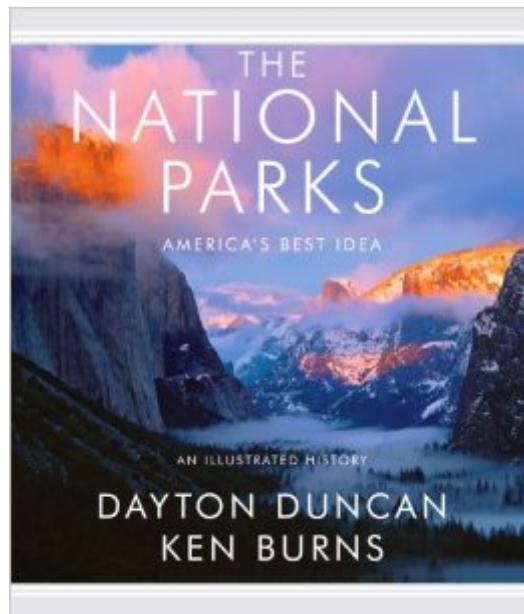


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# The National Parks: America's Best Idea



## Synopsis

The companion volume to the twelve-hour PBS series from the acclaimed filmmaker behind *The Civil War*, *Baseball*, and *The War* America's national parks spring from an idea as radical as the Declaration of Independence: that the nation's most magnificent and sacred places should be preserved, not for royalty or the rich, but for everyone. In this evocative and lavishly illustrated narrative, Ken Burns and Dayton Duncan delve into the history of the park idea, from the first sighting by white men in 1851 of the valley that would become Yosemite and the creation of the world's first national park at Yellowstone in 1872, through the most recent additions to a system that now encompasses nearly four hundred sites and 84 million acres. The authors recount the adventures, mythmaking, and intense political battles behind the evolution of the park system, and the enduring ideals that fostered its growth. They capture the importance and splendors of the individual parks: from Haleakala in Hawaii to Acadia in Maine, from Denali in Alaska to the Everglades in Florida, from Glacier in Montana to Big Bend in Texas. And they introduce us to a diverse cast of compelling characters—both unsung heroes and famous figures such as John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, and Ansel Adams—who have been transformed by these special places and committed themselves to saving them from destruction so that the rest of us could be transformed as well. *The National Parks* is a glorious celebration of an essential expression of American democracy.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Let me first point out that I'm just reviewing the companion book to Ken Burns' PBS show--having not (yet!) seen the show I make no attempt at discussing how it relates to the TV program. This is simply a look on how the book holds up on its own merits. And let me say it is an eye-popper! As a coffee table book alone, it succeeds wildly, with all kinds of stunning photos that make you want to grab the kids and hit the road. What is particularly enjoyable is that it uses a whole range of illustrations--besides glorious contemporary photos of these magnificent landscapes, there are fascinating historic photos in B&W and photos of the various cranks, caretakers and visionaries whose lives were so deeply entwined with the park. There are also a number of beautifully reproduced photos of paintings from the Hudson River school of painting back in the mid-1800s that not only sparked interest in America's landscapes but created one of the first great artistic movements in our country. And as always, it's amazing how landscapes can communicate such profound, and profoundly human emotions, even when there are no people depicted. The simple visual of a lone tree, buried under a heavy canopy of snow and placed against a blank winter landscape can convey loneliness on such a powerful unconscious level. Or how a sunrise on the rim of the Grand Canyon can convey majesty beyond any human description. Gorgeous, gorgeous, gorgeous. But what makes this so much better than a photo essay of great landscapes is the wonderful written content that frames the illustrations. The text brings these magnificent parks back into the realm of human beings.

Ken Burns is easily the cream of the crop when it comes to documentary film making (take that, Michael Moore!). The Civil War, The War, Baseball...his credentials go on and on. Each of his documentaries has been amazing in its own way. His latest film is called The National Parks and like its predecessors, it is accompanied by a coffee table book. I was rather surprised to see that book, with its \$50 price tag, spring onto the list of bestsellers and remain there for a couple of weeks. Coming in at over 400 pages and weighing about as much as a small car, The National Parks is chock full of both text and pictures. The book follows the same format as the film, offering six chapters that cover roughly the same material. Chapters average fifty or sixty pages and they are split roughly evenly between text and photographs. The text is interesting enough, describing the genesis of "America's best idea." The photographs are often stunning, showing some of the most amazing scenery America has to offer. My only complaint, if we can label it that, is that the paper used in the book could use a bit more gloss in order to really make those pictures pop. Nevertheless, even as they are, they provide amazing evidence of the beauty to be found in America's parks. What gripped me as I read the book was the beautiful simplicity of the idea behind

the National Parks. In days past and in other nations, the richest people, the most powerful people, had been able to have their nature preserves, their areas of unbroken and pure land. They had been able to set aside these little bits of paradise for themselves and had been able to enforce privacy, ensuring that the commoners were kept far away. In America, though-the land of free-vast areas of land were set aside specifically for the common man.

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