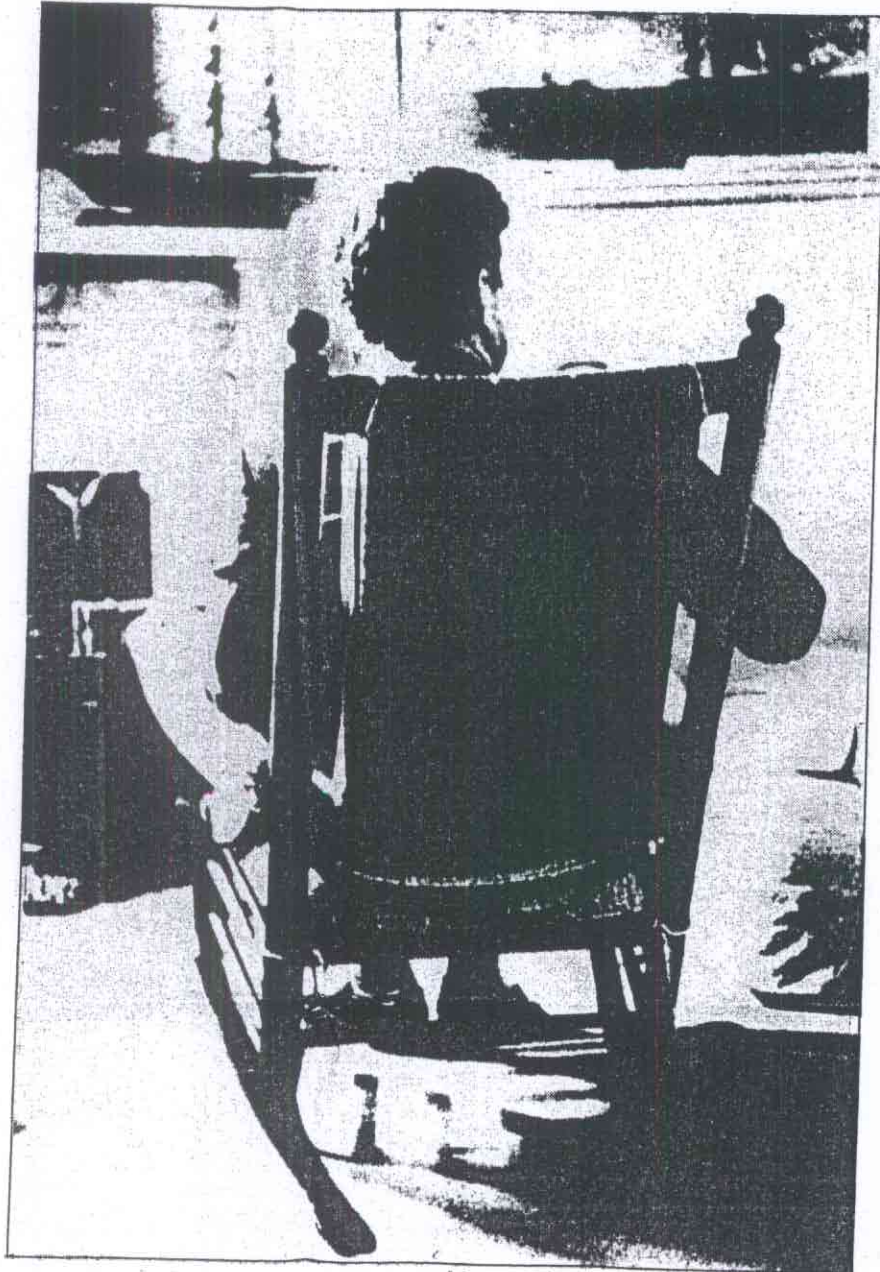


HISTORY

Camelot neurosis

The cure is in knowing the man, not the myth



Pose or pain relief? President Kennedy in his Oval Office rocker.

UPI FILE PHOTO

By Nigel Hamilton

Recently I have heard certain voices in the press criticizing ABC's decision to air the mini-series of my book on the 30th anniversary of President Kennedy's

death — as though, on that occasion, we should only watch, for the thousandth time, the Zapruder film of JFK's head being blown away, or watch the hundredth coy, saccharine documentary covering up his true life.

