

Big Russ and Me

by **Tim Russert**

About the Book

BIG RUSS & ME offers a charming, down-to-earth look at Russert's roots, growing up a hometown guy in working-class Buffalo in the 1950s. From the indelible bond that links him to his father, to the lessons learned from his old-fashioned Catholic upbringing, from his passion for the Buffalo Bills, to the importance of patriotism in everyday life, Russert's reflections hit the very epicenter of American values.

Rich with personal anecdotes and Russert's easygoing style and straight-talking charm, BIG RUSS & ME will be embraced by his myriad fans--and will delight dads across the country on Father's Day and for years to come.

Courtesy of Hyperion, retrieved 2009

Praise for the Book

Russert speaks "from the heart in a particularly American way...a fulsome, sincere Father's Day greeting."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Not many books can make me laugh, cry, and cheer on nearly every page. Tim Russert's Big Russ and Me does that, like no other book since Russell Baker's Growing Up....."

—*Martin F. Nolan*

"A profoundly satisfying story of a father and his son"

—*Wall Street Journal*

"A testament to solid values, hard work and filial devotion"...

—*New York Times*

Courtesy of bigrussandme.com, retrieved 2009

About the Author

Title: Tim Russert

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Personal Information

Born May 7, 1950, in Buffalo, NY; died of a heart attack, June 13, 2008, in Washington, DC; son of Tim (a sanitation foreman and truck driver) Russert; married Maureen Orth (a writer); children: Luke. Education: Graduate of John Carroll University and Cleveland- Marshall College of Law.

Career

Journalist and attorney. U.S. Senate, Washington, DC, special counsel, 1977-82; Office of the Governor, Albany, NY, counsel, 1983-84; National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC), began in 1984, managing editor and moderator of Meet the Press, beginning 1991, political analyst for NBC Nightly News and Today, anchor of The Tim Russert Show (CNBC), contributing anchor for MSNBC, and senior vice president and Washington bureau chief of NBC News. Trustee of Freedom Forum's Newseum; member of board of directors, Greater Washington Boys and Girls Club and America's Promise-Alliance for Youth; lecturer.

Awards

Fatherhood awards include Father of the Year, National Father's Day Committee, 1995, Dream Dad, Parents, 1998, and Father of the Year, National Fatherhood initiative, 2001; Joan S. Barone Award, Radio and Television Correspondents, and Walter Cronkite Award, Annenberg Center, 2000, for interviews with presidential nominees George W. Bush and Al Gore; Edward R. Murrow Award (shared), 2001, for overall excellence in television; named the best and most influential journalist in Washington, DC, Washingtonian, 2001; John Peter Zenger Award; American Legion Journalism Award; Congressional Medal of Honor Society Journalism Award; Allen H. Neuharth Award for excellence in journalism; David Brinkley Award for excellence in communication; recipient of dozens of honorary doctorates.

Works

Writings

- (With Bill Novak) *Big Russ and Me: Father and Son; Lessons of Life* (memoir), Miramax/Hyperion (New York, NY), 2004.
- *Wisdom of Our Fathers*, Random House (New York, NY), 2006.

Sidelights

Tim Russert was a television journalist whose role as host of the popular Sunday morning talk show *Meet the Press* made him one of the country's most influential political commentators. *Esquire* contributors Tom Carson and Barry Sonnenfeld wrote that Russert has come to play the role that was previously occupied by news giants Ted Koppel, Sam Donaldson, and Dan Rather: "A decade into his tenure there," they said, "Russert is widely regarded as the capital's toughest inquisitor, the journalist who asks the hard questions and doesn't let anyone off the hook. Yet one reason Russert never makes the powers that be squirm, except individually, is that he's refereeing a game whose rules he's eager to endorse, playing a time-honored role in Washington media culture." Earlier in his career, in 1985, Russert arranged for an unprecedented live broadcast of Pope John Paul II for the *Today* show. In 1986 and 1987 he led news teams that broadcast from South America, Australia, and China.

