

Twenty-five Years as the White House Chief Floral Designer

My First Ladies

*Behind the Scenes with First Ladies MICHELLE OBAMA,
LAURA BUSH, HILLARY CLINTON, BARBARA BUSH,
NANCY REAGAN, and ROSALYNN CARTER*



NANCY CLARKE with CHRISTIE MATHESON

My First Ladies: Thirty Years as the White House Chief Floral Designer

Nancy Clarke, Christie Matheson

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My First Ladies: Thirty Years as the White House Chief Floral Designer Nancy Clarke , Christie Matheson

*Nancy Clarke reveals the touching, funny, and illuminating story of what it was like to serve under six administrations and to help each First Lady find her own personal style when it came to planning flower designs, state dinners, and holiday festivities in the White House.

My First Ladies: Thirty Years as the White House Chief Floral Designer Details

Date : Published September 15th 2011 by Sellers Publishing (first published January 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9781416206392

Author : Nancy Clarke , Christie Matheson

Format : Hardcover 191 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, History, Biography, Autobiography, Memoir, Politics, Gardening



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From Reader Review My First Ladies: Thirty Years as the White House Chief Floral Designer for online ebook

Julie says

This is a sweet and simple book by an unpretentious woman who rose through the ranks of the White House floral design staff, starting as a volunteer and moving up to her position as chief floral designer. While it is not written as a diary, it has a bit of that feel to it. In her book, Nancy Clarke, describes over thirty years of experience with floral design in the White House. In the first chapter, Nancy describes how she came to train and work in floral design and her early experiences as a new volunteer in the White House. In subsequent chapters, Nancy provides an interesting look at what it is like to be a staff person in the White House. The way she recounts her interactions with the first ladies is often endearing. It is clear that she admired and emulated aspects of all six of the first ladies. Her stories are genuine, respectful, and lacking in sensationalism or gossip. Her stories provide an interesting glimpse into the personalities of the various first ladies. By the end of the book, I felt like I had a somewhat richer understanding of the first ladies based on Nancy's observations and descriptions of her interactions. While I have never had much interest in the life of Barbara Bush, I have to admit that I found myself quite liking Nancy's chapter on her. I was probably the least taken in by the chapter on Laura Bush. I am not particularly interested in flowers or floral design but one does not have to be to enjoy this book.

For any readers who are considering listening to this book on CD as I did, I strongly suggest that you reconsider and read the book instead for several reasons. First, Nancy Clarke's voice is not particularly melodious or enjoyable to listen to. As the book progressed and I enjoyed it more, it became less bothersome but still, she may have been better served by having a professional audiobook narrator read her book. Second, it wasn't until I read another review of this book that I realized that the book contained a wealth of photographs that nicely complement the book and are indeed worth looking at. About 3/4 of the way through listening to the audiotape, I went to the library and checked out the hardcover just to view the photos and I am glad I did. Third, I found the first 44 pages of the book (chapter 1) to be extremely tedious and overinclusive of detail. It got so bad at one point that I was waiting for the author to describe the route she drove to work, street by street. I honestly almost gave up on the book while listening to the long first chapter which consumed almost the entire first disk of five. Reading the book would allow the reader to skim through the first chapter and then move on to the much more enjoyable part of the book where Nancy discusses her work with the six first ladies: Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Hilary Clinton, Laura Bush, and Michelle Obama. I would give these chapters a 4 star rating.

Jessica says

While this started out as interesting, it seemed to circle a little on the same things. It was touching to read how each first lady reacted with their departure from the White House and their respect for the staff working there.

Marge S says

Who knew a small town exists inside the walls of the White House. Nancy Clarke reads her book on this audio version. Although her reading voice is not her strong gift, the listener knows by her words she is someone who delighted in going to her place of work. Nancy graciously shares images of six first ladies, always positive, always complementary of each of their contributions to being lady of the House. I tried to image the floral displays and the decorations from her descriptions. With the audio, there are no pictures. Had to search the web. WOW, for an interest that started out as a whim, really turned into a gift to the Nation. How sad to read of her recent passing. Glad I had all those hours of listening to Nancy share. If you like ready about the Nations first families, put this one your list.

Ashley says

The writing style was dry. Not a very cozy narrative style like I expected. It was more like a list of chronological memories. You never get to know the author which was disappointing. She talks briefly in the begging about herself, mainly how her childhood inspired her love of flowers. I would have liked more about her, her family, and how her job affected her personal life.

For all that, once the books gets into specific chapters about each first lady, I found it more interesting and readable. I would have liked even more stories and details, especially about the planning of the big events. The pictures were priceless, they really helped the book.

Overall this is a very short, somewhat dry, but nevertheless interesting read. Also a very quick read.

Barbara Erickson says

Fascinating behind-the-scenes glimpse of details required for WH events.

Aimee says

2.5... a little slow at times, but interesting/enjoyable to read. It was a little repetitive but she's a floral designer, not a writer. It was interesting to read her observations on the differences of the First Ladies and their preferences/styles. This is a book you can put down and come back to.

