

Hardcover: US

Laura Bush zings Pelosi, nudges Cheney, ignores Rumsfeld

The former first lady writes vividly of her upbringing in West Texas, but as her life becomes more public her observations become less keen

BY MARGARET CARLSON
BLOOMBERG

If anyone can grow up to be president of the US, anyone can be first lady, too.

Still, neither George W. Bush nor Laura Welch had much inkling of what they were getting into when they married. Laura was a school librarian and George lived in a world of sterile apartments, alcohol and dead-end jobs. They wanted to jump-start their lives, but unlike the ambitious Clintons, they were hardly aiming for the White House.

In her memoir, *Spoken From the Heart*, Laura Bush writes as vividly of her upbringing in the bleak and unforgiving oil-patch towns of West Texas as Buzz Bissinger did in his classic *Friday Night Lights*. As her life becomes more public in the later chapters, her observations become less keen — or perhaps she just becomes unwilling to share them.

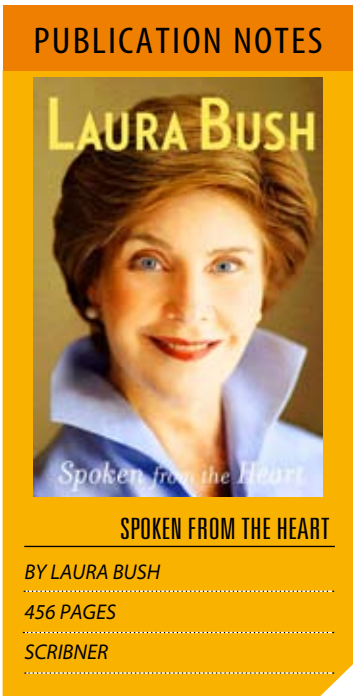
The book offers a stark look at Bush's loneliness growing up in a hard-scrabble town with more oil rigs than trees. The Welch family never struck it rich but her father worked two jobs and they did well enough. Yet there was an undertow of sorrow left by the loss of three children, two to late-term miscarriages and one who lived only a few days. Bush remembers staring at her little brother through the nursery window. Later, at an amusement park or on a picnic with her loving parents, she looked longingly at the families with all the kids.

Loneliness made Laura Bush. It gave birth to her lifelong devotion to reading, which became a career and a cause. A decorous and organized woman, she arranged her shelves by the Dewey Decimal System. (Those shelves ran heavily to books about Nancy Drew, another only child entranced by her father.)

She talks for the first time about a deadly car accident she had as a teenager. The boy she killed was a friend from school, and it was her fault for running a stop sign. By nature reticent, she could never bring herself to call upon the grieving parents to acknowledge the awful hole she opened in their lives.

It's no surprise that her greatest joy was having twin girls after years of trying. Hers is a traditional home — the wife immersed in life and kin, the husband in making a living and, later, politics. She could be forgiven for not knowing George would be the Bush son to inherit his father's mantle. He was the scamp of the litter, such a late bloomer his own parents were astonished when he won the governorship of Texas before the "good" son Jeb won in Florida.

Maybe that astonishment explains the shot she takes at her mother-in-law.



While you will read in vain to find out what kind of guy Dick Cheney really is, for those still wondering about Barbara Bush, here's a small treat:

"Bar" is "ferociously tart-tongued" and has insulted nearly all her friends. When people come up to her and say they know her, she snaps back, "No, you don't. You don't know me."

Once Bush becomes first lady, travelogue and social diary take over — world leaders seen, countries visited, overnight guests and over-the-top dinners. There are some revelations: Hillary Clinton wondered aloud why they called it Hillarycare when it was her husband's health care bill and confided that she wished she'd never gotten an office in the West Wing.

Glimpses of politicians behaving badly are scarce and about the other side. Nancy Pelosi said mean things yet Laura Bush still invited her to a state dinner when Queen Elizabeth visited. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said he'd stop calling Bush names ("loser" and "liar") but he didn't.

Oddly, the one time Bush asserted herself was about a trivial matter. In the middle of the night, she called then chief of staff Andy Card to have him tell Cheney to quit stonewalling about how he shot a friend on a hunting trip. It worked. Cheney started talking.

