



Lightning Man: The Accursed Life of Samuel F. B. Morse

Kenneth Silverman

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In this brilliantly conceived and written biography, Pulitzer Prize–winning Kenneth Silverman gives us the long and amazing life of the man eulogized by the *New York Herald* in 1872 as “perhaps the most illustrious American of his age.”

Silverman presents Samuel Morse in all his complexity. There is the gifted and prolific painter (more than three hundred portraits and larger historical canvases) and pioneer photographer, who gave the first lectures on art in America, became the first Professor of Fine Arts at an American college (New York University), and founded the National Academy of Design. There is the republican idealist, prominent in antebellum politics, who ran for Congress and for mayor of New York. But most important, there is the inventor of the American electromagnetic telegraph, which earned Morse the name Lightning Man and brought him the fame he sought.

In these pages, we witness the evolution of the great invention from its inception as an idea to its introduction to the world—an event that astonished Morse’s contemporaries and was considered the supreme expression of the country’s inventive genius. We see how it transformed commerce, journalism, transportation, military affairs, diplomacy, and the very shape of daily life, ushering in the modern era of communication.

But we discover as well that Morse viewed his existence as accursed rather than illustrious, his every achievement seeming to end in loss and defeat: his most ambitious canvases went unsold; his beloved republic imploded into civil war, making it unlivable for him; and the commercial success of the telegraph engulfed him in lawsuits challenging the originality and ownership of his invention.

Lightning Man is the first biography of Samuel F. B. Morse in sixty years. It is a revelation of the life of a fascinating and profoundly troubled American genius.

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