



American Wife

Curtis Sittenfeld

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A kind, bookish only child born in the 1940s, Alice Lindgren has no idea that she will one day end up in the White House, married to the president. In her small Wisconsin hometown, she learns the virtues of politeness, but a tragic accident when she is seventeen shatters her identity and changes the trajectory of her life. More than a decade later, when the charismatic son of a powerful Republican family sweeps her off her feet, she is surprised to find herself admitted into a world of privilege. When her husband unexpectedly becomes governor and then president, she discovers she is married to a man she both loves and fundamentally disagrees with--and that her private beliefs increasingly run against her public persona. As her husband's presidency enters its second term, Alice must confront contradictions years in the making and face questions nearly impossible to answer.

American Wife Details

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From Reader Review American Wife for online ebook

Travis says

wow, my foray into new fiction turned ugly with the first of many sex scenes between a Laura Bush a clef and a George W. Bush a clef. Then it turned uglier with each further insight into GW's pretend sex life. Such as "I held his penis. It had a nice weight" or somehting like that. You have to be a sick fuck to want to think about GWs penis.

Plus this is one of those books whose back covers calls it "brave" and that pisses me off. Usually it means it's some milquetoast bullshit that tries to use little words to great effect, little sound, little fury, little signifying. And that's what this is, a scurillous little romp with lame dialogue which adds up to 0 insight into how 2 private persons become intensely powerful, and how they inhabit their power or their poewr inhabits them. That's really why I read this book, because of my interest in the everyday of the great, in contrast to the past many decades of democratic fiction (you might call it) with its obsessive attention to the ephemera of little lives, down to the brands that occur in them and their faintest (especially their faintest) sensoria. So this is a peculiar hybrid, an entry that hustles itself into the slaughterhouse of fiction, as Moretti calls it, but which is so interesting for that reason: an effort to tell big stories as if they were the same as little stories, but with a different adress. A new entry in the venerable tradition of political pornography, in which the pornography, rather than discrediting "a great one" (un grand), burnishes his title to normalcy.

Oh, plus I love how the word "zaftig" stands out like an SAT word in the pallid writing. That's what the SAT has done to us. Divided words into regular words and SAT words, and when you encounter SAT words in the middle of a book like this you say to yourself (or you are supposed to)--ooh, nice SAT word.

Kate Merriman says

OK, so here's my gripe. Against no one in particular, just things not going exactly as I'd thought they might.

Being the recipient of ARCs (Advanced Reading Copies) of books does not automatically shield you from spoilers, does not give you back that Virgin Reader Experience. Especially if you cheat on yourself and troll around the Interwebs for feedback about the book before you've finished reading. Doh, did it to myself again!!

In this case, it's American Wife by Curtis Sittenfeld. After a couple real duds from ARC programs, I was so excited to find the characters and plot entrancing and thoughtful in the first couple hundred pages. I was feeling very grateful to Random House for such a juicy, engaging, character-rich read.

I was completely convinced when I started the book and saw the internal dialogue from the perspective of a First Lady that this was a completely postulated presidency in a parallel time. (How's that for alliteration?) And as the central character, Alice, began to grow into a hugely likeable and deeply flawed friend, I became even more sure that Alice could not possibly have anything to do with any living or former First Lady.

Then I lost my good sense and wanted to see what the "other kids are thinking."

So that's how I found out that the main character is a veiled version of Laura Bush. Now, when I pick this

book back up, despite the roaringly good head start I had with it, every time the male central character has dialogue, I am tortured by hearing it as the weaselly George Bush would say it.

OY. I may have wrecked this for myself. But I should keep plugging through and give my new friend Alice the benefit of the doubt. I find myself working hard to replace the George Bush image with some very strong other player, like maybe a younger James Garner. Maybe that will take hold, sure would be better.

Jenny says

This is one of the most thought-provoking and absorbing books I have read in a while. (I'm pretty sure I thought about it in my sleep.) First, there's the fact that it's loosely based on the life of Laura Bush; second, there's the fact that Curtis Sittenfeld has a staggering talent for making characters absolutely real (even when they aren't real already; see PREP).