I'm most definitely not a Republican, however I think I enjoyed reading about Barbara Bush the most. She was so different than Nancy Reagan and of course, Hillary. Mrs. Bush was not frivolous in her choices and nor did they entertain every day like the the Clintons. The older I get and the more taxes we pay, I can appreciate Mrs. Bush's practicality.

Jane Patterson says

We have classes that are offered to Schnucks employees that offer a chance to see how other departments work. One of the classes I took was a floral decorating class and the teacher was very interesting. She was one of several volunteers chosen from all over the county (over 5.000 apply) to help decorate the White

House for Christmas. She was there for two weeks in November and said it was something she will never ever forget. That is the main reason I wanted to read this book.

Nancy Clarke volunteered and eventually became head floral designer for the White House for 6 presidents. I would have rather read a hard copy of this book because of the pictures. (My Kindle only shows pictures in black and white and you can't enlarge it to read the fine print). I did go on line and found some pictures of the many arrangements she and her staff did over the years and they are beautiful. Very interesting and gave a little back ground into each first lady all of whom seemed to be very nice and she became friends to all of them. Nancy retired in 2009 after Obama was elected to be with her grandchildren and ironically died in January of this year of respiratory problems. I'm wondering if it was due to breathing in all the pollen and sprays they use on the flowers.

Jennifer Paddock says

This is not a literary masterpiece, but rather a lovely historical review of Nancy's years as the chief floral designer at The White House. I enjoyed reading behind-the-scenes details. My favorite part was this book provides insights to the personalities of the First Ladies which I found very interesting. It's a very light read and perfect if you want a break from fiction.

Amy says

Behind the scenes at the White House. A pleasant book to skim during short breaks. A lighter touch during another long slog to election day.

I enjoy behind the scenes looks at just about anything. Behind the scenes at a TV show, at an international relief agency, at an Antarctic weather station, at a dog-training monastery, etc. I'd read any of these, especially to take my mind off whatever's behind the scenes in my own job or family.

The butler in Downton Abbey would be pleased: things are much more proper at the White House than I realized. There are certain ways to do certain things. Seven days a week, staff like Mrs. Clarke show up for work around 6 am, dressed in a suit, even though she's on her feet most of the day. (Women staff members weren't allowed to wear pants to work until the Clinton administration—so much for land of the free!). Mrs. Clarke deals with ushers and curators and social secretaries. Apparently, she should even keep an evening gown at the office for unexpected occasions like a photo op with the Queen.

This book has the polite, lady-like tone of something from the 1950s or earlier. I've always felt sorry for the First Ladies. They look like they've been trapped in amber. Mrs. Clarke is exceedingly careful not to write anything unflattering about any of them. Normally I prefer snark and dish, but I found her tact kind of quaint. Genuine good manners.

Karen says

After reading Michelle Obama's book, "America's Garden", I came across this book by the White House

Chief Floral Designer and thought it might be interesting to learn a bit more about Rosalynn Carter, Nancy Reagan, Barbara Bush, Hillary Clinton, Laura Bush and Michelle Obama. I came away from this book with impressions that matched much of how I thought of these women before. The author tells how each of these prepared for big White House celebrations and, of course, the styles and planning of floral arrangements. For me, the descriptions of arrangements, etc. got a bit tedious.

The many pictures included helped some with this. Nancy Clark and the White House staff surely have to be a very adaptable group of people to deal with the variety of personalities they serve.

Jenni V. says

I picked this book when I was searching the library catalog for something with a similar title and this one popped up and looked interesting.

It was a great touch that each First Lady had something to say about her, either specifically for this book or in notes they had sent and the author shared.

Her enthusiasm was contagious and even though I don't know anything about flowers, the behind-the-scenes details of the White House parties and their guests were fascinating. I loved all the pictures and notes, including the general questionnaire each First Lady filled out with their preferences; there is more thought put into all the details than I ever imagined.

Fun fact: they first were allowed to wear pants during the Clinton administration...another effect of Hillary's pantsuits.

Find all my reviews at: <https://readingatrandom.blogspot.com>

Linda says

Light, fun reading. Not politely. Interesting tidbits about the First Ladies. As a former florist I really enjoyed this.

Nancy Newman Bricks says

Oh my what a fantastic book. I learned so much about each of her "First Ladies" it was fascinating !!!

Ashley says

Ashley Woller 4B

In the memoir, "My First Ladies: Thirty Years as the White House Chief Floral Designer," Nancy Clarke shares her memories and experiences while working under six different administrations in the White House. Nancy Clarke specifically works with each first lady, and helps her find their own personal style when it comes to flower designs. In addition, Nancy Clarke would help coordinate state dinners, holiday events, and

social gatherings in the White House.

