

DISCUSSION GUIDE

WHITE HOUSE SECRETS: Medical Lies and Cover-Ups

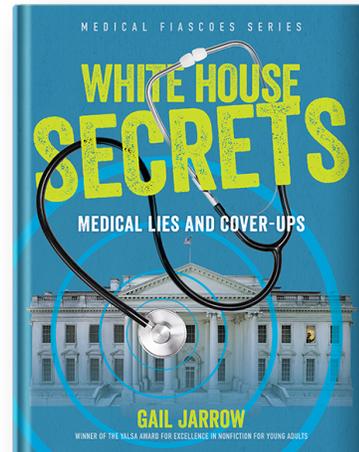
Written by Gail Jarrow

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Ages: 10-17



ABOUT THE BOOK

White House Secrets reveals the shocking—yet true—stories of presidential medical cover-ups from the 19th through the 21st century. This is the latest title in award-winning author Gail Jarrow’s Medical Fiascoes series, written for readers ages 10 and up. Did you know President Woodrow Wilson suffered a paralyzing stroke that his wife and doctors concealed for months—while Mrs. Wilson quietly assumed many of his presidential duties? Or that President John F. Kennedy lived with Addison’s disease and relied on heavy medication for years? In both cases, the public remained unaware. Again and again, when presidents have fallen ill or faced death, they and those around them have hidden the truth to project an image of strength and control. In this fascinating and provocative book, Gail Jarrow examines presidential cover-ups from James Garfield to Joe Biden. ***White House Secrets*** provides young readers with the historical background to better understand issues of media literacy, government transparency, and presidential responsibility—topics that remain as urgent today as ever.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gail Jarrow is the author of acclaimed nonfiction and novels for readers ages 8–18. Her nonfiction books have received the Sibert Honor, the Orbis Pictus Honor, the YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction and Finalist recognition, the Jefferson Cup Award, and the Eureka! Gold Award. Her work has also been named a Notable Social Studies Trade Book, an Outstanding Science Trade Book, an NSTA Best STEM Book, and a VOYA Honor Book. In addition, her titles have been selected as Best Books of the Year by *Kirkus Reviews*, *Booklist*, and *School Library Journal*. Learn more at gailjarrow.com.



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PRAISE FOR *WHITE HOUSE SECRETS*

“The latest from Jarrow, an acclaimed author of nonfiction for young readers, unveils medical issues that have affected sitting presidents through the centuries. This work, a strong choice for young readers and adults alike, raises the question: What’s the best way to balance presidents’ right to medical privacy with their responsibility to govern the nation? ... Each subject’s interesting, easy-to-read story appears in a stand-alone chapter of approximately 20 pages. ... Reveals secrets and raises timely, ethical questions worthy of vigorous discussion and debate.” —*Kirkus Reviews*

“Well researched and succinctly written, each chapter tells a different tale based on secrets kept by presidents and those who wanted to protect them. An intriguing topic explored in compelling true stories and illustrated with period photos.” —*Booklist*

MEDIA RESOURCE

Watch Gail Jarrow discuss this newest book in her Medical Fiascoes series with Calkins Creek Editorial Director Carolyn Yoder: <https://youtu.be/cGkpdtRyzDg>.

GENERAL DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What were common causes of illness and death in the United States during the 18th and 19th centuries?
- To date, how many presidents have died in office? What impact did their deaths have on politics and the public?
- What was the purpose of the Presidential Succession Act of 1886?
- Why might world and political leaders have concerns about a president’s ability to lead during an illness?
- What role do political parties play in choosing presidential and vice-presidential candidates? How has this influenced situations involving presidential illness or death?
- Why might a president’s family opt out of an autopsy?
- Explain the legal progression of presidential succession.
- With several presidents having been shot, how has the treatment of bullet wounds changed over time?
- From James Garfield to Joe Biden, how has media coverage of presidential health evolved?
- Should a president be required to take a competency exam before or during their presidency? Why or why not?



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- Which presidents chose not to run for reelection, and what role did health play in their decisions?
- After reading *White House Secrets* and thinking about your own civic engagement, what do you believe the public should know about a president's health while in office?
- What role did presidential spouses play in keeping health secrets? How did they influence politicians, the media, or the public?

PRESIDENT-SPECIFIC DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did Charles Guiteau gain access to James Garfield?
- What was Dr. Joseph Lister's contribution to medical science?
- Compare the dissemination of information in 1881 with today, using the materials on pages 22–27. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
- How quickly did Chester Arthur take the oath of office after James Garfield's death?
- Who lived in the White House when Chester Arthur took office, and why?
- What obstacles did Grover Cleveland face when becoming the twenty-fourth president?
- Who comprised the medical team that treated Grover Cleveland, and why were they chosen?
- What quote is attributed to Dr. Bryant when speaking with the Oneida's ship captain during Cleveland's health crisis?
- How did Cleveland's doctors, staff, and family address public concerns about his health?
- What was Woodrow Wilson's health like growing up?
- What role did Edith Wilson, Woodrow Wilson's wife, play during her husband's prolonged illness?
- How did Warren Harding feel about the presidency? How did he cope with those feelings while in office?
- In "The Final Stretch," what happened during Harding's last week, and how did it affect him, his administration, and the public?
- What foundation did Franklin Roosevelt establish during his presidency, and what is its legacy today?
- How was Roosevelt's public image shaped regarding his health over his presidency? Who was involved, and why?
- How was John F. Kennedy's illness explained to the public? Why was this explanation effective?
- Why did Ronald Reagan say he'd be open about his health? By the end of his presidency, had he kept that promise?



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- Why was the 25th Amendment not invoked during Reagan’s illnesses?

EXTRA CREDIT ACTIVITIES

- Answer the questions posed in the Epilogue.
- Which piece of “Presidential Trivia” at the start of each chapter did you find most fascinating, and why?
- Select one president and read an autobiography or biography of their life. How is their illness covered in that book compared to **White House Secrets**?
- Identify a political cartoon or headline from media coverage about a president’s health. What does it reveal about how information was communicated to the public?

Guide written by Alicia Abdul, School Librarian and Adjunct Professor (Albany, NY)



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