Sittenfeld gives so much insight into Alice Blackwell, and when you, as the reader, understand in such a close and detailed way what "Alice" is thinking and how she is feeling, it's nearly impossible not to be as sympathetic as the author. It's really, truly, mind-opening (thinking, of course, of Laura Bush). The book is set around four distinct phases in Alice's life; it skips over the time when Charlie Blackwell is governor, before he becomes president. I would have gladly read another 100 or 200 pages describing this period - and, except for cases where I feel the end has been rushed, I rarely feel that books should be longer than they are.

Candy says

You never know what goes on behind closed doors. And after reading *American Wife*, we still don't know what goes on behind closed doors, but it sure is riveting to read what might. When the subject is married to a good-time Charlie (Charlie Blackwell in this case) from a prominent political family, who purchased a Major League baseball team, served as a Republican governor, then won a contested election to become a two-term President . . . well, it all sounds very familiar. The mix of truth and fiction grabs your attention and throttles up the curiosity factor. It convinced me that I'm not interested in being First Lady, but I admit it left me a little empathetic toward the woman who recently held that role.

Alison MacAdam says

This book is a fabulous read -- and as far as I can gather, inspired by a sentiment I can understand well: Fascination with Laura Bush. I certainly don't share enough fascination to have written a novel about her, but even from my own experience of meeting her VERY briefly, she is incredibly NICE. So the premise grabbed my attention.

In the novel, this Laura-esque character is a bit of a contradiction -- a true free thinker and yet an obedient wife and first lady. At times it is hard to square, but I'll give Curtis Sittenfeld a break on this one, because I really love the character nonetheless. And she even does a quite generous job with the George-esque character, finding a narrative that makes him both a dufus and intensely charming -- to the point that we can almost understand how he might manage to win the presidency.

Liz says

I'm surprised, but so far I *really* like this. The main character is very compelling and I love the grandmother. More soon....

9/30: The first chapters are definitely the best, and my biggest problem with this novel is all the TELLING instead of SHOWING. There was so much rumination, explanation, summary, etc. that it started driving me crazy, and the last 150 pages were tough to get through. It needed more scenes, action, dialogue.

Also, how did the fairly interesting young Alice become this country club Junior League person? Alice gets really dull, and we don't really see/understand her transformation b/c of the time shifts between sections.

It was creepy to have to imagine George W. Bush having sex, too, for sure. That was another problem--I was always thinking about the real-life "characters," and so it's hard for me to respond to *American Wife* as a novel. I wonder if this would be a better book if it were completely fictional?

The grandmother was still my favorite character. And maybe Snowflake.

Jeanne says

The first 439 pages of this novel merit 5 stars. Alas! When our American wife makes it to the White House, the story falls flat on its face.

Anyway, this is the engrossing (and somewhat trashy) tale of Alice Lindgren Blackwell, future first lady. Growing up in a small Wisconsin town, Alice has a good life. She is an only child who lives with her mother, father, and grandmother. Her father has a job at the bank, her mother is the perfect housewife, and her grandmother is an eccentric intellectual. Alice is beautiful and bookish, and as sweet as can be.

But things change when Alice is in a car accident, an accident in which she is responsible for the death of a classmate. This is where her life takes a sordid turn!

I won't give away the rest of the plot. Everyone knows that this story was loosely based on that of Laura Bush. It's fun to keep that in mind while reading, particularly when she meets her future husband, Charlie Blackwell.

Alice is very likable, and you cannot help but to become involved in her story. The plot is quite engaging and only becomes stale when she actually moves into the White House.

Chicklit says

I'm a recent fan of Curtis Sittenfeld. I hadn't read any of her work until I read *Prep*, but once I finished it, I wanted to read everything she wrote. I was doubly intrigued when I found out that the protagonist of *American Wife* is a very thinly veiled Laura Bush.

For the most part, I enjoyed *American Wife*. The first three sections were so engaging that I never wanted to put the book down. Alice Blackwell is the kind of character you wish were real. I found myself feeling like I were in her kitchen, listening to her stories over a cup of coffee. The Alice Blackwell in these sections is a woman that is wonderfully complex and interesting. The real magic is that all the hype about the character being modeled after Laura Bush completely disappeared.

