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Kennedy Myths, Revisited

By Zachary Karabell
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After more than four decades, the Kennedy industry is as strong as ever. Every year, publishers issue dozens of books on the Kennedy clan, and these past months have been no exception. Clearly, there is a hard core of Kennedy book devotees, much like there is a solid niche audience for books on each day of each battle of the Civil War.

One of the latest offerings in this field is by Geoffrey Perret, who has carved out a nice niche of his own writing magisterial histories of great Americans such as Dwight D. Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur. Some of his books have been quite adept at portraying complex icons; others have been more workmanlike. It's impossible to know Perret's goals, but it's a good guess that he understands his audience and does his best to offer a product that they will appreciate. His biographies aren't shallow, but they stick to the known story, with only the occasional offbeat insight or analytical surprise.

His account of John F. Kennedy's life is no exception. For someone new to the JFK myth, Perret's book will be full of revelations, about the sexual obsessions of the president, about his difficult father and competitive family, about his privileged upbringing, his experiences at Harvard, his time in the Navy during World War II, his nondescript career as a junior senator from Massachusetts in the 1950s and finally about his victory over **Richard Nixon** in the 1960 presidential election and then his performance as president during the dark hours of the Cuban Missile Crisis and his sudden, horrific death at the hands of an assassin in Dallas.

The problem here is that so much is known about that life. It is impossible to read a book like this solely on its own terms. There is just too much material out there already. When revelations about Kennedy and his various mistresses first began to percolate into the public realm, they were titillating, even shocking. By now, they are old news, and some of the rumors are so unverifiable that they deserve to fade away. But Perret has chosen to assemble his biography in paint-by-numbers style, and so few salacious details get left out. He treats stories of a brief dalliance with a pregnant Jayne Mansfield as equally valid as the affair with mob boss Sam Giancana's mistress Judith Campbell. The source for the Mansfield affair is a memoir by Mansfield's longtime assistant; the sources for the Campbell affair include FBI files. Whether he and the buxom Jayne were more than friends must remain in the realm of "maybe," but Perret narrates the story as if it were firm fact.

In addition to giving credence where credence may not be due, Perret devotes three-quarters of the book to Kennedy's pre-presidency. While only three of Kennedy's years were spent in the White House, his presidency and its sudden violent end are why we are so fascinated by him. The problem for Perret is that the presidency is less salacious and more serious. It's not that Perret isn't up to the task of analyzing and recounting Kennedy policies. He is, and in fact, the more sober tone of the later part of the book shows that Perret is fully capable of judicious, insightful writing. But either he or his publisher seem to have decided that sex and rumor sell more than the workings of the White House or the politics of the Cold War. They may be right.

On a more positive note, Perret does a good job deflating the erroneous image of the Kennedys as Boston aristocracy. In fact, the Kennedy clan was never accepted by that society, for its Catholicism and for its Irishness. That scorn drove the family's ambition. Perret also does not omit any major moments in Kennedy's life, and he strikes a good balance between

the personal and the political. While never neglecting a dalliance, he pays due attention to Kennedy's attitudes toward nuclear war, toward his health and chronic back problems and Addison's disease, and to his uneasy relationship with his wife, Jackie. He also offers thumbnail judgments on Kennedy's character. Remarking on JFK's appetites, he writes, "Jack Kennedy was nonetheless striving for something besides pleasure sharp enough to balance his emotional wounds, the pain in his back and the psychological burden of looming death. What he sought was what we all need—connection." Arguable, certainly, but a compelling analysis of what drove the man.

For those who have never read a book about John Kennedy, Perret has provided a useful primer. But for those who have already digested many of the salient facts, he offers little that is new, and his packaging of the old leaves much to be desired. There is not much wrong with this book, but in a field as well plowed as this one, a satisfactory effort just isn't satisfying.

