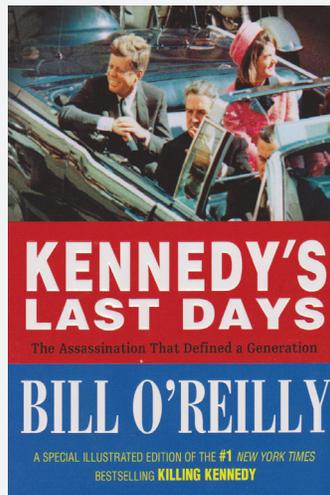


Second Reaction: Making Connections

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

Shannon White



For many of my students, history as a content area seems like an irrelevant and antiquated subject to teach and learn in schools. Often, they struggle to make connections between the world of the past and their lived experiences in the present. Bill O'Reilly's book *Kennedy's Last Days* builds a bridge between these two worlds of past and present by helping students understand the context of a different period of history through the humanity of the key players in John F. Kennedy's story. This human element provides the key to which students can connect the past to the present as they identify as humans themselves.

Although I did not teach United States history this year, I offered my U.S. government students an opportunity to read this book as an enrichment experience, which means that the assignment was optional and extended to those who were interested in the subject and had the desire to deepen their understanding of related course content beyond the minimum expectations of the course. Students had approximately two weeks to read the book, write a reaction paragraph to the book, participate in a book discussion, and create a product about the book for other students in the school to see. The two product choices were an iMovie book trailer to make other students interested in reading the book or a display in the library of our school about JFK, which would include a QR code to the book trailer for those who might be interested in this and other general JFK information.

Reading this book with my students is quite timely as the nation celebrates the fiftieth anniversary of JFK's assassination. Because many of my students heard of the assassination anniversary on the news and/or television programs, they had a heightened awareness of this particular president without making the connections about why the United States and the world were so enamored by this man. In our book discussion, students commented how they could begin to understand the hype of the anniversary of JFK's assassination because they had a more holistic understanding of the legend he was and the legacy he left behind. Consequently, students began taking a particular interest in the programming on network and cable television because they had such a positive experience reading the book and deepening their understanding of this time in history.

In the book discussion, the students expressed resounding enjoyment of reading this book, which is why I would highly recommend it to other teachers and students for course curriculum and/or as a supplement. O'Reilly skillfully intertwines three narratives within the book, which makes the text more interesting and captivating for a broader audience of students: the first narrative is that of the personal life of JFK; the second narrative is that of JFK's presidency; and the third narrative is the parallel story of Lee Harvey Oswald. While some students may be interested in JFK as president and the decisions he made as a leader of our country, other students may prefer the personal narrative of JFK's family life and background leading up to his presidency, while other students still may prefer the narrative of the more mysterious Oswald. O'Reilly seamlessly weaves the narratives together in a way that kept my students turning the pages waiting for the next portion of each of the three stories. Every one of my students who read the book commented on this aspect of the book's structure, citing that they liked how this feature made the book different from most traditional history books. One student, Nathan R., wrote, "It was like two side-by-side timelines that crossed paths at the point of the bullet stinging Kennedy." Julia B. added, "It brilliantly mixes Kennedy's political career with his family life while also informing readers of the life of the man that ended Kennedy's life, Lee Harvey Oswald."

Additionally, nearly all of my students noted how the photographs and captions in the book added an extra layer of authenticity and realism about people in history who can seem so distant that they almost appear fictional. The students liked that the pictures provided more proof of the story. Jackson W. noted, "*Kennedy's Last Days* is a very quick read for all reading levels and includes many photographs that really add to the facts and stories presented." Emily D. added, "In addition to the storyline, the pictures throughout the book helped the reader imagine the scene for him or herself and added to the complete story."

Finally, several of my students noted the direct and simple nature of the information in the book, citing that when they learned about the Bay of Pigs invasion and Cuban Missile Crisis in their U.S. history course they did not fully understand the situation until they read this book and understood these conflicts through the personal *and* professional lens of the

president. This was something students shared verbally during the book discussion that was not as evident in their reaction paragraphs. However, Jenny C. writes, "When I first learned about Kennedy, I didn't realize how much he was actually involved in his short three years of presidency."

In their critique of the book, my students (who are all high school seniors) thought that "the basic reading level can be a hindrance to the book's flow at times as simple points and basic knowledge is occasionally repeated for simple emphasis" (Jackson W.). Jessica K. commented on a missing piece that gains much attention in television programming: "All in all, the book was very interesting and informative, but I do wish the book looked more into the conspiracy thought to be behind JFK's assassination, because I do believe even while reading this book, there are some odd or suspicious facts." Despite these critiques, each student noted his or her personal enjoyment in reading the book. Even the students who do not like reading any text found a way to connect with this book. As an educator, this fact alone makes this a worthwhile read.

Student Reaction Paragraphs

Student: Jenny C.