Russert was born into an Irish-Catholic working-class family in South Buffalo, New York. He was educated by Jesuits and nuns, served as an altar boy, and was greatly influenced by the adults in his life, most notably by his father, who, as he notes in his memoir *Big Russ and Me: Father and Son; Lessons of Life*, continues to be a guiding light. A *Kirkus Reviews* contributor wrote that "Russert, the kid from blue-collar South Buffalo who now grills the prominent and powerful, writes in a style as unadorned as the snow in the land of the Bills."

Time critic John F. Dickerson noted that "some grown men have trouble embracing their fathers in public. Russert hugs his for twenty-one chapters in *Big Russ and Me ...*, a memoir that is part tribute to his dad and part guidebook for the author's college-age son, Luke." A high-school dropout, Big Russ served in World War II and returned home to work for the sanitation department during the day and drive a newspaper truck at night. Young Russ also worked for the sanitation department during the summer and was the first in his family to graduate from college. He later went on to earn a law degree, and he worked on the staffs of politicians Daniel Patrick Moynihan and Mario Cuomo.

American writer Terry Golway noted that *Big Russ and Me* is the "sort of literary work that some of us have been longing for--a book in which nuns and priests actually inspire the young people in their charge. It is also a portrait of a chapter in American life that now seems as distant as the Jazz Age." Russert writes that religion was a vital part of his home life and schooling. Crosses hung above beds, grace was said at meals, and during May, the Virgin Mary's month, his mother would honor her each day with a candle and fresh flowers from the garden. Golway said, "I suspect that not many memoirs from powerful Washington figures recall with such love and

affection these rituals of a Catholic childhood, circa 1960. That's what makes this book so genuinely sweet and likeable--there's not a dishonest page in it."

Appraising Russert's influence within the sphere of mainstream journalism, New Yorker writer Nicholas Lemann commented: "Russert probably holds the distinction of being the journalist whose work Washington talks about most obsessively.... Russert performs a journalistic function on Meet the Press in the sense that he peppers officials with questions, but even if you don't live in Washington it's obvious that he's a bigger deal than most of his guests. His role is that of a luminous fixed star in political space, around whom other bodies must orient themselves."

Further Readings About the Author

Books

- Russert, Tim, and Bill Novak, *Big Russ and Me: Father and Son; Lessons of Life* (memoir), Miramax/ Hyperion (New York, NY), 2004.

Periodicals

- America, June 7-14, 2004, Terry Golway, review of *Big Russ and Me: Father and Son; Lessons of Life*, p. 22.
- Booklist, March 1, 2004, Vanessa Bush, review of *Big Russ and Me*, p. 1099.
- Esquire, January, 2004, Tom Carson and Barry Sonnenfeld, "The Daunting Guy: There Was Koppel and, before Him, Donaldson and Rather. Now It's Russert Who Is Reputed to Have the Power to Sway Elections and Afflict the Comfortable," p. 48.
- Kirkus Reviews, March 15, 2004, review of *Big Russ and Me*, p. 263.
- Library Journal, July, 2004, Katherine E. Merrill, review of *Big Russ and Me*, p. 94.
- New Yorker, May 24, 2004, Nicholas Lemann, review of *Big Russ and Me*, p. 82.
- People, May 17, 2004, Eric Felten, review of *Big Russ and Me*, p. 49.
- Publishers Weekly, April 5, 2004, Jerome Joseph Gentes, "From Meet the Press to Meet the Parent" (interview), p. 54; May 24, 2004, Daisy Maryles, review of *Big Russ and Me*, p. 24.
- Sports Illustrated, May 24, 2004, Richard Deitsch, interview with Russert, p. 24.
- Time, May 24, 2004, John F. Dickerson, review of *Big Russ and Me*, p. 83.

