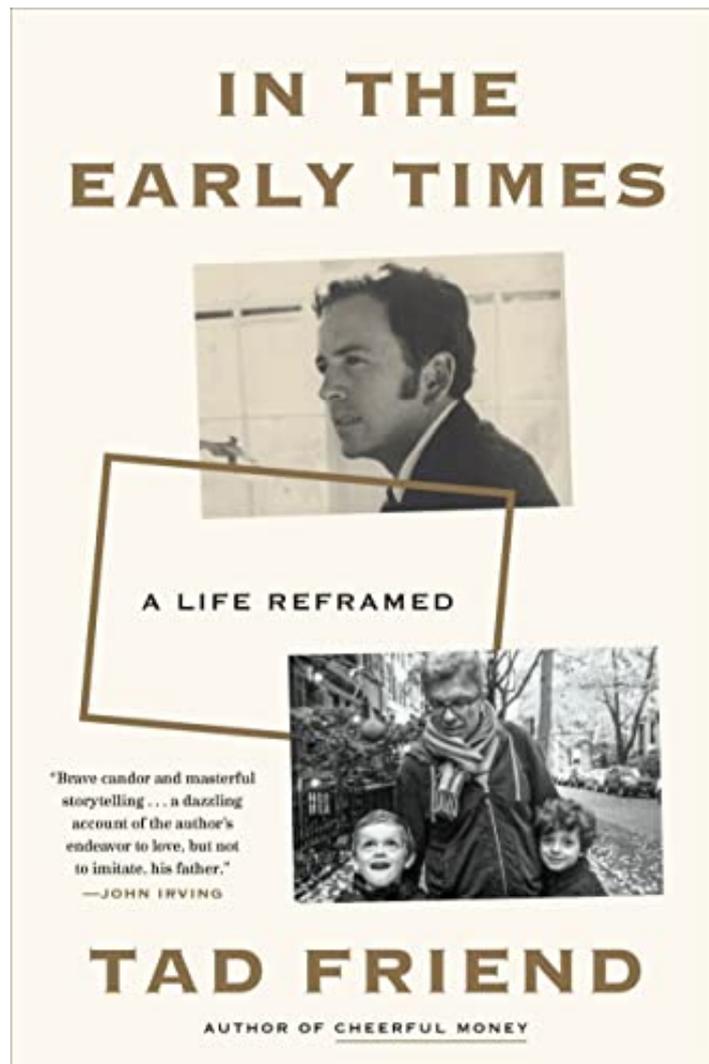


# In the Early Times: A Life Reframed

*by*

**Tad Friend**



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## Synopsis

In this “dazzling” (John Irving) memoir, acclaimed New Yorker staff writer Tad Friend reflects on the pressures of middle age, exploring his relationship with his dying father as he raises two children of his own. “How often does a memoir build to a stomach-churning, I-can’t-breathe climax in its final pages? . . . Brilliant, intensely moving.”—William Finnegan, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Barbarian Days* Almost everyone yearns to know their parents more thoroughly before they die, to solve some of those lifelong mysteries. Maybe, just maybe, those answers will help you live your own life. But life doesn’t stop to wait. In his fifties, New Yorker writer Tad Friend is grappling with being a husband and a father as he tries to grasp who he is as a son. Torn between two families, he careens between two stages in life. On some days he feels vigorous, on the brink of greatness when he plays tournament squash. On others, he feels distinctly weary, troubled by his distance from millennial sensibilities or by his own face in the mirror, by a grimace that’s so like his father’s. His father, an erudite historian and the former president of Swarthmore College, has long been gregarious and charming with strangers yet cerebral with his children. Tad writes that “trying to reach him always felt like ice fishing.” Yet now Tad’s father, known to his family as Day, seems concerned chiefly with the flavor of ice cream in his bowl and, when pushed, interested only in reconsidering his view of Franklin Roosevelt. Then Tad finds his father’s journal, a trove of passionate confessions that reveals a man entirely different from the exasperatingly logical father Day was so determined to be. It turns out that Tad has been self-destructing in the same way Day has—a secret each has kept from everyone, even themselves. These discoveries make Tad reconsider his own role, as a father, as a husband, and as a son. But is it too late for both of them? Witty, searching, and profound, *In the Early Times* is an enduring meditation on the shifting tides of memory and the unsteady pillars on which every family rests.