Kennedy's Last Days by Bill O'Reilly was such an informative book. It told Kennedy's life story, but it went into so much detail that I had no idea about. When I first learned about Kennedy, I didn't realize how much he was actually involved in his short three years of presidency. I liked how the book focused on Kennedy's personal life because I always thought of the president as being someone who is all business all the time. It was nice to read about him playing with his children and having a somewhat normal life as well. This book caused me to have a lot more respect for Kennedy. It helped me understand his decisions better. The book kept me on the edge of my seat throughout most of the story. It kept me interested and I would most definitely recommend reading this book.

Student: Jackson W.

If you're looking to gain some extra knowledge about one of the United States' most well-known and recognized presidents, then *Kennedy's Last Days* is the book for you. Bill O'Reilly provides unique insight and knowledge to JFK's early life leading to his political career, his actions as president, as well as the final days of his life. Although I originally thought I knew a lot about Kennedy prior to reading this book, there were many times throughout my reading that I found myself saying "Wow, that's interesting" and "I never knew that." *Kennedy's Last Days* is a very quick read for all reading levels and includes many photographs that really add to the facts and stories presented. With that said, the basic reading level can be a hindrance to the book's flow at times as simple points and basic knowledge is occasionally repeated for

simple emphasis. The book does a good job (or not if you believe in conspiracy) to sticking to the facts of his assassination and avoids discussing conspiracy theories. All in all, I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in increasing their knowledge about one of the most well-known presidents in United States history.

Student: Jessica K.

After reading *Kennedy's Last Days* by Bill O'Reilly, I learned a lot and really enjoyed the book. I feel that the book gave a different perspective from what I normally would have looked at John F. Kennedy's life as president. While reading Bill O'Reilly's book, I noticed how it really brought attention to the way the Kennedy family has been idolized. The name Kennedy is almost treated as royalty now, and the book shows how JFK and his family were almost put on display for the American public to get an inside look into the life of the president of the United States. The book also did a great job of balancing the life of Kennedy with what Lee Harvey Oswald was doing at that point in time. The contrast of the two men through the book was informative. I felt the book also did a good job of showing how important Jackie Kennedy was to JFK during his presidency and the role she played too. O'Reilly also included just enough history to show what JFK was going through during his presidency. All in all, the book was very interesting and informative, but I do wish the book looked more into the conspiracy thought to be behind JFK's assassination, because I do believe even while reading this book, there are some odd or suspicious facts. However, Bill O'Reilly's *Kennedy's Last Days* was easy to read and also fun to read. I even learned new things, too.

Student: Julia B.

Kennedy's Last Days is a very enjoyable read. It brilliantly mixes Kennedy's political career with his family life while also informing readers of the life of the man that ended Kennedy's life, Lee Harvey Oswald. I would pass this book on to anyone who is interested in anything from politics to history. Kennedy, as the book tells us, was an amazing American who helped and influenced our country greatly. This book is an easy and enjoyable read with helpful aspects in it as well, such as family trees, individual after stories, Kennedy's inaugural speech, and additional facts. This book has made me more interested in the Kennedy family.

Student: Emily D.

The book *Kennedy's Last Days* was a both informative and interesting read. I learned a lot about the president since the book was filled with information; however, I never felt bored while reading since Bill O'Reilly wrote in a very story-like manner that kept it very interesting. I enjoyed how he described the life of not only President Kennedy but also Lee Harvey Oswald. This allowed the reader to fully understand how and why President Kennedy got assassinated. After reading I also feel like I understand Jackie Kennedy better and how so many people admired her. In addition to the storyline, the pictures throughout the book helped the reader

imagine the scene for him or herself and added to the complete story. Overall, the novel was very insightful and builds President Kennedy's Legacy.

Student: Nathan R.

I thought that the book was interesting. I thought it did a great job of comparing where Lee Harvey Oswald was in life along with where JFK was in his. It was like two side-by-side time-lines that crossed paths at the point of the bullet stinging Kennedy. However, the book did a lot of praising Kennedy and his family. It spoke of them as if they were kings when in reality they were just a family of politicians. I'm not sure how he got to his level of fame but the book definitely played on it. It also was not negatively subjective on Lee Harvey Oswald. It did a nice job explaining how he thought and felt. It gave a nice description of how he left for Russia, then came back, then tried to assassinate someone else before the president. I never knew before this book that he just wanted to be recognized. I thought he had something against him but he really liked the president, which is somehow contradictory. Overall, the book was very informative and told an informational side to both the president and Oswald to paint a truthful, factual story of how the whole event played out.

About the Author

Shannon White is a social studies teacher at Noblesville High School. She currently teaches U.S. government and economics. White is in her fifth year of teaching and has taught in urban and alternative school settings prior to teaching at Noblesville. She has her master's degree in urban education and is interested in authentic learning opportunities involving the community in which the school is situated. Beyond this interest, White values advocating for children, teaching about social justice and helping her students master their own learning style.