Imagine if she'd called about weapons of mass destruction. Most people prefer their first ladies Laura-like, and they will love this book. Laura Bush will never make trouble or ask for attention. Even as she writes about a more interesting life than she ever imagined when the "old maid of Midland married Midland's most eligible bachelor," she gives the feeling that she would just as soon be reading about it as living it.



CRYSTAL CASTLES
Crystal Castles (II)
Fiction



CARIBOU
Swim
City Slang/Merge



BROKEN BELLS
Broken Bells
Columbia



MEDICATIONS
Completely Removed
Dischord Records



BY TAYLOR BRIERE
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Crystal Castles is an experimental electronica duo composed of producer Ethan Kath and vocalist Alice Glass. Oozing indie cred from every pore, it has enjoyed a great deal of media exposure since its debut eponymous record was released in 2008 and garnered rave reviews for its schizophrenic, seizure-inducing live shows.

Crystal Castles' second album sees the band sailing further into uncharted electronica territory. *Fainting Spells*, the aptly named opening track, is a three-minute spin into mind-bending noise techno that pummels listeners into submission, while the album's second track and first single, *Celestica*, is instantly likeable. "Follow me into nowhere," Glass sings softly, atop rapturous synths driven along by a pulsing dance beat.

These tracks are a great entry point to the band's music, as it is within the balance of two extremes — unflinching noise experimentation and readily accessible dancefloor loveliness — that Crystal Castles spins its charm. Bizarrely addictive soundscapes are created in tracks such as *Not in Love*, with its delicately detuned crystalline synths and heavily processed Alvin-and-the-Chipmunks-on-LSD vocals, and *Intimate*, where a tight dance beat meets dark bassy synth stabs before giving way to a bridge of skull-peeling noise.

Fans of the band will find this follow-up to be just what they had hoped for.

Caribou is the moniker of musician Dan Snaith, whose 2007 record *Andorra* was a critically acclaimed take on 1960s psychedelia. For *Swim*, Caribou's newest release, Snaith said his

purpose was to produce "dance music that sounds like it's made out of water, rather than made out of metallic stuff like most dance music."

There is certainly nothing metallic here. *Swim*'s rhythms and melodies are incredibly organic, and Snaith's silky smooth vocal delivery feels like a slow ride on a riverboat. But this isn't happy music, and his lyrics are often quite morose, revolving around themes of broken relationships and loneliness. *Swim* is a record that takes itself quite seriously, even as it pumps out eminently danceable tunes.

The album's opener, *Odessa*, relies on a catchy bassline, while flashes of funky guitar dare you not to bob your head in unison. The next track, *Sun*, employs some fluid synth stabs and a no-nonsense four-on-the-floor beat along with the repetition of a single word, "sun," over and over again, and to great effect. The album makes frequent use of clichéd dance production techniques, including sounds processed through high- and low-pass filters to build tension and the one-by-one addition of percussive elements to create a sense of movement within a track. But these tricks are here packaged so tastefully they do their job well.

Snaith's elegant craftsmanship and attention to detail have produced a special record, the kind that makes you want to listen to it again as soon as it ends.

Broken Bells is a collaboration between producer Brian "Danger Mouse" Burton, one half of the duo Gnarls Barkley, and singer/guitarist James Mercer from indie-rock powerhouse The Shins. Their eponymous debut record doesn't sound like you expect it to, because much of what's here

is quite unlike anything we've heard from either artist before. Mercer often eschews the high-pitched emotive crooning that is so typical of The Shins' releases in favor of a deeper, grittier delivery that is more suited to this project. Burton, in turn, treats the album in a wholly different manner from his slicked-up production work as Gnarls Barkley and with Gorillaz.

Musically, the *Broken Bells* is a hodge-podge of sounds and influences and has an easy but earnest feel about it. Some songs gain their footing with the help of an acoustic guitar, others are firmly rooted in synthesizer madness. Lyrically, however, the album is steeped in melancholia, even during its most upbeat musical moments.

