

BILL O'REILLY & MARTIN DUGARD

Killing Kennedy The End of Camelot

A HENRY HOLT READING GROUP GUIDE

1. In the introductory Note to Readers for *Killing Kennedy*, co-authors Bill O'Reilly and Martin Dugard announce that their narrative will “go only as far as the evidence takes us.” With that in mind, discuss how this work differs from other books, articles, or films you’ve previously encountered on JFK’s assassination?

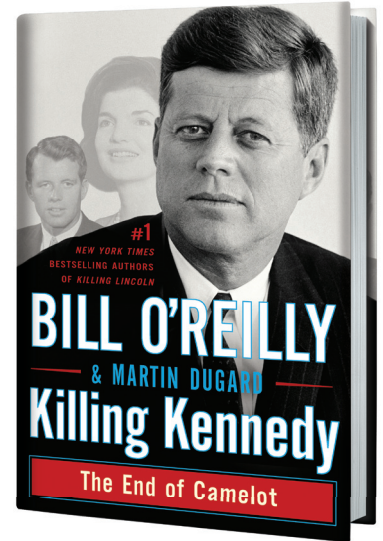
2. At the outset, we see John F. Kennedy being sworn in by Chief Justice Earl Warren. What distinguished Kennedy from Dwight Eisenhower, the man who immediately preceded him as president? What set them apart? Indeed, what set Kennedy apart from every president that came before him? And what did JFK and Ike actually think of one another? (And how, for that matter, did Jackie differ from Mamie?)

3. “Lee Harvey Oswald wants to come home,” we learn at the end of the Prologue. Why? Where had he been for the past few years? And why was he there? Do we really know?

4. Much is made of John F. Kennedy’s sexual liaisons and infidelities in these pages; his affairs and trysts with all manner of women were, literally, far too many to number. In Chapter 2, we read: “As JFK once explained to a friend, he needed to have sex at least once a day or he would suffer awful headaches.” And later, in Chapter 5, JFK’s sexual appetite is described as “beyond the realm of most men’s moral or physical capacities. . . . Sex is [his] Achilles’ heel.” Discuss whether and how JFK’s addiction to sex (if, in fact, that’s what it was) weakened or lessened him as a president. We all have our demons, as they say, but is it fair to suppose that Kennedy would’ve been a better, more effective, or more successful Chief Executive if he *hadn’t* had this particular “need”?

5. “Jackie is assembling a team of top collectors to enhance the décor of the White House in every possible way,” we read in Chapter 2. And in Chapter 4: “Her goal is nothing less than to transform the White House from the very large home of a bureaucrat into a presidential palace.” What did you make of this devotion to all things elegant and gilded? Was it right, or apt, for Jackie to be so focused on issues of style? Who really cares, in other words, if the White House does or doesn’t convey a palatial grandeur to those who visit it? Is it ultimately shallow, or else misleading, to devote so much attention to the glittery surface of things? Explain your views. (And if you can recall seeing Jackie’s historic tour of the White House on CBS, be sure to share with others how that landmark TV special registered with you personally.)

6. In Chapter 5, we read that JFK “has known for years [that] Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy is [his] number one political asset.” When, then, did he continue to cheat on her? Why was he almost incessantly unfaithful to her? Why the affair with Marilyn Monroe, or with so many others?



