler, and cheat among other things, but was never caught. He would steal from anyone, including his closest friends.

It was only after he felt he was being close to being caught that he started to take risks on his motorcycle. He was the father of the X-games, BMX Motocross, and other sports that contained high risk. He found that people had a desire to see a man risk his life doing stunts. In the beginning Evel would crash, wind up in the hospital, crash, wind up in the hospital, in fact he became a celebrity due to the number of days he spent in hospitals and how many broken bones were caused by his crashes. Remember he was doing his jumps without the help of the technology that we have today that can determine – in advance – what was needed to make a successful jump. He did not even use a speedometer; he just did it by feel.

Evel became such a personality that he had little time for his wife and children. He was a womanizer of the first order, drank heavily, and spent his money as fast, or faster than he earned it. He had houses, cars, and boats. It was said that he had more boats than the Chilean Navy. It was believed that his house in Butte was worth over \$900,000.

It was early on in his career that he envisioned jumping the Snake River Canyon. This “failure” was the beginning of the end for Evel. His beating of Shelly Saltman probably put an end to his career.

A well told story that will keep the reader glued to the book to the very end. Anyone who lived through the “Evel” era must read this book.

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## **Robert says**

This is what a biography should be: a well-researched, well-written examination of where a person comes from and what makes his or her life worth examining. Evel Knievel was a bona fide superhero to me and my generation as we were growing up, but we didn't know the whole story. Montville expertly tells the rise and fall of self-made man Robert Craig Knievel, the moral of which is this: admire Evel's achievements but don't admire the man.

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### **Tina Hamilton says**

One of the best biographies I've read in a long time. Truth be told, I had low expectations. I was delighted to be wrong. The author did his homework on this book, and after completing the book I felt I had a sense of the man and his many facets. Evel, warts and all, comes alive in this book. Evel Knievel came onto the scene at just the right time. There was no internet, cable TV, video games, etc. What one could do was watch Wide World of Sports, listen to pre-jump interviews with Evel, and keep fingers crossed as he made motorcycle jumps that were often horrifically miscalculated. When we talk of folk heroes such as Johnny Appleseed, Casey Jones, and others, I almost want to add Evel Knievel to the list. Did any man ever look better in a cape and crotch-hugging bell bottoms?

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### **Rex McCulloch says**

This book brought to mind something I think about a lot--how blissful the ignorance of childhood can be. I don't raise children, but I'm sure it must be hard for parents, especially today, deciding how much they need to know and when. Growing up in the South, I saw the confederate flag, for instance, everywhere, and I wasn't told that it was anything but a historical symbol--and that only because I had relatives who taught me some history. This was ignorance, of course, but I don't think I needed to know at a young age of the flag's connection to racism, because I would've come to this knowledge anyway, and did. Likewise, I didn't need to know at the time that Evel Knievel was a total sociopath, Elvis was a drug addict, and even Muhammad Ali didn't always act as a role model. As an adult, I can appreciate them in all their complexity, and I'm glad too much knowledge wasn't forced on me. Then again, I can only speak for myself.

As for the book, other reviewers have covered it more than adequately. It's very absorbing, written in a sort of gonzo-hip magazine style that isn't very annoying and fits the subject. In terms of pacing, it spends most of the time on all the important events, but milks the build-up to the Snake River Canyon jump interminably and makes most of Evel's life between these events an ultimately tedious blur of hedonism, which it sounds like it was. Guys who can remember revving that toy motorcycle up and watching it careen against the far wall of the basement room will enjoy the ride back to '70s, when a freak like Evel Knievel could conquer America.

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### **Jim Cooper says**

If I had known going into this book what Evel Knievel was really like behind the scenes, I would probably have never bought a copy. But that would have been a mistake.

Leigh Montville is a master story-teller and he picked the perfect subject. Knievel's life is immensely enjoyable to read about - the stories are fantastic. And the way Montville writes makes you feel like you are sitting in a car with him listening to his stories.

The chapters on the Snake River Canyon jump alone are worth the price of the book.

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### **Jason McCuiston says**

Evel Knievel was one of my childhood heroes. This biography was hard to read at times, because it was a warts-and-all depiction of a very flawed man. Montville does an excellent job of showing every facet of this complicated public figure, charting his rise from small-time hustler and petty criminal to worldwide superstar of the '70s, to the self-destructive aftermath of losing his fame and fortune. A page turner that is hard to put down.

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### **Jesse says**

Took a while to get through because I was so busy, and because I so truly detested its subject, but Montville does a great job making an entertaining story out of a terrible man's ridiculous life.

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### **Lynn Smith says**

I really enjoyed this biography. I grew up watching Evel Knievel jump. His most famous jump (the failed Snake River Canyon jump) occurred when I was 11. I anxiously followed it on the news on 9/8/74 (it was only broadcast on closed-circuit tv, the forerunner of pay per view) and then watched it the following Saturday on ABC's Wide World of Sports. I remember watching his final jump live on Wide World of Sports. I owned an Evel Knievel stunt cycle and made my own little wooden ramp and used to jump it over my Matchbox cars. I wish I'd held onto it because those things are worth a lot of money today!

