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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

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The Kennedy Women: The Saga of an American Family
by Laurence Leamer. New York: Villard Books, 1994 933 pp.
ISBN: 0679428607

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Browsing in our local bookstore chain — you know the kind, with just two shelves of philosophy, one of which is devoted to **Carlos Castaneda** and the other to “New Age”, and 24 shelves of self-help — the kind of place where you can ask “do you have anything by A. A. Milne?” and get a blank stare — I happened upon a book that was on the bargain table: *The Kennedy Women*. Unable to resist any information about the Kennedys, and certainly unable to resist a hardback biography whose paperback version sat 15 feet away at twice the price, I snatched it up.

Even if you can't find such a deal, it's worth finding a copy of this book. I recommend it not because the writing is exemplary in the field of biography — as was the case with **David McCullough's** *Truman* or **Diane Middlebrook's** *Anne Sexton* — or because the subject hasn't been covered elsewhere, but because this particular collective biography, focusing as it does on the FEMALE Kennedys, provides a new vantage point from which to consider the Kennedy phenomenon, and indeed, American social history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Perhaps I have a distorted view, living as I do in the heart of Kennedy territory, but I doubt there are many Americans out there who do not find the Kennedy family fascinating. (Yes, we've seen much too much about John-John's new wife Carolyn. But am I the only one who read every word anyway?) The Kennedy family, aside from being the closest thing to royalty we have in this country, represents accomplishment, triumph, and tragedy on such a huge scale that those of us with “normal” lives can only try to imagine. Any book that takes us behind the scenes to discover what the Kennedys are really like and what makes them Kennedys has got to be a good read.

And so this is.

Covering Kennedy history from the birth of Bridget Murphy (who would later marry Patrick Kennedy and raise her son P.J. Kennedy as a widow) in Ireland in 1821 through Jackie O's death in 1994 in just under one-thousand pages, Leamer manages to convey a deep sense of the personalities of the Kennedy women, especially Josie Fitzgerald (Rose Kennedy's mother and the daughter of the Mayor of Boston), Rose, and all of Rose's female children: Rosemary, Kathleen, Eunice, Pat, and Jean. He also makes a good attempt at characterizing the current generation of Kennedy women (Caroline and Kathleen in particular). To some degree, the story of the Kennedy women is the dark side of the Kennedy mystique — for as Leamer demonstrates again and again, life as a Kennedy woman meant pain, betrayal, and

subservience to a man's goals and desires for many of the family.

Leamer, who has written extensively for national magazines and is the author of several other books (such as *Make Believe: The Story of Nancy and Ronald Reagan*) emphasizes the importance of Catholicism among the early Kennedy women, and also makes clear at the outset that the Kennedy fortune was built from a woman's hard work. (Bridget Murphy, widowed in her thirties, created a small business empire that made her own son PJ's business success possible). PJ's money and power was passed to his son Joseph, who pursued Rose Fitzgerald in a clandestine romance despite their families' resistance. Rose was forced to give up her coveted Wellesley education one week before matriculation because her father happened to bump into Bishop O'Connell on the street, and O'Connell spoke unfavorably of sending Catholic girls to the Protestant Wellesley. Rose had been educated at several Sacred Heart schools and learned to submerge her own desires to become a “child of Mary” and a worthy wife and mother. Once married, however, Rose's life as the mayor's daughter, in the public eye, came to an end, and she learned the difficult lesson her own mother had learned: that men were not trustworthy and that the only way to survive was to deny the pain of their absences and infidelities.

Rose, after running back to her father's home with two children in tow when she could not take Joe's philandering and absences any longer, learned that she was no longer welcome at her father's house. She returned to the Brookline home she shared with Joe, and determined not only to not look back, but not to look at all. Leamer points out that the training Rose and her daughters received as young Catholic women forced them, through the constant demand to speak and think only of the positive in their lives, into what at times was outright self-deception. He shows that the roots of Rose's (and her daughters') abilities to deny the negative aspects of their lives (philandering and neglectful husbands, for the most part) lay in their Sacred Heart education and in their socialization as Kennedys, where every event was a competition, winning was all, and failure, even despair, were not possible. The girls were expected to support the boys' efforts in the wider world, but were also trained to be the best at what they did, at any cost.

There are many moments in the book where this family strategy, this family psychology, despite being at the heart of the Kennedy success story, seems almost pathological. For example, when her eldest son Joe had been killed in the war (having volunteered for a bombing mission that meant almost certain death) the family was told to go out and sail in a race as planned. As Leamer notes, “Joe and Rose had taught their daughters and sons to live lives of ceaseless stoicism, never showing their pain, never stopping out of weakness, never giving in.” Rose, upon

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learning of her son John's assassination, takes a walk on the beach and tells her nephew that "we can't look back. There are a lot of people who need us. ... you have to think about your future, your family, your education more. We must go on ... we must." These thoughts are certainly noble, but having them within a couple of hours of receiving news of the death of a child takes self-control to an impressive height — perhaps a destructive height, but one required if the Kennedy's were to achieve as they did. A woman who survived not only the infidelity of her husband but the violent deaths of four children is not someone who can easily be judged by the average reader.

While this book only deepens the wonder and awe with which one can view the Kennedys, it also exposes an uglier side: the elitism that allowed Ethel (Bobby's wife) and Jean Kennedy to treat servants and other employees with extreme rudeness, and left some of the young men in current generation unable even to make toast or cold cereal without assistance.

