ForeWord Reviews

HOUSE & HOME

My First Ladies
Nancy Clarke
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Nancy Clarke reveals a treasured glimpse into the social life of the White House in *My First Ladies*. With help from Christine Matheson, she recounts thirty years of experience arranging flowers there. As chief floral designer, Clarke served under six first ladies: Michelle Obama, Laura Bush, Hillary Clinton, Barbara Bush, Nancy Reagan, and Rosalynn Carter. Clarke entered the White House as a volunteer after attending a well-respected floral arrangement training program, and eventually landed a permanent position. After being promoted, she answered to the first lady who was in office at the time. The author takes us through the drama, fun, and occasional stress of putting on parties, from small dinner gatherings the Bushes enjoyed to large bashes hosted by the Clintons. Along the way, readers are given insight into the tastes of the first ladies, and treated to occasional encounters with the president and important heads of state (such as the Queen of England). Readers also experience dramatic events such as the fallout of the 9/11 attacks and opportunities to practice flower arrangements with seven-year-old visitors.

The author does an excellent job of presenting her employers' various preferences in decorations and floral arrangements. While some first ladies emphasize elegance and formality, others display a more carefree and affectionate attitude. Nancy Reagan, for instance, preferred classic white or pastel arrangements that were elegant and sophisticated, and her favorite flowers were peach-colored peonies. Hillary Clinton liked a variety of flowers in bold colors, from casual mixed arrangements to ultra-traditional to very contemporary styles. Mrs. Clinton always knew exactly what she wanted for the occasion at hand. This reflected her sense of self and the fact that she never tried to be something she was not. Regardless of the particular style of the White House residents, it's clear that all the first ladies and their husbands become a fan of Nancy Clarke. She includes images of handwritten notes from the first families, along with photos.

Nancy's stories of life in the White House are an interesting and rare look into domestic life in America's most prestigious household, and will satisfy readers' curiosity of what it's like to be a staff person, day in and day out. At times the stories can feel like a diary account that

lacks a deeper examination of the White House's significance in a nation experiencing ongoing political turmoil; on the other hand, it may be refreshing for readers to see life in the White House without a political lens. In fact, Clarke successfully reminds readers that at the end of the day, the president, the first lady, and those working in the White House are just regular people with basic needs, often satisfied simply by a fragrant bouquet of beautiful flowers.

Gabriela Worrel