The author treats Knievel very even-handedly, giving him credit where credit is due but not attempted to make Knievel into something he was not. Robert Craig (Evel) Knievel was not a good man. While he portrayed American values to the public, he was a known liar, cheater, adulterer, and many other things. He was a master showman and manipulator. Ultimately the fame he so desperately sought and achieved was taken away by his own stupidity when he beat up a former publicist who wrote an unflattering book about him, and really thought he could get away with it. He lived his final years in bad health and without much fame and died quietly. They say before he died that he found Jesus. I hope his conversion was genuine.

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### **Joel says**

I'm torn. On the one hand, the author takes almost 400 pages to say what I can say in five words: Evel Knievel was a dick. On the other hand, it's pretty entertaining to read about the extent of the guy's dickishness (and about his stunts).

Probably only worth reading if you were a kid in the 1970's.

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## **Meg Marie says**

I finished this book, but just barely. The basic take away is Evel Kneivel is a TOTAL ASSHOLE and an absolute douchebag, and this writer really enjoys using literary devices instead of telling a story - it's like she was trying to write a tall tale. I stop counting how many paragraphs began with "A story" because it made me want to go on a murderous rampage. Skip the 400 book, just read a Wiki article about him instead.

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## **Ian Duncan says**

An extremely entertaining, well-written biography of an outlandish daredevil, a man as unconventional and ostentatious as the 70's themselves. Page after page of fascinating anecdotes: Knievel was so assured of his godlike invincibility after surviving numerous death-defying feats, he once told an escort she could treat him "like a normal, mortal man." Another: to every jump he brought a felt-lined attache containing dozens bright steel parts. When questioned, he explained they were replacement parts for all the rods, plates, and screws already in his body; so that, in the event of a crash, doctors would have the replacement parts on hand.

Well-researched, and authoritative as possible given Knievel's propensity for exaggeration and outright lies, Leigh Montville reveals a man both triumphant and catastrophic, comic and tragic, admirable and abominable. From Knievel's beginnings as cat burglar and con man in Butte, Montana (dubbed "Evil" Knievel while spending a night in jail) to his status as a household name and action-figure hero, to his latter years of obscurity, regret, and repentance, "The High-Flying Life of Evel" easily soars onto my top-ten list of most interesting biographies.

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## **bamlinden says**

In a nutshell...Evel Knievel was one-of-a-kind. You could say he was an innovator. You could also say he was a swindler. You could say he inspired a generation of kids. You could also say he was the epitome of a hypocrite.

Regardless of what you may think...Evel Knievel is a name synonymous with the 1970's and the wild, crazy living of the times.

A couple quick quotes from the book that stuck with me...

"Robert Craig Knievel was a one-man tidal wave when he came through more ordinary lives."

"There was a reason why toymakers always favored cartoon superheroes over real-life people: the cartoon characters never grew old, never lost their powers, never drank bourbon, never claimed to have slept with eight different women in a day, never whacked their former publicist with a baseball bat, never went to jail."

How's that for painting a picture?

I was amazed at just how crazy, irresponsible, rude, uncaring and just all around self-centered Evel Knievel was. I was equally amazed at how much I felt sorry for the guy by the end of this book.

He played the hand he was dealt and in the end seemed to have a lot of regrets. If I met this guy at the bar in

his heyday...I'd probably be disgusted by his antics. But what's odd is that I was completely embroiled in his story. Faults and all.

Frankly, this guy has no redeeming qualities. He swindled more people out of money than anyone else I've ever read about. He cheated on his wife (how she ever stayed with him for over 35 years is beyond me) constantly. He bet on anything and everything. He had a God complex. He commanded the attention of every room he stepped in. And rules meant nothing to him.

So why do I care about this guy?

I'm at a loss. Maybe it's because my memories of him prior to reading this book were of the iconic jumps he performed when I was a kid. Maybe it was because I connect more with the wind-up toy than I do with the fatally flawed character in this book.

Maybe deep down (real deep), he is a good person.

Whatever it is, I found his story to be an interesting one.

This book's biggest struggle is the fact it was written in 2011 and the author never got to interview Evel himself. All the info was taken from other sources and interviews conducted with friend, family and associates. That said, it's a pretty complete account of his life in my opinion.

It's a very slow starter of a book. The first 2-3 chapters don't hardly even mention Knievel. It's all setting the scene. His hometown of Butte, Montana back in the 30's and 40's. Basically the life he was brought into and was raised in (a huge reason he became the person he did).

It picked up steam in the middle chapters and some of the stories are pretty amazing. The stunts, the injuries, the flaws.

The last few chapters really reveal who Evel Knievel was. Spending time in jail, his injuries catching up to him and his eventual death in 2007. He entered the world quietly and exited with an equal whimper.

But the story in between was worth the read. If you remember the name Evel Knievel, this would be a good read for you.

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