Even more horrible to contemplate is the story of Rose's eldest daughter and second child, Rosemary. I had known the bare bones of her story: the midwife held Rose's legs together at her birth to wait for the doctor's arrival, depriving Rosemary of oxygen and leaving her mentally retarded, and that she ultimately had a lobotomy. What I did not know was that during her entire childhood and early adulthood, Rosemary lived among — and superficially as — an equal with the other Kennedys. She learned to read and write, and was presented to the King and Queen of England as a debutante during her father's time as Ambassador to England. It was only when, living in a convent in Washington DC, she began to escape and wander the streets at night that Joe Sr., her father, decided he must take action to help control her periodic rages and avoid her becoming pregnant and shaming the family. He used his power and money to convince doctors that a lobotomy would be right for her, although it was a new and experimental procedure and had been used only as a last resort and on severely psychotic patients. Rosemary was the first retarded person on which the procedure was used, and Leamer's description of the operation is chilling. Her frontal lobe was essentially scraped out of her skull (the surgeon decided how far to go by making sure she could no longer sing or count during the operation, for which she was awake). As a result of this crude, cruel, and inappropriate procedure, Rosemary was turned into a babbling shadow of her former self. The family handled this disaster as they handled all the others: with action and denial. Rosemary was sent off to live in an institution (although well provided for) and was rarely visited by any family member, except her sister Eunice.

Eunice's role in developing the Special Olympics emerged out of the nightmarish circumstances of Rosemary's life and treatment. One can only admire a family that turns every tragedy into positive action; the frenzy of activity and the outright inability to allow for sorrow or reflection are both the great strength and the great weakness of the Kennedy legacy, according to Leamer.

Another aspect of the focus on Kennedy women is Leamer's insights into the Kennedys as mothers. Managing such large families, Leamer shows, was not easy. For the Kennedys, this seemed to be done at times poorly, and with a lot of help. Bobby's wife Ethel had eleven children, yet was nevertheless constantly in motion across the country supporting Kennedy political campaigns and efforts. Especially after Bobby's death, her oldest sons were left to run wild at their home, with local police attempting to rein them in. Rose herself traveled extensively as the last five of her nine children were growing, shuttling her youngest, Jean and Ted, from one boarding school to another before they reached their teens. Pat, who married Peter Lawford and lived for many years in Hollywood, delegated most

of her mothering. Jackie stood apart from this hands-off mothering, according to Leamer, carefully shielding and educating her children. He writes almost reverently of Jackie, and justifies all of her actions, through her marriage to Aristotle Onassis and beyond.

One of the books' fascinations is seeing the Kennedy legacy played out across four generations of American women. If the Kennedys are a reflection of the rest of the US, the real change in women's lives came only in the last generation, when JFK's daughter Caroline Kennedy Schlossberg combines mothering three with authoring a book, as a lawyer, on the Constitution, and Maria Shriver, Eunice's daughter, married to Arnold Schwarzenegger, carves out a successful career as a television journalist while raising her children, and Kathleen Kennedy Townsend (Bobby and Ethel's daughter) becomes a lawyer and balances a political and legal career while fully sharing parenting with her husband. For three generations prior to the current one, then, the Kennedy women continued in the time-honored path of being wives, mothers, and good Catholics, in charge of the home and raising the children, and promoting the political and business interests of the Kennedy men. Rose and her daughters learned to tolerate womanizing men as part of the norm.

The tale of Kathleen "Kick" Kennedy is one of the most moving and sobering in the book, and in a sense, the most emblematic of the Kennedy persona and mystique. Kathleen, who took on the mantle of Rose's eldest daughter when it was clear Rosemary would never be "really" a Kennedy, represented all that is great and all that is tainted in the Kennedy family: full of energy and spirit, but lacking in introspection or possibly even in deep affection (as she herself claimed), Kathleen was all that a Kennedy woman was raised to be: beautiful, stylish, well-mannered, positive, ebullient, energetic, talented, and devoted to her faith. Chased by many men, Kathleen settled on Billy Hartington, heir to the Duke of Devonshire, and a member of the most Protestant of Protestant English families. Both families abhorred the notion of a match between them, but in the face of the vast uncertainty of the future brought by World War II, Kathleen married Billy. He died after they had lived together only five weeks, when he returned to the front as an officer. Kathleen then became engaged to a married man, Peter Fitzwilliam, who was rejected by her church and her mother, who in fact threatened to disown and disinherit her. Leamer points out that partially because Kathleen's Catholic church could not or would not distinguish between the evil of marrying the fine, upstanding (albeit Protestant) Billy, and the evil of marrying an irresponsible (already-married) adventurer, Peter, she did not heed warnings about Fitzwilliam and instead followed him to her death. En route to a honey-moon like retreat, Fitzwilliam forced the pilot of the plane to take off in dangerous weather, and the plane crashed; all aboard were killed. Kathleen paid the ultimate price for her rebellion from Rose's teachings in pursuing life with Fitzwilliam, and in doing so she ironically represented all that the Kennedys stood for: acquisitive elitism coupled with unbounded optimism and daring.

Leamer is not sentimental, but neither is he overly negative about the Kennedys. He seems to treat the Kennedys objectively, pointing out the great faults that have accompanied their great strengths. He stays focused on the women. He supplies fascinating photographs, but I suppose it is inevitable that with such a photogenic and unusual family, one wishes for more.

While a reader may feel that this book might have been written more inspirationally (I myself found the locution "pain beyond pain" or sought "solace beyond solace" appeared an extraordinary number of times) in the end it is not possible to feel cheated when you finish these pages. Simply by offering a new lens through which to view the lives of the Kennedys, this book offers a better understanding of them, as well as of the American history they have been shaped by, and made.