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Fighting for safety, other challenges

NADER: Crusader, Spoiler, Icon. By Justin Martin. Perseus. 388 pages. \$26.

Reviewed by BILL MASHBURN

Justin Martin has done a superb job researching and writing this first biography of the inordinately secretive Ralph Nader, who has never married, and whose address and phone number are given out only to a select few. The book reads like a novel as the reader wonders what challenge Nader will undertake next.

Nader was born in Winsted, Conn., to parents who had emigrated from Lebanon. His father was an outspoken participant in town meetings and instilled many of the ideals that propelled Nader into a career that led him to be described by both Time and Life magazines as one of the 100 most important people of the 20th century, while Rolling Stone dubbed him the "most dangerous man in America."

Nader graduated magna cum laude from Princeton with a major in Oriental studies. He then finished law school at Harvard and undertook a number of assignments as a free-lance journalist. In 1965 he took on General Motors with publication of the book "Unsafe at Any Speed." GM responded by hiring spies to tail Nader in an effort to dig up dirt. He sued and won a settlement of \$425,000. His vindictiveness against GM continued in other actions.

In the 1960s and '70s Nader hired teams of young people to investigate corporate malfeasance and government corruption. The team was later dubbed Nader's Raiders, a term that stuck. Nader is best characterized by an answer he gave to the question: "How do you choose the people to work with you?" His answer, "Well, you start off by saying they have to be bright, hard-working - the usual traits. But the one key probably is how willing they are not to be loved." Nader himself often sacrificed friendships rather than yield on his principles.

He was, from the beginning of his career, the darling of Congress because he could be relied on to be a witness with facts. He was often called before congressional hearings to testify on topics such as safety, health and other issues affecting average citizens.

Then Nader made perhaps the worst blunder of his career. He decided to put together a team to investigate every member of Congress. The yearlong study with hundreds of volunteers produced nothing of significance but did alienate his friends in Congress.

With his influence waning, Nader made a decision that certainly was one of the toughest of his career. He decided to run for president. He agreed to be the Green Party's presidential candidate, but true to a promise to his dad that he would never join a political party, he did not join the Green Party. His candidacy was blamed by some for costing Gore the election in Florida. Nader's response: "I think that Al Gore cost me the election, especially in Florida."

Nader has had his ups and downs during nearly four decades as a public figure. But his legacy is undeniable. Safer cars, safer X-rays and battles won on a vast array of issues: nuclear power, drug labeling, access to government information and on and on.

Martin's book is informative, suspenseful and very well written.

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BILL MASHBURN is professor emeritus of mechanical engineering at Virginia Tech.

Wonder-filled essays

SMALL WONDER. By Barbara Kingsolver. HarperCollins. 288 pages. \$23.95.