I reject this view, indeed I feel the morbid attention paid to Kennedy's assassination has become a veritable national neurosis — as if, somehow, we cannot let go, cannot come to terms with our shame and our impotence to completely "solve" the crime. And the reason we are so reluctant to let go is that we have spent the last 30 years fabricating a childish, wholly illusory myth about Kennedy's life — spurred by Jacqueline Kennedy in her period of trauma in November 1963, but which we have constantly and willfully embellished in the years since.

I don't think Jackie Kennedy thought for a second that her noble, exquisite farewell to her murdered husband, or her whimsical subsequent notion of "Camelot" would last for more than three weeks in the American consciousness. However, to everyone's astonishment, it

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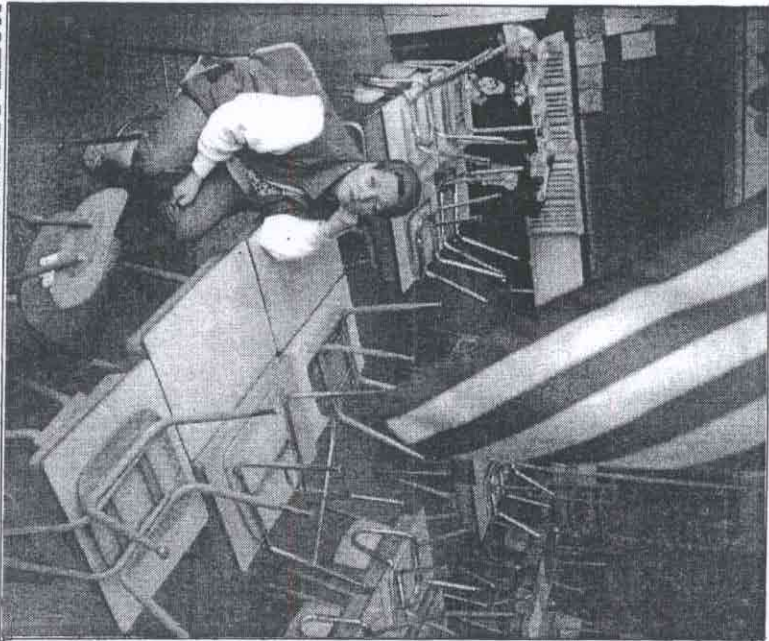
Nigel Hamilton, a fellow of the John W. McCormack Institute at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, is the author of "JFK: Reckless Youth," published last year and released this month in paperback by Random House.

WHERE WE WERE

A dozen people. A dozen memories. Twelve Bostonians recall and revisit the places where they heard the news that the president had been shot.



PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY JOHN TLUMACKI



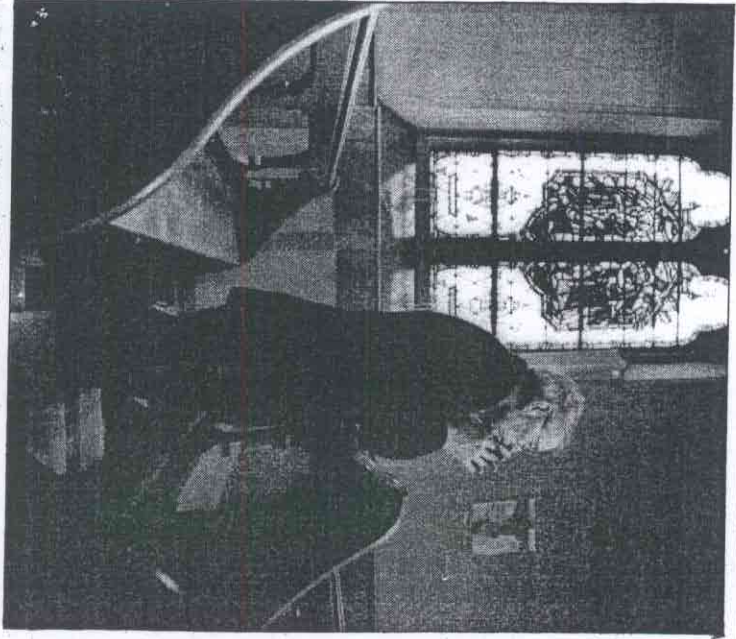
KATE SPENCER

She was 6 years old, a first grader at St. Gregory's Elementary School in Dorchester, when the news came. "I remember sitting in that section of the classroom, and someone came and knocked on the door and told us to turn on the TV," says Spencer, now the mother of three St. Gregory's pupils. "All the teachers and nuns went to the corridor and were crying. The nuns were usually so stoic, and they were crying. An announcement was made in the office for us to pray for the president. Then it was like a neighborhood ordeal when I went home. We couldn't play outside. My parents didn't want us to play as loud as usual, but to keep quiet."