However, that complexity gets lost in the last section. If there was any doubt that Alice is Laura and that Charlie is George W, it gets thrown out the window immediately as Sittenfeld presents the Blackwells with the same history as the Bushes: the controversial 2000 election, the terrorist attacks, the failed war, even a grieving father that protests the war by camping outside the White House. At that point, I feel the book lost some of its magic for me. The prose got much more expository and the story turned heavy handed. I wish the story and its characters had maintained the same complexities it did in its earlier sections.

Rebecca Foster says

The life of former First Lady Laura Bush might not sound like promising material, but this fictional autobiography delights. When shy librarian Alice falls for Charlie, heir of the Blackwell political dynasty, private tragedies from her past – and her disagreement with her husband's policies – threaten to emerge. It's delicious fun to spot Bush family and administration members in this *roman à clef*. The well-drawn characters defy caricatures of a conniving presidential idiot and his meek, silent wife. Imagining the rich inner story that resides in every unassuming introvert, Sittenfeld has created a masterpiece from an ordinary life.

(With this 100-word review, I was one of 10 finalists for *Stylist* magazine's Culture Critic competition in April 2011. It was one of my first attempts at book reviewing!)

Book Concierge says

Book on CD performed by Kimberly Farr

From the book jacket On what might have been one of the most significant days in her husband's presidency, Alice Blackwell considers the strange and unlikely path that has led her to the White House – and the repercussions of a life lived, as she puts it, "almost in opposition to itself."

My reactions

I was expecting a somewhat light look at a fictional first lady. What I got was every so much more – a nuanced, complex portrait of a woman who did not seek but nevertheless found herself in a very public position.

I liked that Sittenfeld takes the reader back to Alice's childhood and introduces us to this young, quiet but inquisitive girl – an only child who lives in a small town with a loving family, including her grandmother who introduces her to the wonders of literature. We watch her grow to adolescence, make mistakes, grieve over losses and heartbreaks, struggle to achieve some independence, and find joy and fulfillment in her career as a librarian. While her life takes some unexpected turns, Alice remains true to herself, confident in her opinions, compassionate and thoughtful, but also willing to fight for the happiness she wants. She is no less strong because she is quiet. And when push comes to shove, she will stand up for what she believes is right and insist on her due.

The author's note at the beginning tells the reader that while this is a work of fiction, the lead characters will be somewhat recognizable. And they are, but the reader should remember that this is a work of fiction – NOT historical fiction. One thing I found interesting is that I had looked at the cover of this book and assumed that this would be a story that paralleled the lives of Jack and Jackie Kennedy. I was wrong, but not at all disappointed.

Kimberly Farr does a fine job performing the audio version. She has good pacing and really brought Alice to life for me.

Michael says

A character-driven story about Alice Blackwell, a small town girl who meets and falls in love with a rising Republican hot-shot from her home state of Wisconsin. The strength of this story comes from the first-person narration by Alice and the way the story is told. Each of the four sections of the story are defined by a place Alice lives and she tells the story of not only what's going on in her life at the time, but fills in certain details to help clue you in on the overall pattern of her life. It ends up making the story feel very conversational, like sitting down with an old friend and catching up a bit.

The first hundred or so pages are all about establishing who Alice is, before we see her meet Charlie, the young Republican hot-shot whose star is on the rise. Despite being a Democrat, Alice finds herself falling for him and the two engaged in a whirlwind romance before getting engaged after just six weeks.

The writing style of the book is well done and while it's not breaking any new ground, the voice of Alice still feels fresh, authentic and real. Watching Charlie's star rise until he achieves the ultimate in political success is fascinating. Even more fascinating is that the story here is loosely based on the story of former first lady Laura Bush. In the end, we get to see the private side of the political office and the toll it can take on any relationship. It may even persuade some to look past a politician's policies and see that there is a human being behind them, who in the end isn't really all that different from you or I.

Kecia says

This book got four stars from me because I agree with most of the reviews (not here; "out there"): The first three sections (about 3/4 of the book) were good and interesting but the fourth section just didn't work as well. It was like being brought up short: "Oh yeah...she's the First Lady. Damn."