## Sort review

Hunger Strangers often told me how wonderful my father was. Wait, my father? I’d think. They met a different man, the handsome polymath with the much--stamped passport. The earnest charmer. At conference dinners, he’d linger over the Sauternes to draw out his seatmate’s knowledge of Persian poetry; once, with a Korean who spoke almost no English, he was able to convey baseball’s arcane balk rule using only pantomime. His pockets were always full of business cards inscribed with pleas to keep in touch, as if he were a human Wailing Wall. Theodore Wood Friend III was “Dorie” to his contemporaries and “Day” to his children, from my first tries at “Daddy.” (We’re one of those Wasp families where baby names stick for life.) A believer in letters to the editor and global rapport, he drove four hundred miles to witness Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, won the Bancroft Prize for his history of the Philippines three years later, and became president of Swarthmore College, in 1973, at forty--two. By then,

he'd taught the histories of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, China, Japan, Korea, and all of Southeast Asia, as well as of American foreign relations. He possessed a resonant baritone and a self-deprecating manner, and hopes were high. The middle years . . . middling. Nudged out at Swarthmore, he sought a spot on Reagan's National Security Council, hoping for a rise to the cabinet from there. After being passed over, he ran the Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship. EEF brought foreign go-getters to the United States to exchange ideas—and, under Day's leadership, began sending Americans overseas for the same purpose. Like America, he had a missionary temperament, and his sweeping doctrines applied even to the three of us children, the smallest of tribes. After twelve years at EEF he stepped down, at sixty-five, to take care of our mother, Elizabeth. If Day was a gravel truck juddering off to mend the broken world, Mom was a coupe cornering at speed. At his retirement dinner, where she wore an auburn wig after her chemo, we all had our photo taken with two of the foundation's chairmen: Gerald Ford and George H. W. Bush. When the photographer pointed out that Mom's hand was obscuring Bush's thigh, Bush remarked, roguishly, "Leave it, Elizabeth, it feels good where it is." "That kind of photo costs more, George," she shot back. Day's guffaw made everyone except Jerry Ford crack up, and that photo was the keeper. One August afternoon in 2018, after lunch and before Day's nap, my younger sister, Timmie, and I sat down with him in his living room to ask about his life. It felt like our last chance to understand him; he was nearly eighty-six and his once-lush conversation was as clenched as winter wheat. He clearly mistrusted our agenda. The way he sat in his blue armchair—chin low, lips tight, gray hair batwinging from his enormous head—called to mind a nineteenth-century caricature: Boss Tweed astride his empire; the cantankerous Tories. We began gently, at the beginning, which was probably a mistake, as he hated his Pittsburgh boyhood. Being raised by old-school Wasps was like being raised by a minibar. Timmie asked, "How would your parents have described you?" "They would have described me as a baby. And then they would have described me as a boy." Timmie glanced over: Uh--oh. He was just checking the box: I owe my children this courtesy. I was of like mind, a paramedic filling out the forms: Did you take every possible measure? I'd suppressed my expectations for so long it felt like a form of filial piety. But Timmie still hoped he might finally confess that he loved us more deeply than, for secret reasons, he could ever reveal. He closed his eyes and said, "I'm sort of hungry for ice cream." "You had some a short while ago," she said. "I did?" "Right after lunch." He frowned. Day loved sweets. In college, he got fired from a summer job for filling doughnuts with too much jelly. When we lived in Manila, in 1967, he spent two days in a hospital, as Mom noted in a doleful letter home, "under observation for—you won't believe it—chewing up and swallowing a Christmas tree ball! We had a rather elaborate cake in the shape of a dragon and the eyes were glass balls. Dorie thought they were candy and ate one." Two years later, Day wrote Mom from Amsterdam to say, "Drinking 'young gin' (tough) rather than lemon gin (a little sweet) because I want the waiter to realize I am tough. Of course, you realize, my lovely, that I am at least a little sweet. I like a lot of brown sugar on my cereal and a lot of white sugar in my tea and a lot of sympathy in my boyish disconsolations." He was prey to darker