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7. Discuss the bitterly acrimonious relationship had by Bobby Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson. Why did these men despise one another? And describe the “shoot a gun like man” exchange, from the fall of 1959, which seems to have originated this feud. Moreover, why did JFK and LBJ likewise not get along?
8. As a group, compare/contrast how John Kennedy handled the Bay of Pigs invasion (in 1961) with how he facilitated the rescue of the crew of PT-109 (in 1943).
9. What was the “Irish Mafia”? Who were the key players in this squad, and why were they important to John Kennedy? What did they do for him?
10. Why was JFK’s decision to stay for a few days at Bing Crosby’s residence in Palm Springs, California—rather than at Frank Sinatra’s residence—so devastating? Why did this last-minute change of venue turn out to be so hurtful, so pivotal? And how did this change come about in the first place?
11. In Chapter 6, we note: “Originally, Johnson fought JFK over being used as a roving ambassador, but now he has come to love this aspect of his job.” What did such ambassadorial work consist of, and why did LBJ like doing it so much?
12. What sorts of questions did FBI Special Agent John Fain have for Lee Harvey Oswald on August 16, 1962? And how, if at all, did Oswald answer them?
13. “The president of the United States is rolling around on the bedroom floor with his children,” we read at the beginning of Chapter 7. What did you glean from *Killing Kennedy* about JFK as a family man? What sort of father was he?
14. During his typically eloquent, televised speech during the Cuban missile crisis, John F. Kennedy said: “Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right. Not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom—here in this hemisphere and, we hope, and around the world.” Did this remain a paramount “goal” for the U.S. in the years following the early 1960s? And is it still one of America’s primary aims today? Explain.
15. Who is (or was) Lisa Gherardini? Why is JFK so taken with her, at the start of Chapter 8? And why is Jackie, too, even more so? Why is Jackie driven to share Lisa with the whole United States?
16. Isaiah 1:18—“Come now, let us reason together”—was, as we see in Chapter 9, LBJ’s favorite biblical verse. Why?
17. “On April 10, 1963,” O’Reilly and Dugard write ominously, “Oswald decides it’s time to kill someone.” Describe what has brought him to this decision; pinpoint those events that have led up to it. Also, identify Major General Ted Walker.
18. *Killing Kennedy* maintains that certain Associated Press photographs significantly influenced Jack Kennedy’s ideas and feelings about both the civil rights movement and Viet Nam. Look again at these two photos, as a group, and then discuss why each image had such an impact on the president. Also, discuss how Kennedy’s views on civil rights and Viet Nam were influenced by RFK as well as LBJ.
19. Were you surprised to learn that the famous “I Have a Dream” speech, delivered by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., at the March on Washington, was—at least, at the outset—an “unusually stiff” and “flat” and “dull” piece of oratory? When and why did King’s speech turn the corner? And what did Jack and Bobby, and also Jackie, think of MLK? What were their respective opinions of King, and what were these opinions based on?

20. Talk about the role the City of Dallas plays in this narrative. Describe what Dallas, Texas, was like—as a place, as an American town—in the early 1960s. Why did people (several different people, actually) warn JFK not to travel there? And why did he decide, nevertheless, to do so?
21. “He doesn’t know whether he wants to be an American, a Cuban, or a Russian,” we read of Oswald in Chapter 21. “Still, he longs to be a great man. A significant man. A man whose name will not be forgotten.” And back in Chapter 10, along the same lines, we read of Oswald being “worse than a failure; he is anonymous.” How common is this thirst for lasting famousness—or if not for outright fame, at least for notoriety—among modern assassins? John Wilkes Booth comes immediately to mind, of course, but what about other examples? Discuss this matter, and if necessary, do some additional/outside research into this question.
22. After considering the ways in which Jack and Jackie Kennedy dealt with the death of their infant son, Patrick, reflect on how their marriage changed over the course of their time together in the White House. Why, for example, was JFK so jealous of Aristotle Onassis? And why, conversely, were the First Couple closer and more intimate with one another—and much closer with their two kids—in the wake of the Cuban missile crisis?
23. Having read this book, do you believe Oswald acted alone? Some folks think so, others don’t. (RFK didn’t think so, by the way, as we read in Chapter 26.) *Killing Kennedy* presents the assassination of JFK as though Lee Harvey Oswald committed the terrible act of and by his own accord, but the book also leaves room for the possible involvement of other events, schemes, or persons. As the authors put it: “The world will never know the answer.” Do you agree with this assertion (especially with the “never” part)? Explain and defend your view(s).
24. Why did JFK’s seated body remain more or less erect in the presidential limo, even after being hit by a bullet—the first of two separate impacts—in the back of the neck? Why didn’t the president fall forward? And what would’ve happened to Kennedy, most likely, if he *had* fallen forward?
25. Looking again at this book’s subtitle, and also at the last few paragraphs of Chapter 27, explain the “Camelot” allusion that Jackie passed along to journalist and author Theodore White, and that the rest of the nation (no, make that the world) was all too ready to accept as fact. Was this bright and graceful “Camelot” of a White House a mythic place, or did it—if only to some degree—truly exist?
26. *Killing Kennedy* boasts a memorable cast of incredible-yet-real-life characters, a rich, diverse dramatis personae that’s as colorful and compelling as any other roster in the annals of history. Therefore, reading this book’s Afterword can be a treat. Whatever happened, for instance, to George de Mohrenschildt, Allen Dulles, and Sam Giancana? And how, respectively, might’ve each man had a hand—perhaps, perchance—in the killing of JFK?
27. In the Epilogue, we find a letter that JFK wrote concerning Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. Conclude your discussion by considering the traits that Kennedy and Lincoln had in common—as presidents, leaders, thinkers, statesmen, fathers, inspirational figures, tragic heroes, and American visionaries. They are sometimes regarded, Lincoln and JFK, as two sides of the same proverbial coin. Would you agree?