Online

- Meet the Press Online, <http://msnbc.msn.com/> (July 8, 2004), "Tim Russert."*

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Author Interview

From Meet the Press to Meet the Parent

PW Talks with Tim Russert

by Jerome Joseph Gentes -- Publishers Weekly, 4/5/2004

PW: Has your father read your new book [Big Russ & Me]?

Tim Russert: Big Russ wants to wait until it comes out as an actual book. Naturally, he's very curious, somewhat amazed that he's done anything that anyone would want to write about. He believes he lived such a simple, middle-class, American life. But that's what I want to share. I've already spent 12 years interviewing the great and powerful. My son, Luke, read it, though.

PW: What did he bring to the process?

TR: Until the scene I described in the opening chapter, I tended to see my father as a veteran, as an active member of the American Legion, an organization which brought so much to my childhood. Then when my son turned 18, I realized he was the same age as my father when he was sent off to war. I suddenly saw my father as a mere boy aboard the Queen Mary, going off to fight in a war he didn't understand.

PW: What kind of grandfather is Big Russ?

TR: Very doting. He wasn't what you'd call a doting father. He loved us, sure, but when I was growing up, when my father reprimanded me for something, forced me to rake the leaves, told me to drive either sober or not at all, I had no notion that was love. But Luke and Big Russ just love each other's company. They talk about baseball, about girls, all those things my dad and I didn't often talk about.

PW: Where does the optimism of Buffalo, N.Y., your hometown, come from?

TR: Walking backward to school in the snow. Everything after that is easy. You know, Buffalo was such an important steel and manufacturing town in the '50s and '60s, and when those industries declined people decided that was the end. Many people left, going to places in the Sun Belt in search of employment. But they always came home, and a lot of them returned for good. Sure, there's December, January, February. But you have skiing in the winter, farm country in the spring and harvest, Canada, boating and Indian summer. Thank God February is only 28 days long.

PW: How might New Frontier idealism be rekindled for your son's generation?

TR: When Kennedy ran for president, there was a feeling in our Irish, middle-class neighborhood of "Isn't this great? He's one of us." I saw some of that in 1984 with Jesse Jackson. And we'll see it again when a major party has a woman for its nominee. My son and his peers did learn a lot from the struggle in the courts after the 2000 election. Before then they and a lot of people had never thought about the electoral college. They wondered what athletic conference it was in.

PW: What about this year?

TR: We have even more access to real-time information. We're very aware for such a large, unwieldy democracy, especially now, knowing that one percent can make a difference. A lot of people come up to me, and their analysis is as perceptive as anyone I talk to on my shows. I hope people read and watch everything. The Daily Show, the papers, whatever. Let the debate begin.

PW: What has the reaction been to your book so far?

TR: One surprising thing is the number of people, friends, strangers, all telling me and writing me about their own dads. Some talked about strained relations, some mentioned how they never had a chance to thank their dads. I would love it if this Father's Day people get into a dialogue with fathers or about fathers.

Courtesy of publishersweekly.com, retrieved 2009

Discussion Questions

Memoir Discussion Questions

1. For the person who chose this book: What made you want to read it? What made you suggest it to the group for discussion? Did it live up to your expectations? Why or why not?
2. What do you think motivated the author to share his or her life story? How did you respond to the author's "voice"?
3. Do you think the author is trying to elicit a certain response from the reader, such as sympathy? How has this book changed or enhanced your view of the author?
4. Discuss the book's structure and the author's use of language and writing style. How does the author draw the reader in and keep the reader engaged? Does the author convey his or her story with comedy, self-pity, or something else?
5. Were there any instances in which you felt the author was not being truthful? How did you react to these sections?
6. What is the author's most admirable quality? Is this someone you would want to know or have known?
7. Compare this book to other memoirs your group has read. Is it similar to any of them? Did you like it more or less than other books you've read? What do you think will be your lasting impression of the book?
8. What did you like or dislike about the book that hasn't been discussed already? Were you glad you read this book? Would you recommend it to a friend?

Courtesy of readinggroupguides.com, 2009