desires, too, but he hid those better. Timmie tried again: "If somebody wrote your parents and said, 'Tell us about your son, what's he like?' what would they have said?" "Nobody did that." His laugh was a rueful bark. "Nobody cared." "So no one cared about you when you were young?" "Well, I cared about myself." He laughed again, more softly. "But, no." He turned his reading lamp to glare the bulb at us. You go to the station to file a missing person report, and suddenly you're the suspect. Whenever I see a father hug his son on--screen I begin to cry. I know. I'm not crazy about it, either; a hug is cinematic mush on the level of a lost dog bounding home. And I cry at that, too! The father doesn't even have to be the son's actual dad; a prisoner on the lam with a kidnapped boy, like Kevin Costner in *A Perfect World*, works just fine—a father figure. My father hugged me until I was about seven. Then he stopped; I don't know why. We started up again when I was in my mid--twenties, because I hugged my friends and I hugged my mom and it seemed weird not to hug my dad. But trying to reach him always felt like ice fishing. In my earliest recurrent dream, I'd find myself in a meadow that sloped uphill to a door set in a knoll. As I struggled through the tall grass, I'd hear banjo music behind the door; after work, my father had gone there to play. When I grasped the doorknob, though, the music would stop. I'd run among the small bare rooms, then return to the doorway, bewildered. Eventually the banjo would resume, far away. But there was always a door between us. I tried to turn Day, heeling wide: "What do you think you're best at?" "I think I am best at . . . listening." Okay. "How do you feel you've contributed to the world?" "Three children." I glanced at Timmie, an interior designer who has Mom's darting humor and radiant smile. Born six years after me, she effectively grew up in a separate wing of the house; we got close only later. "Want to elaborate, at all?" I asked. "Three beautiful, marvelous, exquisite, wonderful, unique children!" he bellowed. Shooting me a deadpan look—Yay, us!—Timmie asked, "Is there anything you wish you'd done?" "I wish I'd been president," Day said. "President of the United States?" "Yes." He enjoyed naming the presidents in order. "And I wish I'd played music, especially the guitar. All I ever did was turn on the phonograph." "I never knew that," I said. "I wish I'd played the guitar, too." My children took lessons for years, but, nah. We're the anti--Partridge Family. Day looked at his watch, then added, "I wish I'd written more creatively. I wish I'd written more fiction." In the eighties, he published a well--received novel about his youth, *Family Laundry*. For years he'd been working on a final book, a memoir. Timmie asked, "Is there anything you wish you'd spent less time doing?" "Answering questionnaires," he said. "I've answered hundreds of them." He backhanded our question away. Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Hunger Strangers often told me how wonderful my father was. Wait, my father? I'd think. They met a different man, the handsome polymath with the much--stamped passport. The earnest charmer. At conference dinners, he'd linger over the Sauternes to draw out his seatmate's knowledge of Persian poetry; once, with a Korean who spoke almost no English, he was able to convey baseball's arcane balk rule using only pantomime. His pockets were always full of business cards inscribed with pleas to keep in touch, as if he were a human Wailing Wall. Theodore Wood Friend III was "Dorie" to his contemporaries and "Day" to his children, from my first tries at "Daddy." (We're one of those

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to the hardcover edition.[Read more](#)

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## What people say about this book

Alan, "Unsatisfying. This was a good read, and I wanted to see what he had to write. I gave this four stars because he's a good writer and seemingly honest. If I were judging on the impression I got of him as a person, I would give him maybe two stars. An online search revealed this snarky line from a newspaper article when he and Amanda Hesser got engaged: "For months, readers of The New York Times Magazine have been vicariously following the courtship of Amanda Hesser, the Times' brilliant and brilliantly self-absorbed food writer, and Tad Friend, a writer for The New Yorker." I think Tad turned out to be a brilliantly self-absorbed memoirist. Since I had recently read his first memoir "Cheerful Money," I was familiar with previous stories about many of the family members he mentioned. It felt like he was going back over previously covered ground though and recycling material, but had to be done to make this book stand on its own. I think I liked "Cheerful Money" better. I was surprised by his candor, but I suppose that since he detailed things from his father's journals that were probably never meant for the public, he had to share some of his shameful secrets too. Over all, I found it a bit sad and depressing."

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