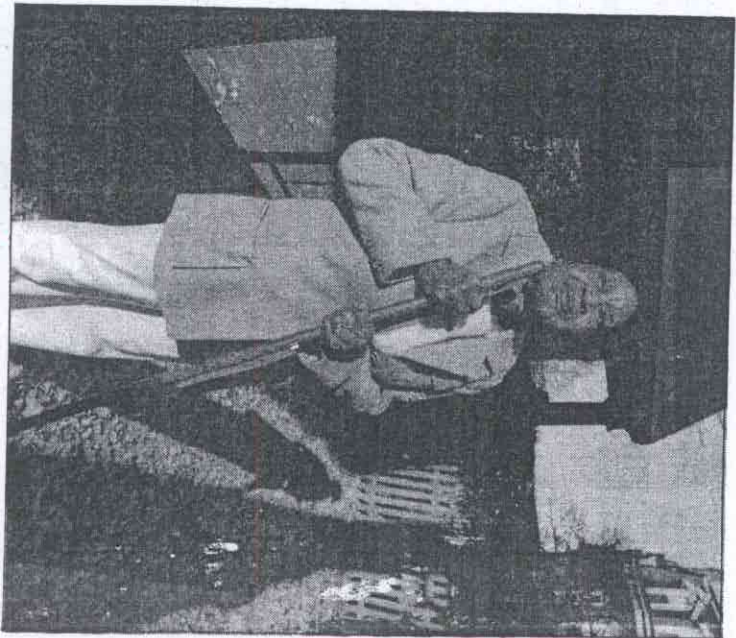
CORNELIUS C. VERMEULE 3d

"I was at the museum doing routine things and was on the way to the Harvard University Press to oversee the proofs of my book," says Vermuele, who was 38 and curator of classical art at the Museum of Fine Arts, a position he still holds. "My head was filled with the book. I realized something was radically wrong. The phone lines were all jammed up. The word of Kennedy's death traveled like electricity around the University Press. We weren't conditioned in America to having our president assassinated. One always thought we were immune to this in politics, and suddenly, bang!, the world changed forever. Just like the band of conspirators that killed Julius Caesar changed the Mediterranean culture forever. We went to St. Peter's Church in Cambridge that night and sat and meditated."



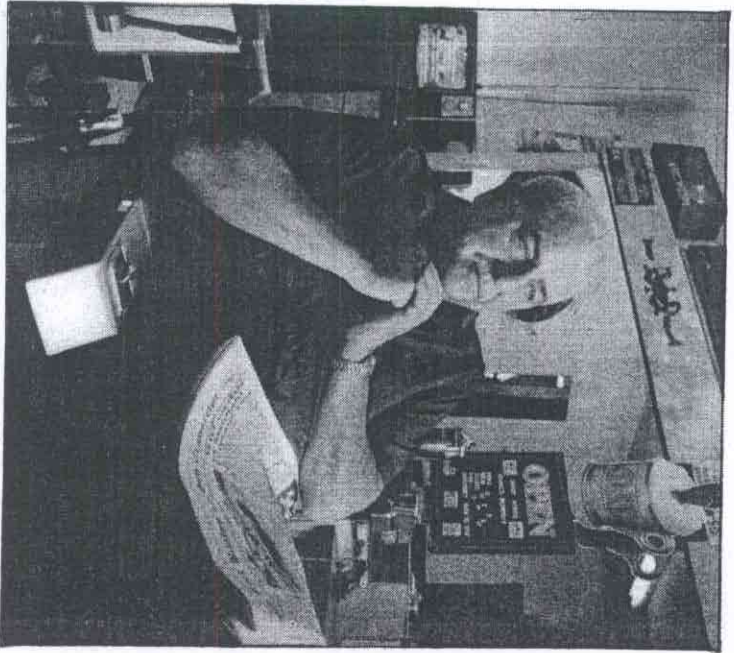
REV. FREDERICK O'BRIEN

"I had just met with the cardinal and pulled up to the Cathedral in a VW van, and someone came by and said the president was just shot. Both doors to the chapel were open, and a man in an apron went in. I think he was a butcher from across the street," says Father O'Brien, retired now but then 38 and assigned to the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, where he directed its Spanish center. "I realized the terror of this event, as people began to file into the chapel to pray." He joined them in prayer.



