



American Wife: A Novel

By Curtis Sittenfeld

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On what might become 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.”

A kind, bookish only child born in the 1940s, Alice learned the virtues of politeness early on from her stolid parents and small Wisconsin hometown. But a tragic accident when she was seventeen shattered her identity and made her understand the fragility of life and the tenuousness of luck. So more than a decade later, when she met boisterous, charismatic Charlie Blackwell, she hardly gave him a second look: She was serious and thoughtful, and he would rather crack a joke than offer a real insight; he was the wealthy son of a bastion family of the Republican party, and she was a school librarian and registered Democrat. Comfortable in her quiet and unassuming life, she felt inured to his charms. And then, much to her surprise, Alice fell for Charlie.

As Alice learns to make her way amid the clannish energy and smug confidence of the Blackwell family, navigating the strange rituals of their country club and summer estate, she remains uneasy with her newfound good fortune. And when Charlie eventually becomes President, Alice is thrust into a position she did not seek—one of power and influence, privilege and responsibility. As Charlie's tumultuous and controversial second term in the White House wears on, Alice must face contradictions years in the making: How can she both love and fundamentally disagree with her husband? How complicit has she been in the trajectory of her own life? What should she do when her private beliefs run against her public persona?

In Alice Blackwell, *New York Times* bestselling author Curtis Sittenfeld has created her most dynamic and complex heroine yet. *American Wife* is a gorgeously written novel that weaves class, wealth, race, and the exigencies of fate into a brilliant tapestry—a novel in which the unexpected becomes inevitable, and the pleasures and pain of intimacy and love are laid bare.

BONUS: This edition includes an excerpt from Curtis Sittenfeld's *Sisterland*.

Praise for *American Wife*

“Curtis Sittenfeld is an amazing writer, and *American Wife* is a brave and moving novel about the intersection of private and public life in America. Ambitious and humble at the same time, Sittenfeld refuses to trivialize or simplify people, whether real or imagined.”

–Richard Russo

“What a remarkable (and brave) thing: a compassionate, illuminating, and beautifully rendered portrait of a fictional Republican first lady with a life and husband very much like our actual Republican first lady’s. Curtis Sittenfeld has written a novel as impressive as it is improbable.”

–Kurt Andersen

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Sittenfeld tracks, in her uneven third novel, the life of bookish, naïve Alice Lindgren and the trajectory that lands her in the White House as first lady. Charlie Blackwell, her boyishly charming rake of a husband, whose background of Ivy League privilege, penchant for booze and partying, contempt for the news and habit of making flubs when speaking off the cuff, bears more than a passing resemblance to the current president (though the Blackwells hail from Wisconsin, not Texas). Sittenfeld shines early in her portrayal of Alice's coming-of-age in Riley, Wis., living with her parents and her mildly eccentric grandmother. A car accident in her teens results in the death of her first crush, which haunts Alice even as she later falls for Charlie and becomes overwhelmed by his family's private summer compound and exclusive country club membership. Once the author leaves the realm of pure fiction, however, and has the first couple deal with his being ostracized as a president who favors an increasingly unpopular war, the book quickly loses its panache and sputters to a weak conclusion that doesn't live up to the fine storytelling that precedes it. (*Sept.*)

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From [The New Yorker](#)

In her third novel, Sittenfeld offers a thinly veiled account (Wisconsin, not Texas) of the life of Laura Bush, in the story of Alice Lindgren, who marries Charlie Blackwell, the ne'er-do-well son of a political dynasty who becomes President. The early chapters, in which Sittenfeld depicts an innocent childhood and adolescence disrupted by tragedy, are the most compelling. As the book progresses to more recent and familiar events, she has difficulty enlivening the ins and outs of electioneering and policymaking. The object of Sittenfeld's fascination is the seeming incongruity between Alice's liberal sympathies and her bookish intellect and Charlie's conservative nature and general insouciance. Neither character is very likable—Alice weak-willed and martyrlike, Charlie unbearably self-centered—but the novel, Sittenfeld's most fully realized yet, artfully evokes the painful reverberations of the past.

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While critics couldn't say for sure whether or not Sittenfeld captures the exact thoughts of Laura Bush, they did agree that she creates a realistic and highly sympathetic portrayal of the (soon-to-be former) First Lady. (The author supposedly based the novel on Ann Gerhart's 2004 biography, *The Perfect Wife: The Life and Choices of Laura Bush*.) Sittenfeld asks provoking questions about marriage, loyalty, and responsibility. But many reviewers couldn't fundamentally understand why the very decent Alice had supported her husband despite her doubts about his capabilities; Sittenfeld's pat, unsatisfactory answer is that Alice leads a life "in opposition." That, combined with the author's obvious contempt for Charlie, brought the reviews down a notch. Still, there's nothing as titillating as a look, albeit fictional, inside the White House—especially during an election year.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

James Crow:

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Gregory Howard:

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Anthony Brown:

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