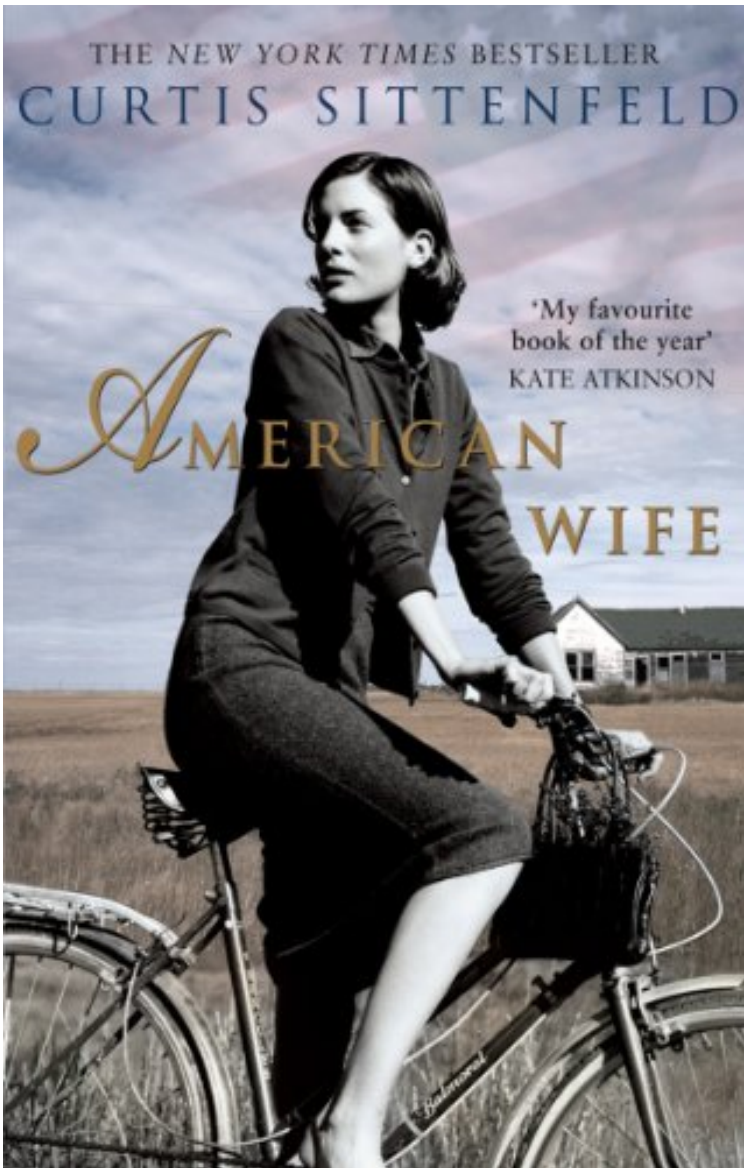


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American Wife



Par Curtis Sittenfeld
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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurIn the year 2000, in the closest election in American history, Alice Blackwell's husband becomes president of the United States. Their time in the White House proves to be heady, tumultuous, and controversial. But it is Alice's own story - that of a kind, bookish, only child born in the 1940s Midwest who comes to inhabit a life of dizzying wealth and power - that is itself remarkable. Alice candidly describes her small-town upbringing, and the tragedy that shaped her identity; she recalls her early adulthood as a librarian, and her surprising courtship with the man who swept her off her feet; she tells of the crisis that almost ended their marriage; and she confides the privileges and difficulties of being first lady, a role that is uniquely cloistered and public, secretive and exposed. In Alice Blackwell, Curtis Sittenfeld has

created her most dynamic and complex heroine yet. *American Wife* is not a novel about politics. It is a gorgeously written novel that weaves race, class, fate and wealth into a brilliant tapestry. It is a novel in which the unexpected becomes inevitable, and the pleasures and pain of intimacy and love are laid bare.