The track *Vaporize* marches along with a happy chord progression and snappy percussion, but on top of this Mercer delivers lines such as, "I was lost then and I am lost now/And I doubt I'll ever know which way to go."

On the lovely and lazy *Citizen*, accompanied by simple percussion and swelling synthesizer pads, Mercer seems to be begging for answers to life's toughest questions: "From the moment we're born/till we're old and tired/do we ever know?"

Still, there are moments where Mercer seems to find a reason to keep up the search for greener pastures, as on the relatively minimalist track *Trap Doors*, on which, backed by synthesized organ and simple guitar strums, he sings in a distant, distorted voice: "Now that it's over/you have to pick up/and start again."

With The Shins having broken up and Gnarls Barkley on hiatus, perhaps that's just what Broken Bells is all about: picking up and moving on.

The duo insists that the record is not a one-off, and that's good news.

Completely Removed is the long-awaited follow-up to Medications' 2005 math-punk debut record *Your Favorite People All in One Place*, and its second release on Washington, DC's famous Dischord Records.

Math rock gets its name from its rhythmic complexity — the use of odd asymmetrical time signatures that sometimes change multiple times in the space of a single song.

Angular, dissonant melodies and technical virtuosity are par for the course within the genre, often lending the music a gritty feel far too edgy to be considered pop.

On *Completely Removed*, however, Medications attempt to bridge the gap between math and pop. In some ways, despite the loss of drummer Andrew Becker, the record isn't too great a departure from what we've heard before from the band, as quirky rhythms and jagged guitars still pepper its songs. But what stands out is the band's newfound love of infectious vocal melodies, and this makes all the difference.

At times, Medications manages to completely disguise itself as an indie-pop band, as on the track *Seasons*, whose verse is held together by a riff that could easily have found its way onto a Top 40 single. *Brasil '07* is, simply put, a lovely tune. Jazzy drums and chiming bells are paired with hushed vocals and a subdued brass section, calling to mind the work of Sea and Cake. The mostly instrumental track *Kilometers and Smiles* splits its time between a big, nasty sounding math rock riff and Beatles-esque poppy psychedelia, complete with harmonized "ooh" and "aah" vocals.

Though some may pine for a time when Medications maintained a harder edge, there is probably an equal number of fans who will enjoy the new direction it is heading in.

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Notes from a very small island

Peter Rudiak-Gould's account of a year spent as a teacher in the Marshall Islands serves as a thoughtful introduction to this little-known part of the world

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
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The Marshall Islands should be of particular interest in Taiwan as they form a country with full diplomatic ties to Taipei. Close to both the equator and the International Date Line, the island group took its name from a Briton, Captain Marshall, who visited them in the 18th century when taking prisoners sentenced to transportation to Australia. But they're best known as containing Bikini Atoll where the US conducted a long series of nuclear tests beginning in 1946, with the name subsequently becoming attached to the ultra-miniature swimsuit.

The young Californian Peter Rudiak-Gould was posted there as an expatriate teacher with WorldTeach and spent a year on the tiny island of Ujae. It took him 45 minutes to walk round its entire coastline, he relates, and five minutes to walk from the lagoon side to the ocean side. Education levels are apparently low on the Marshalls, and the record of Rudiak-Gould's school was one

of the worst. His pupils couldn't point to either the Marshall Islands or the US on a world map on his first day of teaching.

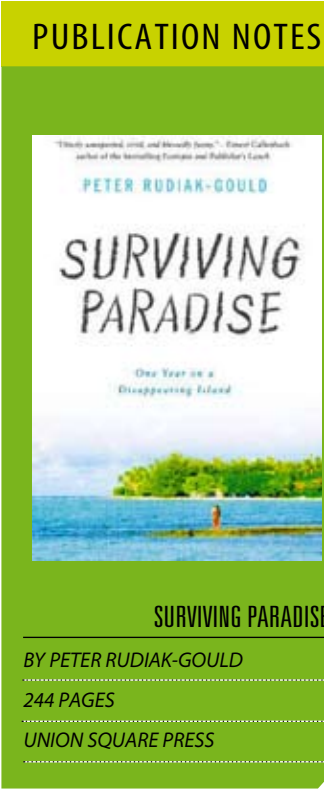
The book's title, *Surviving Paradise*, is of course ironic — paradise is somewhere you're supposed to lose your heart to, not struggle to survive. It's typical of the clipped irony that characterizes the author's prose style generally. He was a mere 21 when he went there, and not much older when he penned this book. He went on to pursue graduate studies in anthropology at Oxford, but the humor remains notably unassuming and even self-effacing. Some of the book's perceptions, however, are a good deal more tart.