Of course it's the parallel to that other First Lady that has people reading this book but it's in the first three sections that Sittenfeld creates this interesting and complex character (yeah, she's also pretty passive, but I understood why she was) that you can almost detach from that other First Lady.

On reading some of the bad reviews ("here" as well as "there") I wonder whether people are allowing their antipathy for the Bush administration to color their opinions. I understand this (to an extent) but I also understand how Sittenfeld can take a premise (see 2004 Salon article) and turn it into something that's not a memoir or a biography but a mostly unique work of fiction that is loosely inspired by real people and events.

TK says

As I said in my comments when I posted this book to my "Currently Reading" list, I've "never read Curtis before but am semi-obsessed with novels about First Ladies and First Daughters. Plus, I love wedding gowns."

That's right, I was suckered in by the wedding gown! But come on -- it's a luscious dress, like a mound of whipped cream sprinkled with sugar. And truly, when I had a chance to read the ARE, I couldn't say no, since I have heard only good things about Curtis's stuff.

There must be something wrong with me, because I did not enjoy this book, and the more I think about it, the less I like it. I started reading and I was excited, this Alice Cole character was promising, she seemed sincere and real. Even Charlie Blackwell was a likable enough meat-eater, despite his privileged background and carefree arrogance, because we got to know him through Alice's eyes., who loved him despite herself.

I think I began to feel jipped when I realized there wasn't going to be an elaborate wedding scene in the novel, that Alice was never going to wear the wedding gown (or anything nearly like it) pictured on the book jacket. That isn't to say she doesn't get married.

Ultimately, two things turned me off of this novel. First, I realized I was reading a highly fictionalized account of Laura and George W. Bush's relationship, and frankly, I don't care about them or their relationship. I would have liked this book more had it been about some completely faux, wholly invented presidential marriage.

I read this book through to the end, because I had faith that Alice would do something dramatic, she'd do something to win back my respect, that would remind me why I liked her in the first place. But, ultimately, even her grandest gestures, and her most private, at a potentially pivotal point in her life, brought her right back to the status quo, to towing the line for her husband's administration and leadership. Her self-reflection and explanations were thin, and to me sounded more like justifications. Ultimately, I didn't like Alice Blackwell, the American Wife, and resented Curtis for having talked me into spending so much time with her (550 pages worth).

I'm sorry. Clearly, I'm not the right reader for this book.

Lucy says

Rarely am I so repulsed by a book while still able to honestly say that it wasn't completely awful. I can't ignore the fact that Curtis Sittenfeld (a woman by the way. I didn't look at the picture in the book jacket and had a male author writing this in my head for well over half the book) creates one of the most interesting and well-developed characters, Alice Blackwell, for a novel that I have read in a while. The creepy part of that is she modeled Alice after Laura Bush, flagrantly so, and I'm left feeling it's all unfair somehow.

I've always enjoyed historical fiction. I've given high praise to authors who seem able to "resurrect" actual historical figures and infuse life into them by placing them in dynamic relationships and creating a voice with conversations. Perhaps the historical figures need to be dead before writing about them, because when Sittenfeld takes the same liberties with Laura Bush, fictionalizing her actual history, I'm left with is disgust at Sittenfeld's disregard for her privacy, her public position not to mention the actual truth and have a very strong urge to dismiss this book as gossipy garbage.

Sittenfeld must have expected reactions such as mine. From it's charged release during last year's Republican National Convention, the book has been criticized by many, mostly Republicans, as being salacious and untrue - two charges Sittenfeld herself agrees with. Well...maybe not the salacious part, but she certainly included enough sex to keep even the fluffiest of beach readers happy. Doing so didn't give the book an honest quality but it did manage to make it feel trashy. She tried hard enough to portray Charlie Blackwell as close to the general media's version of George W. Bush that the otherwise normal trash becomes a downright disturbing image. I wish I could scrub my brain.

But not all of it is tawdry and in poor taste. Alice is so...real, in both her motivations and actions that if she were completely fictional my fingers would be tripping over themselves typing, "just so real and complex. So full of depth." As a result, I feel like a hypocrite for being so turned off. After all, are any characters truly "made up?" It seems to me that most authors use real life subjects as inspiration for their characters, so if the author acknowledges this, and even leaves that inspiration exposed and traceable, should they get less or more credit for being authentic?

