

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY



Curtis Sittenfeld is the bestselling author of six novels: *Prep*, *The Man of My Dreams*, *American Wife*, *Sisterland*, *Eligible*, and *Rodham*. Her first story collection, *You Think It, I'll Say It*, was published in 2018 and picked for Reese Witherspoon's Book Club. Her books have been selected by The New York Times, Time, Entertainment Weekly, and People for their "Ten Best Books of the Year" lists, optioned for television and film, and translated into thirty languages. Her short stories have appeared in The New Yorker, The Washington Post, and Esquire, and in the Best American Short Stories anthology, of which she is the 2020 guest editor. Her non-fiction has appeared in The New York Times, Time, Vanity Fair, The Atlantic, Slate, and on "This American Life." A graduate of Stanford University and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Curtis has interviewed Michelle Obama for Time; appeared as a guest on NPR's "Fresh Air," CBS's "Early Show," and PBS's Newshour; and twice been a strangely easy "Jeopardy!" answer.

- Author's website

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about Curtis's decision to write a retelling of Hillary's life?
2. How much did you know about Hillary, beyond the basics, prior to reading the novel? What's your opinion of her?
3. In the novel, Curtis really dives into her relationship with Bill including the passion and similarities in career aspirations. We know this is fiction but still based on a real couple. Do you think this was a realistic portrayal of their relationship for the most part? Where do you think the author took fictional liberties with it? Do you think they're happy in their marriage?

4. Let's talk about why Hillary was so drawn to Bill to begin with. She talks about her failure to connect with men as they seem to treat her as almost like a fellow guy and not a romantic interest. How did Bill treat her differently in the beginning of their courtship?
5. Hillary has said that she turned down Bill a couple times before finally accepting his marriage proposal. Why do you think she turned him down before eventually saying yes?
6. Hillary is the protagonist but it turns out that Bill is antagonist—even though they break up, she never can quite escape her relationship with Bill. What did you think about the author's portrayal of Bill and his affairs?
7. Once they break up, Hillary forges her own path and like in real life, she becomes a senator. What did you think about the sections dedicated to her senate run?
8. She never does marry and doesn't have a child in this timeline. It's interesting that the media still finds something to target with her—in this case, it's her single status. She still deals with plenty of misogyny and just general BS as a female politician. Why do you think the media is so concerned with the personal lives of female candidates?
9. Many times, Hillary remarks that Bill is probably the love of her life (before the 2005 meeting). Let's talk about this.
10. And now let's talk about when Hillary goes to visit Bill at his place in California. She thinks they're both single and they might hook up again, maybe even get back together. But Bill rebuffs her and she's angry and humiliated. Let's talk about this scene.
11. Like in real life, Hillary makes a couple presidential runs. But the fictional 2016 election is miles away from the real one. In this timeline, she's running against Bill and Donald Trump ends up endorsing Hillary (!). Why do you think the author decided to have Bill run such a nasty campaign against Hillary as opposed to Trump in this timeline?
12. Hillary secures the victory and becomes the first woman president. Let's talk about this.
13. What do you think a Hillary presidency would have looked like in real life? Do you think Bill was an Achilles heel for her during the run?
14. The story ends with Hillary thinking: "If I'll never know how much this was my path because of fate and how much because I willed it, the question is less important than that I made it across. Now other women know they, too, can make it, and not because I or anyone else tells them. They know because they've seen it happen." When do you think we'll finally see a woman president?
15. The story talks about tradeoffs. In letting go of Bill, Rodham misses out on marriage and having a child. But in doing so, she eventually becomes the president. Let's discuss this concept of tradeoffs in life.

16. Let's talk about the differences between fate vs free will. Is it one or the other or is life a balance between the two?

- <https://bookclubchat.com/books/book-club-questions-for-rodham-by-curtis-sittenfeld/>

BOOK REVIEWS

Booklist

/ Starred Review */* Though camouflaged, Sittenfeld's *American Wife* (2008) is a bold and empathic reimagining of the life of First Lady Laura Bush. Sittenfeld's avidly anticipated new novel, *Rodham*, mines a similar vein, though it is more daring, seductive, and provocative. Commandingly narrated by one Hillary Rodham, and laced with true-to-life figures and facts, this exhilaratingly trenchant, funny, and affecting tale nonetheless pivots smartly away from reality. Yes, Hillary and Bill Clinton, two brainy and ambitious Yale law students, fall passionately in love, and, yes, she accompanies him to Arkansas, where everyone finds her intellect, professional commitments, and no-frills style alarming and offensive. Hillary revels in Bill's charisma and drive, the sex is ecstatic, and she finally agrees to marry him, until his chronic infidelity convinces this disciplined social-justice warrior to walk away. With this split, Sittenfeld creates a vibrant and consequential alternative life for Hillary, rendered with shrewd and magnetizing specificity as the author dramatizes the sexism petty and threatening that Hillary confronts at every turn, while also offering unusual insights into the difficult-to-balance quests for racial and gender equality. As she envisions her Hillary's demanding and ascendant career, crucial relationships, and political quests that reel Bill back into her sphere, Sittenfeld orchestrates a gloriously cathartic antidote to the actual struggles women presidential candidates face in a caustically divided America. -- Donna Seaman (Reviewed 4/15/2020) (Booklist, vol 116, number 16, p15).