Clarke starts off describing her life living in Los Angeles with her children and her husband in the 1970's. When her husband was called to fight in Vietnam, she moved to Illinois with her children to live with her mother. At the time, arranging flowers was only a hobby for Nancy. It was something she could do to keep her mind of her husband being away. She decided to take a night class to learn about home floral design. Little did she know, arranging flowers would take her to bigger and better places. Nancy thought floral designing would only be a hobby, but after she working in a floral shop and learning about the Hixson's School of Floral Design located in Ohio, she instantly knew she wanted to attend. Of course Nancy could have attended a floral school in Dayton, but she wanted the best of the best. Nancy's husband supported her with all her ideas; so she set out for a few weeks, and discovered a whole new world of floral designing. At the Hixson's School of Floral Design, Nancy quickly learned how to properly care, color coordinate, design, and arrange a variety of flowers. In addition, she learned the difference between traditional and contemporary designs. While Nancy attended the floral design school, Bill Hixson, the owner of the school, asked Nancy if she was ever in Washington to contact the chief florist at the White House and volunteer as a designer. The next thing Nancy knew was that her husband was assigned to Washington, where she called the chief florist and soon began what would become her thirty-one-year career as a floral designer working in the White House. Nancy quickly became in contact with Rusty Young, who at the time was the White House chief floral designer. Clarke started off as a volunteer working in the White House Flower Shop. What she saw when she first entered the shop was by far what she intended to see. The White House Flower Shop, she said, "was crammed, cluttered, and overrun with flowers, cut stems, and discarded leaves, and had refuse piled up." Nancy's high expectations of the shop were by far the opposite of what the shop really looked like when she saw it in person. Nancy Clarke later touches on her journey of working in the White House Floral Shop and working her way up to becoming a successful floral chief. She describes the multiple working expectations she's encountered with each of the first ladies, from Rosalynn Carter to Michelle Obama; as well as the events she has experienced and the behind-the-scenes action that go on in the White House. A quote that specifically stood out to me was when the chief florist said, "You cannot talk about what you see or hear in the White House outside of the White House" (15). This quote got my attention because it was one of the most vital pieces of advice that was given to Nancy when she first started working in the White House. This quote made me think of the discussion we had in class about the White House Correspondents Dinner that President Barack Obama hosted in 2011. During this dinner, Seth Meyers' joked about Osama Bin Laden and his location. Little did the world know, President Obama had already set out Special Forces to complete the attack on Osama bin Laden. Especially those working in the White House, this information was top secret and is something that if one were to hear, could ruin the whole plan. Therefore, it shows how trustworthy people who are working in the White House or even close with the president have to be, and how mindful those people truly are outside of the White House.

An event that Nancy Clarke experienced while working in the White House was 9/11. Reading about her experience that day personally gave me the chills. Clarke was unable to describe the fear and terror she had the day of 9/11 and even the aftermath of the days since. In the beginning of September, when the school year started, we touched on 9/11 and the impacts it had on all Americans. We talked about how President Bush sent out troops into Iraq, and what we will do next to secure justice. It was interesting to read another perspective about 9/11 and how the White House completely shut down that very day. Nancy describes her experience of everyone, including the Secret Service officers, running out of the emergency exit doors of the White House and all heading north. She recalls watching the World Trade Center being destroyed on television, as well as seeing the smoke of the Pentagon right in Washington. In addition, Clarke adds in the aftermath of 9/11 how security instantly changed in the White House. She had to "go through two checkpoints and have [her] car searched (with detection dog) just to get to [her] parking place...and then as everyone, guests or staff, entered the gate into the actual White House, we all had to run our purses and bags through a scanner," (134). From then on, the security levels have stayed that way and are even more intensive just to get into the White House. This was a very interesting excerpt to read because it gave a

perspective a person who was actually there and experienced the aftermaths of what had happened. One of Nancy Clarke's last experiences at the White House was handing in her pass on Friday, May 30th. Clarke describes her White House pass as "something that everyone who works at the White House wears proudly," (170). In addition to security changes that were made after 9/11, passes were one of the changes that was made at the White House. These passes can be compared to the IDs that we wear in school. In class, every now and then we have discussions about IDs. We discuss how a person could just be wearing a simple Pokemon card and get away with that as an ID. A person can think of multiple reasons why we have to wear IDs, but at the end of the day, IDs are just a name card with a photo that anyone from the outside world can change or create and say it is there's. Every once in awhile the discussion of IDs and their importance in school systems comes up every once in awhile, but it is interesting to read how important they are in the most valuable of places, especially the White House.

In all, Nancy Clarke has impacted the White House and all of the six administrations she has worked with outstandingly. As far as Nancy Clarke's bias throughout her work of floral arrangements, she has done her job accordingly and has respected the wishes of each First Lady. Nancy Clarke was not one who wanted to disappoint. She wanted the First Lady, and those working in the White House, to be happy with the work she created. From Mrs. Reagan who "was elegant and sophisticated. Barbara Bush –conservative and traditional. Laura Bush --clean, simple lines and monochromatic tones," (101), to Mrs. Clinton who liked, "strong, bold, and unusual varieties," (103), Nancy Clarke was able to please each one of them to their preferred liking and specific taste. Throughout Nancy Clarke's time working at the Floral Shop she was able to make personal connections with each First Lady. Nancy was able to learn each First Lady likes and dislikes and even know each one of them on a personal level as well. Nancy Clarke was truly appreciative to have the experience of working in the White House. I know that she will truly be missed and the White House will never forget her lifelong work.

Linda Gaines says

Lots of photos of bouquets and comments (all good) on the six First Ladies in the White House.