When I finished reading, all I wanted to know was, "How much of this is true?" Enough of the events in Alice's fictional life are documented facts in Laura Bush's own that it seems more true than it is. In an interview Sittenfeld gave, she claims 85 % of it is fiction. That only the major events in each of the book's four sections (accidentally killing a classmate of hers in a car accident during high school, being a librarian and meeting her husband at a BBQ, having a husband who bought a major league baseball team, and being married to the President of the United States) are true and everything else is speculation and "what if's."

I guess that's fair but it still doesn't seem like it. For a book to be written about an actual First Lady, a human being entitled to the same dignity we all deserve and a woman who most of America holds in high regard (even the author herself admits that she's fascinated by her), and to speculate about private things like her sexuality, her commitment to her husband, an abortion and drug use, and dress it up as fiction to avoid being charged with slander and libel seems cowardly.

The author claims her intention was not to expose Laura Bush but to write what life might be like if you happened to marry a guy who went on to become President of the United States. If she had managed to write that, and leave out her obvious bias for Laura Bush and against President Bush - she might have succeeded in writing something thought provoking and brave. While it may be thought-provoking, it certainly isn't brave...it's cheap and dangerous. Sittenfeld may have opened my eyes to the price and path of fame, but she did so at the cost of my own respect for her.

Sheryl Sorrentino says

American Wife is the best thing I have read in a very long time. I picked this book up from my local library in a moment of desperation when I had nothing else to read. I was about to pass on it when two of my “holds” came in, but I am so glad I cracked the front cover, because I was immediately and hopelessly hooked.

American Wife offers an intimate fictional peek into the marriage of George W. and Laura Bush. Full disclosure: I am in the camp that considers George W. Bush to be among the worst presidents ever. I—like many of the narrator’s critics in the novel—viewed Laura Bush as a “Stepford Wife” whose background and life story held no interest for me whatsoever. I had misgivings about spending 555 pages reading a thinly-veiled account of the Bushs’ rise to political prominence, and yet, I devoured this lengthy saga over the long Fourth of July weekend.

The protagonist, Alice Lindgren, tells her story of unsought fame and marital compromise in such an eloquent, honest, down to earth voice, I could not help but “get behind” her. Likewise, the portrait Curtis Sittenfeld paints of Charlie Blackwell is “W” masterfully personified. He is a bawdy, self-aggrandizing F-up, and yet, like Alice, I found myself being drawn to his potency and charisma in spite of myself.

Sittenfeld does an extraordinary job bringing Charlie and Alice to life in all their glory, warts and all. The prose is beautiful—clear, plain and heartfelt—and the story both moving and matter-of-fact. Whether you loved or hated the Bush’s, or fell somewhere in between, this skillful work of modern-day historical fiction is a must-read. With the exception of a few well-established facts (e.g., Laura Bush’s car accident when she was seventeen; W’s DUI), the rest is all supposed to have been fabricated. The acknowledgments page lists a number of sources (primarily widely-available written works) that Ms. Sittenfeld used to craft this story, but she sure could have fooled me! I would have guessed she’d spent extensive time in the White House with President and Mrs. Bush; so skillfully does she “nail” these characters while probing the tenuous pact Alice Lindgren—and by implication Laura Bush—forced to reconcile her private and public lives and preserve her personal political values without directly or publicly opposing her husband.

N.B.: I’m not typically one to comment on book covers, but I do take issue with this one: Alice by her own account states that she wore a simple suit on the day she wed Charlie Blackwell. So why the fancy white dress, white gloves, and two- (or is it three-?) carat diamond suggestive of a debutante? Is this supposed to appeal to the Harlequin set? Come on, Random House; I’m sure you could have come up with a cover design that more accurately reflects the tone and theme of this superbly complex story.