ExtraitPART I 1272 Amity Lane In 1954, the summer before I entered third grade, my grandmother mistook Andrew Imhof for a girl. I accompanied my grandmother to the grocery store that morning, while reading a novel that mentioned hearts of palm, she'd been seized by a desire to have some herself and had taken me along on the walk to town and it was in the canned-goods section that we encountered Andrew, who was with his mother. Not being of the same generation, Andrew's mother and my grandmother weren't friends, but they knew each other the way people in Riley, Wisconsin, did. Andrew's mother was the one who approached us, setting her hand against her chest and saying to my grandmother, Mrs. Lindgren, it's Florence Imhof. How are you? Andrew and I had been classmates for as long as we'd been going to school, but we merely eyed each other without speaking. We both were eight. As the adults chatted, he picked up a can of peas and held it by securing it between his flat palm and his chin, and I wondered if he was showing off. This was when my grandmother shoved me a little. Alice, say hello to Mrs. Imhof. As I'd been taught, I extended my hand. And isn't your daughter darling, my grandmother continued, gesturing toward Andrew, but I don't believe I know her name. A silence ensued during which I'm pretty sure Mrs. Imhof was deciding how to correct my grandmother. At last, touching her son's shoulder, Mrs. Imhof said, This is Andrew. He and Alice are in the same class over at the school. My grandmother squinted. Andrew, did you say? She even turned her head, angling her ear as if she were hard of hearing, though I knew she wasn't. She seemed to willfully refuse the pardon Mrs. Imhof had offered, and I wanted to tap my grandmother's arm, to tug her over so her face was next to mine and say, Granny, he's a boy! It had never occurred to me that Andrew looked like a girl. Little about Andrew Imhof had occurred to me at that time in my life but it was true that he had unusually long eyelashes framing hazel eyes, as well as light brown hair that had gotten a bit shaggy over the summer. However, his hair was long only for that time and for a boy; it was still far shorter than mine, and there was nothing feminine about the chinos or red-and-white-checked shirt he wore. Andrew is the younger of our two sons, Mrs. Imhof said, and her voice contained a new briskness, the first hint of irritation. His older brother is Pete. Is that right? My grandmother finally appeared to grasp the situation, but grasping it did not seem to have made her repentant. She leaned forward and nodded at Andrew who still was holding the peas and said, It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance. You be sure my granddaughter behaves herself at school. You can report back to me if she doesn't. Andrew had said nothing thus far it was not clear he'd been paying enough attention to the conversation to understand that his gender was in dispute but at this he beamed: a closed-mouth but enormous smile, one that I felt implied, erroneously, that I was some sort of mischief-maker and he would indeed be keeping his eye on me. My grandmother, who harbored a lifelong admiration for mischief, smiled back at him like a conspirator. After she and Mrs. Imhof said goodbye to each other (our search for hearts of palm had, to my grandmother's disappointment if not her surprise, proved unsuccessful), we turned in the opposite direction from them. I took my grandmother's hand and whispered to her in what I hoped was a chastening tone, Granny. Not in a whisper at all, my grandmother said, You don't think that child looks like a girl? He's downright pretty! Shhh! Well, it's not his fault, but I can't believe I'm the first one to make that mistake. His eyelashes are an inch long. As if to verify her claim, we both turned around. By then we were thirty feet from the Imhofs, and Mrs. Imhof had her back to us, leaning toward a shelf. But Andrew was facing my grandmother and me. He still was smiling slightly, and when my eyes met his, he lifted his eyebrows twice. He's flirting with you! my grandmother exclaimed. What does flirting mean? She laughed. It's when a person likes you, so they try to catch your attention. Andrew Imhof liked me? Surely, if the information had been delivered by an adult and not just any adult but my wily grandmother it had to be true. Andrew liking me seemed neither thrilling nor appalling; mostly, it just seemed unexpected. And then, having considered the idea, I dismissed it. My grandmother knew about some things, but not the social lives of eight-year-olds. After all, she hadn't even recognized Andrew as a boy. In the house I grew up in, we were four: my grandmother, my parents, and me. On my father's side, I was a third-generation only child, which was greatly unusual in those days. While I certainly would have liked a sibling, I knew from an early age not to mention it. My mother had miscarried twice by the time I was in first grade, and those were just the pregnancies I knew about, the latter occurring when she was five months along. Though the miscarriages weighted my parents with a quiet sadness, our family as it was seemed evenly balanced. At dinner, we each sat on one side of the rectangular table in the dining room; heading up the sidewalk to church, we could walk in pairs; in the summer, we could split a box of Yummi-Freez ice-