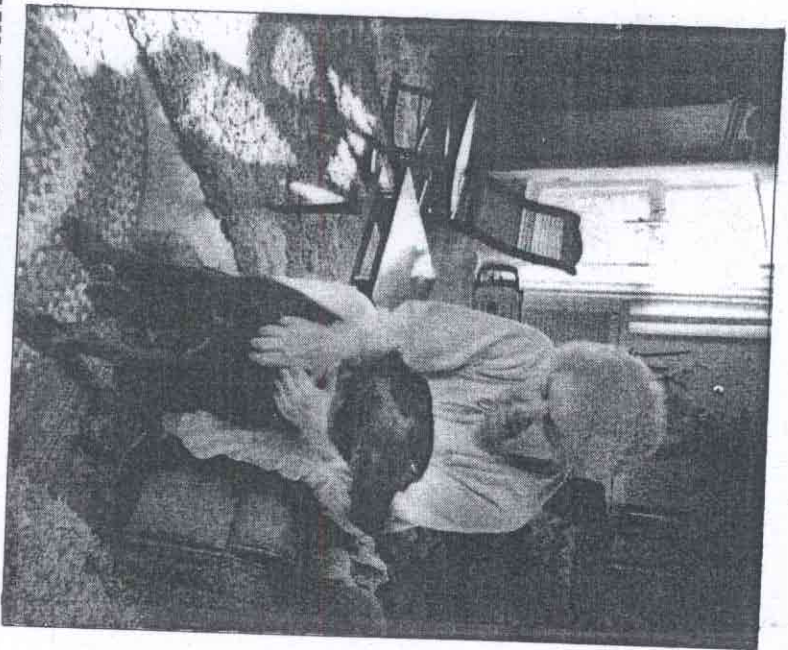
MILDRED DANIELS

"I was raking leaves in front of my yard, and someone passed by and said, 'They shot Kennedy.' I stopped raking and went inside and turned on the TV." Daniels recalls from the same house in Roxbury to which she had moved a month before the assassination, at age 43. "I didn't even know who the person was that told me. I was very saddened. It had a big affect on me." Daniels, a City Year community worker, has a small sculpture of Kennedy in her stairwell.