The value of this book is consequently as a contribution to studies of the Marshall Islands, not a genre known for being particularly thick on the shelves. (There you are — I'm falling into Rudiak-Gould's style of quiet irony already.) It certainly doesn't make for gripping reading in the manner of Paul Theroux, a writer in a totally different class who the publishers nonetheless

see fit to evoke on the cover. Rudiak-Gould's irony is too mild and good-mannered to bear comparison with Theroux's characteristically outrageousness, not to mention his devastating and freely dispensed insightfulness.

The daily lives of the Ujae locals may have been unexceptional — two flights a month, little Protestant churches, lunches consisting solely of rice — but there were natural wonders on the uninhabited atolls nearby. There were frigate birds, "their bodies absurdly tiny between their huge pterodactyl wings," and clams almost a meter across, with shells so hard the ancient Marshallese had made adze blades out of them.

Though they now constitute an independent nation, the Marshalls still receive generous subsidies from the US. The author visited an American military base on Kwajalein Atoll. In its lagoon, he writes, unarmed missiles from California, 8,000km away, had from time to time either landed or been shot down. They were test flights for National Missile



Defense technology.

As for the former residents of Bikini, they'd received such

lavish compensation that they now lived a lifestyle far removed from any others on the islands. They had electricity, running water, air-conditioning, cars and a gymnasium, and the men never learned to spearfish because tuna came from a can. "The bomb had injured their self-reliance," Rudiak-Gould writes with characteristic urbanity, "but it was the new wealth that had killed it."

The author's own intrinsic Western-ness is instructively described. On a visit back to the capital, Majuro, to meet his fellow teachers, he understands for the first time how much he loves his own culture. "It wasn't the West's wealth or power. It was the fact that friends hugged each other; that men and women freely interacted; that children were openly treasured; that both intimacy and anonymity were possible; that a person could determine his own path in life." Elsewhere, though, he's not so generous about his home country.

There were many other foreigners in Majuro, including a transsexual Thai hairdresser,

an "affable Taiwanese ambassador," and an often distrusted community of Chinese immigrants. The reason for the distrust of these last residents

was the same as that expressed against similar new arrivals the world over — that they made too much money too quickly. But the facts were probably that they worked harder than the locals, then saved and invested, and that the locals were quick to use their efficient and plentifully stocked shops, but then resented the owners' resulting prosperity.

At one point in this book there's what looks like controversial material relating to Taiwan's Aborigines. On page 92 the author describes the ubiquitous Pacific outrigger and asserts that more than 5,000 years ago it "allowed the indigenous people of Taiwan — the Austronesians — to settle almost every inhabitable island across half the globe," regularly sail 3,000km to Hawaii, found "the world's most remote civilization" on Easter Island, discover Madagascar, and bring

back the sweet potato from South America. I've encountered some dramatic claims for the original Taiwanese, but never one as far-reaching as this.

It was probably the publishers who suggested adding global warming to the book's title — "One Year on a Disappearing Island." The author himself doesn't treat the topic until near the end of the book, and when he does so it's in a characteristically undramatic way. Yes, ocean levels are set to rise, but nothing very worrying is happening yet.

Then, then, is a pleasantly written account, full of information about a little-known place, and testimony to the virtues of sanity and keeping a cool head.

But what's the truth about the Taiwan's Aborigines? Some scholars have suggested the Austronesian diaspora may indeed have begun here, but it's by no means the orthodox view. There's neither bibliography nor footnotes in this book. It would be useful to know more about Rudiak-Gould's sources.