cream bars; and we could play euchre or bridge, both of which they taught me when I was ten and which we often enjoyed on Friday and Saturday nights. Although my grandmother possessed a rowdy streak, my parents were exceedingly considerate and deferential to each other, and for years I believed this mode to be the norm among families and saw all other dynamics as an aberration. My best friend from early girlhood was Dena Janaszewski, who lived across the street, and I was constantly shocked by what I perceived to be Denas, and really all the Janaszewskis, crudeness and volume: They hollered to one another from between floors and out windows; they ate off one anothers plates at will, and Dena and her two younger sisters constantly grabbed and poked at one anothers braids and bottoms; they entered the bathroom when it was occupied; and more shocking than the fact that her father once said goddamn in my presencehis exact words, entering the kitchen, were Who took my goddamn hedge clippers?was the fact that neither Dena, her mother, nor her sisters seemed to even notice. In my own family, life was calm. My mother and father occasionally disagreed a few times a year he would set his mouth in a firm straight line, or the corners of her eyes would draw down with a kind of wounded disappointmentbut it happened infrequently, and when it did, it seemed unnecessary to express aloud. Merely sensing discord, whether in the role of inflictor or recipient, pained them enough. My father had two mottoes, the first of which was Fools names and fools faces often appear in public places. The second was Whatever you are, be a good one. I never knew the source of the first motto, but the second came from Abraham Lincoln. By profession, my father worked as the branch manager of a bank, but his great passionhis hobby, I suppose youd say, which seems to be a thing not many people have anymore unless you count searching the Internet or talking on cell phoneswas bridges. He especially admired the majesty of the Golden Gate Bridge and once told me that during its construction, the contractor had arranged, at great expense, for an enormous safety net to run beneath it. Thats called employer responsibility, my father said. He wasnt just worried about profit. My father closely followed the building of both the Mackinac Bridge in Michiganhe called it the Mighty Macand later, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge, which, upon completion in 1964, would connect Brooklyn and Staten Island and be the largest suspension bridge in the world. My parents both had grown up in Milwaukee and met in 1943, when my mother was eighteen and working in a glove factory, and my father was twenty and working at a branch of Wisconsin State Bank Trust. They struck up a conversation in a soda shop, and were engaged by the time my father enlisted in the army. After the war ended, they married and moved forty-five miles west to Riley, my fathers mother in tow, so he could open a branch of the bank there. My mother never again held a job. As a housewife, she had a light touchshe did not seem overburdened or cranky, she didnt remind the rest of us how much she didand yet she sewed many of her own and my clothes, kept the house meticulous, and always prepared our meals. The food we ate was acceptable more often than delicious; she favored pan-broiled steak, or noodle and cheese loafs, and she taught me her recipes in a low-key, literal way, never explaining why I needed to know them. Why wouldnt I need to know them? She was endlessly patient and a purveyor of small, sweet gestures: Without commenting, shed leave pretty ribbons or peppermint candies on my bed or, on my bureau, a single flower in a three-inch vase. My mother was the second youngest of eight siblings, none of whom we saw frequently. She had five brothers and two sisters, and only one of her sisters, my Aunt Marie, who was married to a m...Revue de presse"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)