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PHOTOGRAPHY

Christmas at the White House: Reflections from America's First Ladies
Jennifer B. Pickens
Fife and Drum Press
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Five Stars (out of Five)

The White House: it is both the most recognized home in the United States and, in some ways, the most mysterious. At the forefront of American history for so many years, the mansion is infused with generations of holiday traditions, but the number of people who actually get to glimpse the December White House in all its decorative glory is very small.

Jennifer B. Pickens visited the White House for the first time in 2004. She was so impressed with First Lady Laura Bush's "A Season of Merriment and Melody" theme that Pickens wanted to share the joyous experience with her friends and family. She was disappointed to discover that no book had been written about Christmas at the White House and decided to remedy the gap. The result is a collection of charming photographs and detailed descriptions of the efforts of nine recent First Ladies to make the White House festive and enchanted during the holiday season. Pickens also includes excerpts from the First Ladies' own reflections.

Pickens' descriptions of the decorations, along with the work that goes into them, are thorough and enjoyable. Not only does she show talent at choosing words and phrases, but she also includes a host of fascinating facts about things like the weight of the traditional gingerbread house, for example. Charmingly, she manages to show glimpses of the presidents and their families as they celebrate: a playful picture of Nancy Reagan sitting on Santa's lap (who happens to be President Reagan), and a picture of George W. Bush decorating a cookie.

This delightful collection of essays and photographs is refreshingly apolitical. Pickens only seems to be concerned with enchantment and beauty, which is evident in a paragraph about Christmas in President Nixon's White House: "The vibrant décor contrasted with the dark mood of the political scene, where events were unfolding that would lead to the President's resignation in the coming year. Yet the First Lady found comfort in a bird's nest that she discovered in the branches of the eighteen-foot tree. During a press tour she called it 'an omen, a sign of very good luck. I've heard it forever that if you get a tree with a nest, it's good luck.'"

Christmas at the White House has wide appeal and is sure to delight lovers of Christmas and Americana.

Andi Diehn