Publisher's Weekly

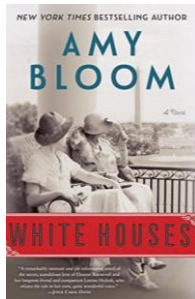
In this entertaining political fantasy, Sittenfeld (Eligible) imagines Hillary Clinton's personal and professional life if she and Bill had gone their separate ways instead of marrying. The novel begins with an intimate perspective on historical events: At Wellesley's 1969 graduation, Hillary feels the exhilaration of speaking her mind in public. Two years later, she meets Bill at Yale Law School. He is handsome, larger than life, proud of his Arkansas roots. She is ambitious, smart, hardworking, and opinionated. They fall in love and discuss marriage, but break up because of Bill's philandering. Bill runs for president in 1992 but drops out of the race. Hillary, meanwhile, is a year into her first term as senator from Illinois. When she runs for president, in 2016, Bill is one of three primary challengers. Scenes with cameos from Donald Trump prove livelier than familiar elements like Hillary's chocolate chip cookies, which she brings to a Yale potluck. Still, Sittenfeld movingly captures Hillary's awareness of her transformation into a complicated public figure ("The feeling was in the collapse, the simultaneity, of how I seemed to others and who I really was") Readers won't have to be feminists (though it would help) to relish Sittenfeld's often funny, mostly sympathetic, and always sharp what-if. (May) --Staff (Reviewed 03/30/2020) (Publishers Weekly, vol 267, issue 13, p).

Kirkus Reviews

How would Hillary Rodham's life—and our world—be different if she had never married Bill Clinton? In *American Wife* (2008), Sittenfeld imagined her way into Laura Bush's head in the guise of a character

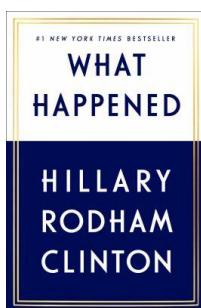
named Alice Blackwell. In her new novel, she doesn't bother to change the protagonists' names, and we're introduced to Hillary Rodham as she's about to give her famous Wellesley College graduation speech and has an intimation of her "own singular future." She goes to Yale, meets a charismatic former Rhodes Scholar, falls in love, catches him cheating on her, and follows him to Arkansas anyway. They try to come up with ways to tame Bill's libido: "Maybe—what if—if I wanted it and you didn't," he asks her, "would you think it was disgusting if I laid next to you and touched myself?" That works for her. "Mapping out the future, coming up with strategies and plans—these were things we were good at," she thinks. But then she decides not to marry him, and the history of the United States goes off in a different direction. The captivating thing about *American Wife* was imagining an inner life for Laura Bush, a First Lady who was something of a cipher, and in particular imagining that her politics were different from her husband's. Sittenfeld sets herself an opposite task in this book, creating an interior world for a woman everyone thinks they know. This Hillary tracks with the real person who's been living in public all these years, and it's enjoyable to hear her think about her own desires, her strengths and weaknesses, her vulnerabilities and self-justifications; it's also fun to see how familiar events would still occur under different circumstances. (Watch what happens when Bill Clinton appears on 60 Minutes with a less-astute wife at his side.) But there isn't much here that will surprise you. Pleasurable wish fulfillment for Hillary fans. (Kirkus Reviews, May 15, 2020).

READALIKES



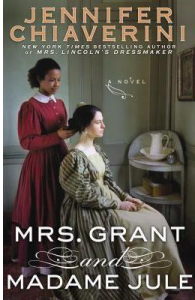
White Houses by Amy Bloom

After meeting the future first lady while covering Franklin Roosevelt's campaign, Lorena Hickock and Eleanor discover a powerful passion between them.



What Happened by Hillary Rodham Clinton

For the first time, Hillary Rodham Clinton reveals what she was thinking and feeling during one of the most controversial and unpredictable presidential elections in history. This is her most personal memoir yet.



***Mrs. Grant and Madame Jule* by Jennifer Chiaverini**

Julia Grant, beloved as Ulysses S. Grant's wife and the First Lady, grappled with a profound and complex relationship with Jule, the slave who was her namesake. While Julia spoke out for women -- Union and Confederate -- she continued to hold Jule as a slave behind Union lines. Upon the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, Jule claimed her freedom and rose to prominence as a businesswoman in her own right.