Ulysses S. Grant was hailed as the hero of the Civil War yet history remembers him only as a drunkard. Grant lived in a time when alcohol was all over America, yet the side effect, alcoholism, was shunned. Ron Chernow focuses his book, *Grant*, on telling the story of Grant. A man from a small town who struggled all throughout his life, but ended up being the strategic genius who managed to bring the South to surrender when all other Union generals, specifically the ‘do nothing’ generals of the eastern war campaigns, failed to do so.

Ron Chernow is not a historian. He received his Bachelor’s in Literature at Yale University and then his Masters in Literature at Cambridge. He never finished his PH.D. program. He focuses his writing on American politics and leaders. His other books include *George Washington: A Life* and *Alexander Hamilton*. His book *Hamilton* won a Pulitzer Prize, was a New York Times Bestseller for three months, and was adapted to be the award-winning Broadway musical by the same name. Chernow approaches writing history from a literary standpoint. He uses his background in journalism to teach history as a narrative. He focuses more on the individual lives of the people and how the events around them affected their lives, their decisions, and history. Chernow manages to present history in a way that is approachable to anyone. His books are for the general population, he makes history approachable to non-historians.

Chernow writes the story of Grant’s life chronologically. He begins with Grant’s childhood and his overbearing father Jesse Grant, which sets up for Grant’s later conflicts with his father. Chernow breaks the book up into four sections: Grant’s “Childhood and Struggle
before the Civil War,” “Victories and Fame during Civil War,” “A Lifetime of Peace and Presidency,” and the “Reflections.” The book closes in a beautiful way with Mark Twain and Sherman reminiscing on the life of Ulysses S. Grant.

One would think that a man who struggled and worked hard his whole life, managed to close the civil war and achieve victory, and then went on to be a two term president would be remembered as the victorious and angelic hero that he was hailed at the time. But unfortunately, the narrative that is commonly taught was that Grant was a useless drunk. Northerners who opposed Grant spread malicious and exaggerated rumors of his drinking escapades, while Southerners said that Grant only won because of his superior supply of men and supplies. Ron Chernow challenges these misconceptions in this book. The prevailing defense throughout the book is Grant’s drinking. Chernow presents Grant as the struggling man that he was. Grant had a problem with alcohol, but, contrary to modern misconceptions, he fought it. Grant was a firm supporter of the Prohibition movement. Chernow points out that alcoholism ran in Grant’s family. What we would now consider an addiction is being used to discredit Grant. Even further, Chernow uses primary sources to discredit most of the drinking rumors. Chernow researched the people who spread these alleged drinking lapses. In most cases he found that the person was not even there to be a witness or had a personal vendetta against Grant. Such is the case with Henry Halleck reports.

When first reading this book, it is easy to believe that Ron Chernow is stretching the truth to cover Grant’s drinking. It is hard to believe that Grant is remembered as a drunkard, yet was a man who abstained from alcohol except for a few slips. Chernow invokes a complete turnaround on the Grant that is taught. Chernow disproves most of the drinking rumors. Chernow seemed to
be actively downplaying the drinking rumors throughout the book due to a bias to Grant. But there are some stories that he cannot disprove, such as the one about Grant’s leg injury (302). Chernow still tells these stories in order to stick to the truth of Grant’s life.

Rather than being someone who disregards all the unpleasant truths of Grant’s life, Chernow commits to accurately telling Grant’s story and uses primary sources to back his argument. This book will completely turn anyone’s opinion around and make them an ardent Grant supporter. This book presents Grant as the man he was, a military genius with his own struggles. Chernow humanizes Grant and because of that displays him as a hero.

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Recommended citation