Lisa says

I loved Curtis Sittenfeld’s debut novel, *Prep*. And while I wasn’t thrilled when I discovered that the main character of this book was based upon Laura Bush, I remembered how brilliantly Ms. Sittenfeld crafted the coming of age story of her young protagonist in *Prep*. I suspected that her treatment of Laura Bush masquerading as Alice Lindgren Blackwell would be equally engaging. For the greater part of the book, I was not disappointed. *An American Wife* proved to be a refreshingly modern rendition of a classic American coming of age. However, the book’s final chapter proved to be a bit of a let down. It seems that the author lost her focus after the main characters moved into the white house. I could barely endure the main

character's laundry list of complaints and regrets about her role as first lady. It was distracting and it almost ruined a perfectly lovely book.

Jennifer says

This thinly veiled fictional account of Laura Bush was absolutely fantastic. I'm sure the First Lady will be embarrassed by certain juicy, fabricated events, but all in all, I found this to be a love letter to her from the author, who claims to be a huge Laura Bush groupie. Sittenfeld is a true master of character development and this is some of the best fiction I've read in awhile--I couldn't put it down and stayed up way too late reading it.

Lisa says

Wow. One of the best books I've read this year.

Just forget what you might have heard about this book being a mirror of the life of Laura Bush (it is, but ...), it's really about the life of one woman, and purely on its own merits as a novel, it's moving, thoughtful and wonderfully wrought.

The author gives Alice (and Charlie) complexity, hopes and fears — and lives, even if their lives (in the White House and before and after) aren't like ours. She empathetically details the burdens and isolation of being famous, the doubts and regrets people carry with them through their lives, and the challenges that married couples face over the years. Sweeping and at the same time intensely personal, "American Wife" explores the most intimate parts of Alice's life and marriage with a piercing realism that captures the height and depth of emotions without ever straying into melodrama.

It's one of those rare books that when you have to put it down for a while, you wonder what the characters are doing while you're gone. And when you put it down for good, it's like saying farewell to a dear friend.

Margritte says

I will have to go for two stars on this one. This 'biographical fictional' tale of Laura Bush started out five stars, but finally fell flat in the last third of the book. I struggled to finish.

I also feel uncomfortable with the repulsive, salacious details provided, although the author claimed that 95% of the book is fiction.

Huh?!...W.w.w.what?!... C.c.c.c.come again?!

Building a story around a president of the USA and his wife, surely demands some respect for privacy, truth, facts, if it is so blatantly based on real people, right? Was this exploitation for sales? I think so. For this reason it deserves the lowest rating possible.

Aren't we all a bit tired of media exploitation? The past election coverage in America is a text book example of it. One of millions. Why should facts interfere with a good story, yes. I am not even American, but even I felt terrorized and traumatized in the aftermath! This book is no exception.

However, the first three hundred or so pages of the book, the detailed descriptions of Milwaukee and surroundings; the lives of Alice as a young teenager and young adult, the colorful social set-up, and the historical background was really well done. The information dumping to fill up too many pages, losing the tension, was not. There's moments of tragedy and brighter moments of happiness, good and less good people making up the adjectives. The realism so well used. I felt present, part of the families, a good, loyal friend of Alice's. Entrenched. Involved.

Despite an effort to vilify Charles (George Bush) as a hard drinking, lazy misfit... truth or fiction?...never mind, I still liked the character, the people lover, the social animal. I don't know George Bush from Adam, but Charles was a gentle, tough, good man. Alice (Laura Bush) started out as a strong protagonist, but ended up a pathetic whiner claiming noble victim status, trying very hard to be a heroine, but alas, did not make it - my opinion. Remarkable, maybe.

I should have stopped reading before they arrived in the White House, and just ignored the gory details of the 'fiction' surrounding them. How do we distinguish between facts and fiction?

The ending... where is it?

Two forced stars. Sorry. One of us in this experience was lying, and it's not going to be me. It is about principles.

Ami says

Three stars is really more of an average. Four stars for the first half, and two for the last half.

However, when reading the first chunk of the book, I was excited, engaged, engrossed, and believed that Sittenfeld had pulled off something epic here, a truly staggering undertaking.

I'm interested to see what the reviews will have to say. God knows there have been books with less strong beginnings and worse endings lauded as excellent. (Indecision, I'm lookin' at you!) I have to say, based on the beginning, I'd say that full scale embrace of the book by reviewers would not bother me.
