




COMMENTARY DEC 1

## Film fails to show the warmth of Jackie Kennedy and Lady Bird Johnson

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When I was an undergraduate at the University of Texas at Austin, the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library was free for everyone. My big family was often looking for something to do on their visits, so I became very familiar with the historical documents on display at the library. One item I took to heart was a letter written by Jackie Kennedy on the day after President Kennedy's funeral.

In the letter on robin's egg blue White House stationary, Jackie Kennedy thanks President Lyndon Johnson for his kindness toward her and the children following the assassination of President Kennedy. She expressed gratitude to Johnson for walking behind Kennedy during his funeral procession, for the letters he wrote to her children and for the way he had always treated her. Jackie told him in the letter that she always thought Lady Bird should be First Lady.

Watching the movie "Jackie" at the Austin Film Festival, I couldn't help but think of that warm letter housed just across town at the LBJ Library. The contrast between the two made me grumpy.

In the film "Jackie," respected actress Natalie Portman portrays the private struggle of American icon Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy after the assassination of her husband. The film shows her smoking, drinking and walking around the White House in a daze -- a far cry from the polished First Lady our country adored during Camelot.

While Portman delivers a captivating performance, the film raised my hackles in a way I hadn't expected. It didn't treat Lady Bird Johnson very well, and I was surprised to find how upsetting that was. Lyndon Johnson doesn't come off much better, heavy on blustering cone-pone Texan.

Contrast the film's portrayal of the Jackie-LBJ relationship to a taped conversation between the real-life Johnson and Jackie Kennedy from December 1963, (which you can listen to as part of the public exhibit at the library). In the brief phone call, Johnson tells Jackie she now has to be strong for another president and that she's welcome anytime to take a walk in the backyard with him.

I've had numerous fleeting encounters with Lady Bird Johnson. I used to see her in the front row of events at the LBJ Library, where her attendance guaranteed the event would include a near-dinner of delicious hors d'oeuvres. Later, after she had lost her ability to speak following a stroke, the former first lady and I shared an Austin manicurist, meaning I'd cross paths in the beauty shop with her flock of secret service agents. (I felt safer in the parking garage with a guy on an earpiece keeping an eye on my vintage Volvo.)

Once I took an overflowing basket of my friend's garden yield of tomatoes to the salon. When I gave Lady Bird a tomato she gave me the biggest and brightest smile I've ever gotten from a fellow human.

I didn't like how "Jackie" portrayed Lady Bird as a White House mean girl, giving President Kennedy's widow some serious side eye and suggesting that she change out of her blood-soaked pink suit before more people saw her. Later, Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson are shown looking at the walls of the White House with swatches in hand, as if she can't wait to move in and make the décor hers.

I became even more defensive about the portrayal of Lady Bird in the film after a recent visit to the LBJ library. I noticed an informal note from Jackie to Lady Bird on a small white White House card, reading "I wish you a happy arrival in your new home Lady Bird. Remember you'll be happy here. Love, Jackie."

The LBJ Library displays a quotation from Lady Bird about her White House gig.

"The first lady is an unpaid public servant elected by one person -- her husband."

Watching "Jackie," it's clear that being First Lady can't be an easy gig. It's like being appointed homeroom mother for the entire country, and you have to make up most of your job description as you go along. In their different ways, both Jackie and Lady Bird were brilliant as First Lady.

It's hard not to feel for Melania Trump. No matter what she does, people are going to compare her to public service oriented Michelle Obama. That isn't fair. Melania only married the President-elect, she didn't run for office. Trump doesn't have a history in politics, so Melania didn't have a chance to cut her teeth on the chicken dinner circuit. I can understand why she doesn't want to move into the White House immediately.

Maybe I should go work off some of my stress at Lady Bird Lake. The hike and bike trail around the lake was one of Lady Bird Johnson's first projects after returning to Texas. Like Jackie, Lady Bird kept up her public service long after she left 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

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