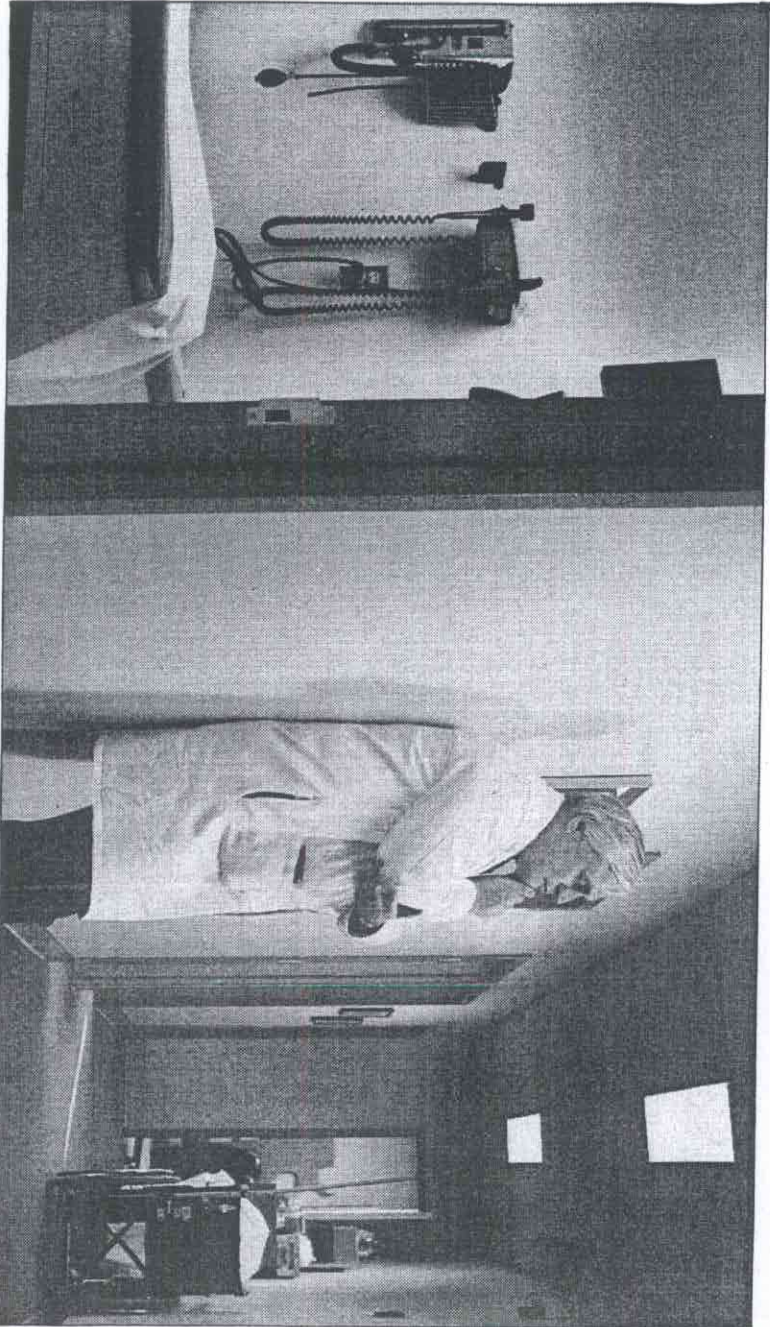
CHARLIE ZUCCO

"I remember I was wiping the walls in the barber shop just before lunch. It was a Friday," says Zucco who, then 25, had just opened a barber shop, Charlie's, in East Boston. "On the radio, I heard that Kennedy was shot and at first I thought it was a joke. I just couldn't believe it." Upon hearing Kennedy had died, "I closed up the shop. I couldn't work for the rest of the day. It took me a long time to overcome it."



MILDRED HILLIARD

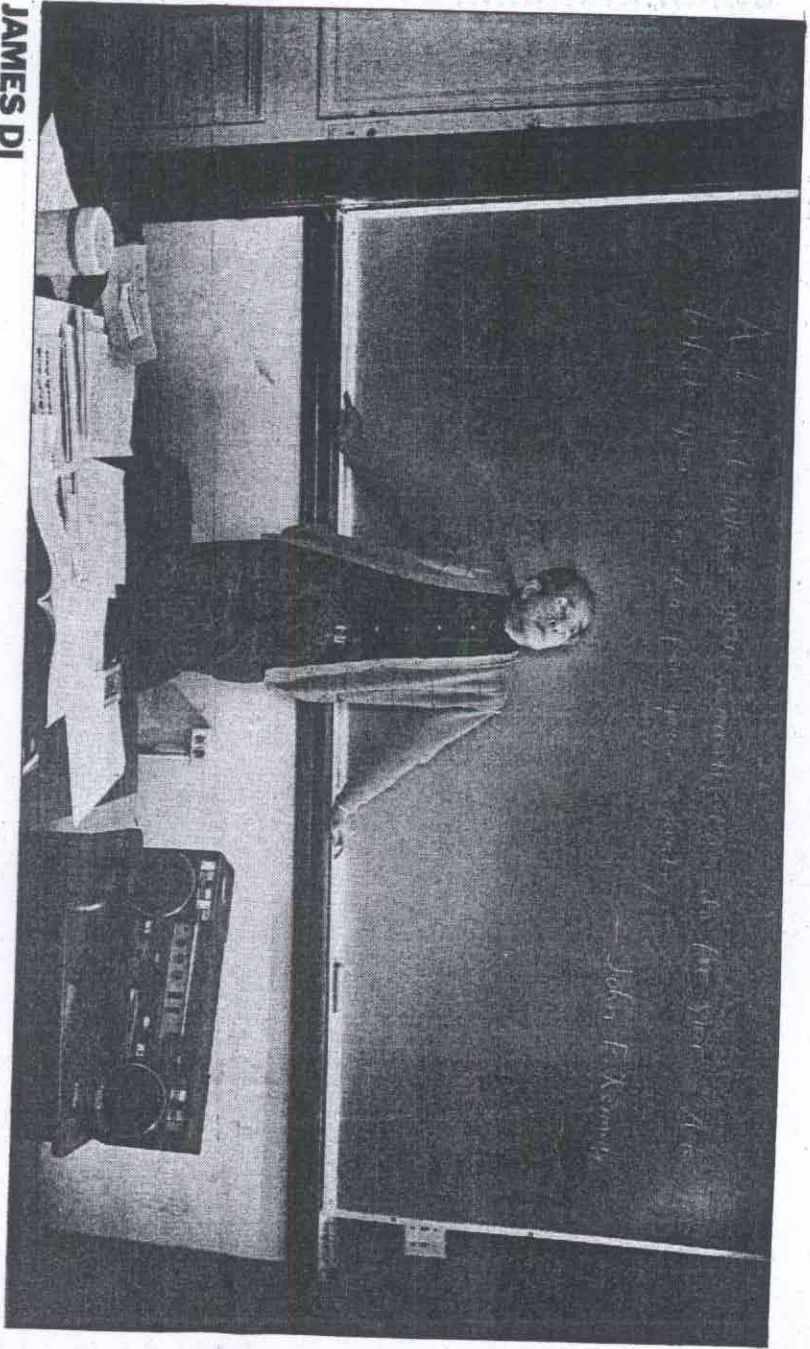
Hilliard, then 41 and a teachers aide for handicapped children, was cleaning her Dorchester home, expecting family from Maine. "I had the radio on and remember just wanting to say to myself that this can't be." Hilliard, blind since the age of 2, tried to visualize the morcade scene as she listened to the broadcast. "It was a shock to everybody. I felt so bad for the children. Shootings of anybody were not common."



