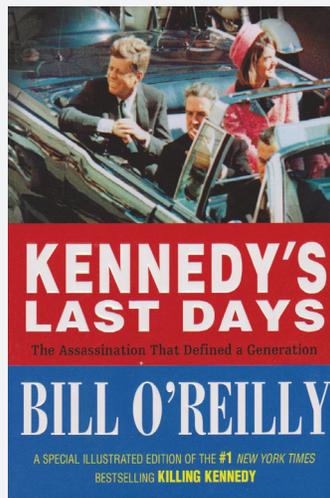


First Opinion: Presenting the Kennedy Assassination as an Uncomplicated Narrative of Good and Evil

O'Reilly, Bill. *Kennedy's Last Days: The Assassination that Defined a Generation*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2013.

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If you are past a certain age, you remember where you were and what you were doing when you learned that President John F. Kennedy had been shot. This familiar memory opens the prologue of Bill O'Reilly's book, *Kennedy's Last Days*. While our current students do not have this personal memory, it is in the collective memory of the nation, and it continues to stir the emotions of most Americans. The book, written for adolescents, is an adaptation of O'Reilly's successful *Killing Kennedy: The End of Camelot*, coauthored with Martin Dugard. The book details two parallel life journeys—those of Kennedy and of his assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald. The book is filled with wonderful historical photographs and focused maps that complement and move O'Reilly's narrative along. The book also contains interesting supplemental information, such as Kennedy's inaugural address, a list of important characters, a timeline, and suggested additional readings. While the narrative heavily emphasizes political and military history, there are attempts to help the young reader understand the social context of the early 1960s. This includes a list of top music, movies, and television shows.

The text is relatively chronological and moves between the lives of the protagonist, Kennedy, and the antagonist, Oswald, surging toward a seemingly inevitable and absolutely devastating conflict. For example, O'Reilly writes that at the time of his inauguration, Kennedy

“does not know that he is on a collision course with evil” (10). O’Reilly immediately turns the story to Oswald’s growing dissatisfaction with his life as a defector living in the Soviet Union. The bulk of the narrative spans Kennedy’s presidency, although there is a backward glance to the PT-109 story and Kennedy’s run for Senate. Throughout the narrative, Kennedy is always good and Oswald is always evil. Even as the Bay of Pigs disaster is explained, Kennedy’s public acceptance of full responsibility positions him as heroic. Oswald, on the other hand, is the consummate antagonist. He is angry, disillusioned, a Communist, and a drifter who cannot keep a job. He abandons his young family; and above all, he is anti-American. By extension, the United States and its ideals are perfection; the Soviet Union, Cuba, and their ideals are completely worthless.

History is rarely this uncomplicated and as neatly tied up as presented in the text. There are no loose ends. Historians leave loose ends in the narratives they construct. Historians realize that history is an interpretation and that different historians interpret historical evidence in different ways. Those interpretations differ across available evidence, time, place, and experience. In some instances, historians analyzing the same evidence will reach different conclusions regarding the significance of people and events. When O’Reilly describes the book as “completely a work of non-fiction” (306), he fails to disclose that the purpose of his narrative is to stir nationalistic emotions.

The book is certainly filled with familiar factual information. We have all seen the heart-breaking photographs of Jacqueline Kennedy standing beside Lyndon B. Johnson as he took the presidential oath of office, and of a toddler JFK, Jr. saluting his father’s casket. Kennedy did appear on television to take the blame for the failure of the Bay of Pigs. He is credited with providing strong leadership through the Cuban Missile Crisis, and he was assassinated in Dallas in November 1963. Oswald had lived in the Soviet Union and was denied a visa to Cuba. He was angry at the United States, and he supported Communist ideals. Finally, most believe he was the gunman in Dallas. All of this is accurate.

However, the one-dimensional portrait that O’Reilly creates of each character in his nationalistic narrative underestimates the intellectual abilities of young readers to explore and understand both of these men as complex human beings living in turbulent times and in complex places.

The book is entertaining, and I shed some tears while reading the familiar climax of the story. However, it is not the best resource to use with students when exploring this topic.

About the Author

Kathryn Obenchain is currently an assistant professor of social studies education at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. A former Fulbright Fellow to Romania, she was previously on the faculty at the University of Nevada, Reno and the University of Texas at Austin.

Her research centers on democratic citizenship education in the United States and newly emerging democracies. Her work has appeared in *Theory & Research in Social Education*, *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, *the Social Studies*, *Teachers College Record*, and *Equity & Excellence in Education*, among others. She is particularly interested in how social studies classrooms are structured to promote democratic knowledge, skills, and dispositions through curricular and instructional decisions, what informs these decisions, and students' experiences in these classrooms. Her recent work focuses specifically on the civic identities of social studies teachers and their students.