

## First Lady Lit

*The history of the first lady memoir goes back further than most people realize. It also reveals some unfortunate constants in our current age.*

Laura Bush has made it to about mile 20 in the political memoir marathon—past the mega advance, past the leaked details, past the saturation-point publicity. If she needs a boost for the final stretch, she might remind herself that, more than 40 years ago, Lady Bird Johnson did it all first.

In the days after JFK's assassination, Lady Bird decided that, as the president's wife, she owed history an archive. So, most nights, at around 7, Lady Bird would retreat to her White House office-slash-dressing room, hang a small pillow on the door ("I Want To Be Alone"), and talk to her tape recorder. Lady Bird also saved lunch menus, guest lists, anything to aid her memory, and, as the Johnsons prepared to leave the White House, she began cutting and revising what had become almost two million words of material. By December 1968, New York's editorial elite were filing into a secure "reading room" to examine the manuscript. Holt, Rinehart and Winston ended up publishing *A White House Diary* in 1970 to effusive reviews. Radio, TV, and a book tour soon followed, and *A White House Diary* spent 13 weeks on the *Times*' best-sellers list. Every first lady since, with the exception of Pat Nixon, has written a memoir.

Lady Bird Johnson may have been the first first lady to get the full modern book rollout, but she was hardly the first whose White House experiences made it into a book. Readers were devouring *Letters of Mrs. Adams, Wife of John Adams* as early as 1840, and Abigail's daughter-in-law, Louisa, made several attempts at an autobiography. (She titled her final try *The Adventures of a Nobody*.) Louisa never intended to publish her memoirs—though, for a while, Henry Adams planned on bringing out an edition as his first book—but Julia Grant certainly did. In 1899, she told a reporter that "I never anticipated writing a book and don't believe, in fact, that I am gifted with any talent of that kind." "But memoirs," Julia added, "are different." Still, even after leaning on Mark Twain, who had helped Ulysses S. Grant's memoirs become an enormous success, Julia couldn't find a publisher. *The Personal Memoirs of Julia Dent Grant* didn't come out until 1975.

That means the first first lady to publish her memoirs was Helen Taft, whose *Recollections of Full Years* appeared in 1914. "I should like to say here," she writes, in an aside that opens the first chapter to overlap with her husband's political career, "that I am not trying in this narrative to pose as a woman endowed with an especial comprehension of such problems of state as men alone have been trained to deal with." Readers took Helen at her word, treating her book as a welcome and womanly curiosity. It was praised in much the same terms as the next first lady memoir, Edith Wilson's *My Memoir* (1939), which the *Book Review* applauded for its "intimate characterization of President Wilson and the faithful description of social life in the White House."

The *Book Review* did criticize Edith's memoir for its "anxious interest in matters that are personal and even trivial"—for example, her account of a White House dinner where she and two other wives arrived in similar velvet dresses. ("Fortunately," Edith writes, "the colors were different.") But first lady publishers didn't mind such criticisms since they marketed these books not as political literature, but as women's literature, to be serialized in magazines like *McCall's* and *Ladies' Home Journal*. Even Eleanor Roosevelt, whose political advocacy and twenty-plus books make her something of an outlier here, saw her first lady memoir, *This I Remember* (1949), feminized along these lines. The ads for Lady Bird's *Diary* promised "the story of a concerned wife and mother managing the busiest household in the world—the White House."

Yet Lady Bird had to neglect that household in order to keep up her diary. Luci, the Johnsons' younger daughter, later recalled "despising" Lady Bird's "I Want To Be Alone" pillow, and this gets at the modern first lady's increasingly complex and contradictory role. The same cultural forces that allowed the first lady memoir to become an actual, individualized story also made it a much harder book to write than a presidential memoir. Presidents need to show where they shaped history; first ladies need to show where they didn't. And while this split may be a legacy of the first lady memoir's early expectations, it certainly produces a better and more humanizing brand of political memoir. After reading a draft of Rosalynn Carter's *First Lady from Plains* (1984), Jimmy asked her: "Do you want to write in your book that you cried? It'll make you sound weak." Rosalynn kept the tears, and it's no surprise that, while both Carter memoirs mention Pope John Paul II, only Rosalynn reveals that, after his White House visit, the First Couple watched a Bo Derek movie.

While first ladies have always used their memoirs to defend their husbands, these days they use them to defend themselves. Things can get nasty, as in Nancy Reagan's *My Turn* (1989)—a book whose vengeful tone earned it the nickname "My Burn"—and, to a lesser extent, Hillary Clinton's *Living History* (2003) and its "vast right-wing conspiracy." But this is simply another index to the first lady's shifting role. It's not really fair to classify *Living History* as a first lady memoir—it's that plus campaign autobiography plus much more, and readers expected Hillary to engage Bill Kristol and Bill Bennett on healthcare.

Of course, you won't find similar moments in Barbara Bush's *A Memoir* (1994) or in her daughter-in-law's *Spoken from the Heart*. What still unifies the first lady memoir is money. Every twentieth-century title has hit the best-seller lists. Indeed, following Lady Bird's lead, Rosalynn, Nancy, and Barbara have all outsold their husbands—as did Hillary, until the Clinton autobiographies. The best example of this trend is Betty Ford's *Times of My Life* (1978). When the Fords signed a joint book deal for \$1 million—the first (and, it now seems, only) time this has happened—the same publishing insiders who had predicted Betty's book would land an advance three times the size of her husband's quickly spun the deal as one that "places their experiences as public figures on an equal basis." But the deal, if anything, helped President Ford save face—though not for long, since Betty's book received a record amount for its serial rights and another million for its paperback rights, all while Ford's *A Time to Heal* (1979) struggled to muster a paperback deal.

Betty realized all this: for Gerald's 64th birthday, in 1977, she gave him a T-shirt that said "I bet my book outsells yours." And yet the publishing industry continues to insist on bailing out our

presidents. Even after a wave of predictions that Laura Bush's memoirs would get as much as \$5 million—or, at the very least, more than her husband's—she reportedly received an advance of less than \$2 million against his \$7 million. It's as good an argument as any that publishers sign presidents more for the face time and prestige than for any chance at a profit. But it's also an indication that the history of the first lady memoir—while also a history of impressive scope, of evolving gender roles, and even of a few genuinely good books—is a history of unequal pay for equal work.