JAMES C. MELBY

"I was on the fourth floor of the Evans Building in a patient's room; I believe Room 410," recalls Melby, who was 35 and chief of endocrinology at Massachusetts Memorial Hospital, now the Boston University Medical Center Hospital. "Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Walter Cronkite on the TV set. I heard that the president was shot, and asked the patient if she minded me turning up the TV. I stood

there utterly stunned. The patient kept on talking about her condition. I finished with her and walked out of the room, down the stairs to the parking lot and drove to St. Elizabeth's Church in Milton. There I sat and meditated." Melby now is the hospital's chief of endocrinology-hypertension.



JAMES DI

After teaching his language class, professor Di, then 33, went to his office at the University of China in Kun Ming to listen, as he did every day, to Voice of America. "I was shocked to hear of Kennedy's assassination," says Di, who came to the United States in 1985 and lives and teaches in Chinatown. Di rarely discussed what he heard about the States; he would occasionally come across US magazines with articles about and photographs of Kennedy. "People didn't talk

to each other. I went home and told my wife there's very bad news. ... My second son was born on Nov. 28, 1963, so this event is always on my mind," Di says. "There was only a brief account of the assassination in the Chinese newspapers. "I listened to the radio when he became president and heard his inaugural speech. I think he was a hero."



FRANK BELLOTTI

Lt. Gov. Bellotti, 40, was acting governor for Endicott Peabody and was at the State House that Friday, working on legislation. "Someone called me on the phone and said the president was shot. At first, I didn't believe that. I was asked to prepare a speech, and in minutes it was done. I read it on the front steps of the State House," Bellotti, now retired from practicing law, recalls. "I just thought he could change the world. There was an aura about him. People cried that never cried before."



AL JOHNSON

Johnson, then 52 and a worker at a hose manufacturer, was watching TV at a former girlfriend's house when the bulletin came on. "I felt numb. My girlfriend started crying. It seemed like a pall was in the air. To me, it got cloudy, a day you could practically smell death in the air," he says, retired now and sitting in the community garden across from his Roxbury home. "People had hopes. They could see him leading them into a promised land. I cried."



HARRY ELLIS DICKSON

"I was sitting in the first violin section," Dickson, who was 55, recalls of the usual Friday afternoon Boston Symphony Orchestra performance. "Backstage, there were rumors that JFK was shot. After we played Handel, the librarian came out and handed out Beethoven's 'Eroica' funeral march. This was always a sign that someone had died. Some people left the hall. During a break, Henry Cabot, president of the BSO trustees, talked it over with the musicians whether to continue the performance. We agreed to continue." As conductor Erich Leinsdorf announced Kennedy's death, the audience stood up and bowed their heads throughout the movement. "It was one of the saddest moments in my whole life. Backstage, no one talked. Nothing seemed to matter."



MARYLYN MOORE

"I was at a drugstore in the South End getting an ice cream when the radio announced that Kennedy was shot," says Moore, who was 28 and a homemaker. "Right away I started praying and ran home to the Lenox Street projects where I lived. I started crying and everyone came into the halls crying," recalls Moore, homeless for a year since being laid off at Digital in Roxbury, and sitting now on a bed at The Women's Inn. "I went downtown to Filene's Basement afterwards to do some shopping, and everyone's eyes were puffy. It was like going to a wake. I was pulling on a piece of clothing that another woman was holding onto. We both looked at each other and started crying. She was white. We had heard that Kennedy had died, and we started holding hands."

Kennedy

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took root, nourished by emotions of loss and guilt, until it began to resemble Plato's story of the lost civilization of Atlantis.

My feeling is, this neurosis will continue, fanned each autumn by votive offerings at Arlington and by muffled drums on television; it will continue until, collectively, we wake up and begin to ask ourselves who it really was who was killed that day in Dallas.

I know the man I mourn.

I was in Cambridge, England, going to dinner when I heard the news that JFK had been shot; then that he was, certainly, dead.

I was 19, and had spent the summer as a trainee reporter at the Washington Post, in the course of which I had met Robert F. Kennedy and many senior members of the Kennedy administration - who didn't seem much older than I was, though a lot smarter. I'd returned to Cambridge humbled, in fact, realizing that the center of the universe was not Cambridge after all - despite Newton's famous apple and Rutherford's splitting of the atom.

Washington in the summer of 1963 remains the most haunting and electric memory of my life - and the reason why, a quarter of a century later, I embarked on a new biography of the 35th president.

I was, frankly, astonished that no one had written a true biography before. Books, yes. Accounts of JFK's presidency, yes. And works about the assassination - oh, the shelves groaned under the weight of so much tortured, fevered invention, counter-invention and counter-counter invention. Why, I wondered, could we not simply accept JFK's death, however tragic, however mysterious the tangled threads of conspiracy? Why couldn't we start, at least, by looking at JFK's life, at who he really

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was, behind that wonderful, orthodontically perfect smile?

He was born here in Boston in 1917, six weeks after

America's entry into World War I. He inherited a wit, an intelligence and a love of history from his grandfather, after whom he was named: John Fitzgerald. He ought never to have been in uniform in World War II, ought never to have served in the Oval Office, given his catastrophic ill-health. Yet it is hard not to follow his extraordinary life story without compassion for the frail victim of Addison's disease whose life was a constant series of battles: with the Grim Reaper; with his ice-cold mother, fleeing the reality of her hopeless marriage; with his loving, frightening, isolationist and appeasement-minded father, who corrupted his youth and bought his brilliant but ailing son's way into Democratic politics by buying out James Michael Curley.

The real JFK was such a paradox, such a mix of virtue and vice, of high idealism and callous low behavior; a lover of history, of international politics and of women. To understand the paradox of his character, we have to start telling the truth about his life - and to make that truth accessible to scholars. Only by being honest about JFK's background and upbringing will we ever do justice to his great achievement in escaping the evil shadows of his father to become the standard-bearer of liberal democracy in the early '60s; a patriot who was not afraid to recognize the United States' interventionist destiny as the leader of the free world. Moreover, only by telling the truth about his physical frailty - involving one of the great stories of modern American medicine - will we ever understand the extent of his courage.

Ranged against us are the le-

gions of Kennedy worshippers, of gray-haired flame-keepers and paid mythologizers. If they prevail, not only is the outlook bleak for the pursuit of history in the United States, it is a recipe for endless further writing and filming of Kennedy's assassination. When will we finally overcome our collective neurosis? I truly believe we will only ever come to terms with JFK's loss when we show ourselves willing to know whom we have lost.