

# Richard Reeves

IN AMERICA

## JFK, THE MUSEUM

THE KENNEDYS ARE A DETERMINED lot, used to getting their way. For more than 25 years, the family has been trying to persuade Americans to remember John F. Kennedy on his birthday, May 29, rather than on November 22, the date in 1963 when he was assassinated in Dallas.

This failure must seem odd to them. After all, who remembers the date Abraham Lincoln was shot? Actually it is getting harder even to remember when the Great Emancipator was born. It was February 12 when I grew up, but now Presidents' Day must give many children the impression that Lincoln and Washington were born in the same log cabin on the same day. Maybe their mothers knew each other and exchanged cards on other holidays.

The Kennedy family's cause was almost certainly lost early this year with the popular success of the film *JFK*, which focuses on the president's death and the conspiracy theories that now dominate talk of what happened that day. But the birthday memorial was probably doomed from the beginning, overshadowed by the shared television experience of Americans (those of us who are over 40 now) as we sat paralyzed emotionally for three days, until the dead president was buried on a hill in Arlington National Cemetery.

The terrible power of November 22 was obvious when I visited the Sixth Floor, a museum in the redbrick building that was called the Texas School Book Depository in 1963. Opened three years ago by the Dallas County Historical Foundation, it's probably the only museum in the world built around an ordinary win-



dow—the one where Lee Harvey Oswald waited with a rifle, hidden from view by piles of book cartons, to shoot Kennedy at 12:30 that afternoon. The number of visitors to the window has doubled since the release of *JFK*. More than 27,000 people came to the Sixth Floor in January, making it the most popular tourist destination in Dallas.

Nineteen hundred miles to the east, in Boston, is the most popular presidential library, the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. The number of visitors there has risen more than 15 percent since the movie opened, to about 20,000 each month. As they used to say before prizefights, the numbers tell the tale: More people are going to the much smaller museum in Dallas, and the visitors at both places are, on the whole, younger than they were a year ago.

Before *JFK*, the Kennedy crowds seemed to age with each calendar year; now there are more students and young couples, all talking easily and inaccurately of magic bullets and fantasy conspiracies. Uneasily, I eavesdrop. I know very little about the latest assassination theories, but it seems to me that this case has about the same confusion, coincidence and contradiction as the murder trials I have covered over the years. Eyewitness stories at times of high trauma are never identical. Frankly, I won't believe in a conspiracy to kill Kennedy until a conspirator surfaces to pitch his book on *PrimeTime Live*.

It happens that I have spent the last five years working on a book about Kennedy's time in the White House. As far as I'm concerned, the "facts" and motivations broadcast by *JFK* are either



silky or poisonous, depending on your viewpoint. But popular myths as history are nothing new: Shakespeare created a Julius Caesar different from the original, and dime novels invented an American West that never existed. Oliver Stone's fiction in *JFK* lies somewhere between, nearer to the dime novel's than to Shakespeare's.

Museums, too, are mythmakers, struggling artfully to win the hearts and minds of visitors with a particular slant on history or art. The first act of a successful revolution is often to set up a museum that celebrates the glorious victory of the people. John Kennedy was no revolutionary, but the Kennedy Library has an obvious historical mission planned and still executed by the family. All presidential libraries are mom-and-pop operations, a manifestation of the American bent toward privatization, including the privatization of history. I am not suggesting there are outright lies, but simply acknowledging that you and I will never know the whole truth, because history depends on records and records depend on the people who choose which ones to release and which to burn.

So the museum in Boston, with film and family artifacts, guides a visitor warmly through the coming to power of a man who, by just showing up, could light a room—or a world—bringing out the best in people eager to gain his approval. That charm, the evocation of a life filled with kids and dogs, and the humor of the man as shown in videotapes of his news conferences, are companions throughout the museum. But when you walk through a last door, you enter a six-story-high glass room, cold and empty except for an American flag. It is architect I.M. Pei's attempt to transmit the truest Kennedy mystery: what might have been, if there had been no Dallas.

In Dallas, the entire Kennedy presidency is covered in a six-minute video. At the depository, all arrows point toward the window, where, if you have ever used a rifle, you see how easy a shot it was—just 256 feet from the sniper's gun to the president's head. From Oswald's perspective,

Kennedy wasn't even a moving target; the limousine had just made a hairpin turn from Houston Street onto Elm and was moving directly away from the window.

In Dallas, John F. Kennedy is barely discussed as a political figure. He is presented not so much as a product of his extraordinary family, but as a product (and shaper) of his times. I was transfixed by a small case displaying books and movie posters of the day: *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson, *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee; *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, *Lilies of the Field* with Sidney Poitier.

You have to be a certain age to understand the context of that list, which is what America was like back when we believed that all problems had solutions and that the world would be a better place if we just worked hard enough at them. The symbol of the times was not our handsome young king and his beautiful and cultured consort; it was Caroline and John Jr. In both museums, the photographs of

these two tiny children romping through the corridors of power stop you, taking you back, breaking your heart

one more time. When Kennedy was elected, there had been no young children in the White House since Theodore Roosevelt's administration. The idea thrilled the nation. Yes, this is who we are! God knows, it was the way we wanted to be.

In Dallas, I had steeled myself to walk once again through the assassination. I was surprised, again, that the geography of the event is so small (the grassy knoll is about the size of a big front lawn), but I managed to avoid thinking about what really happened there. I was not prepared for my reaction, a welling of tears, when I stood before a photograph of the Kennedys entering the White House after the inauguration in 1961. They were walking through a side door, looking like a couple who couldn't remember which one had the keys. Caroline, two years old, was tugging

at her father's coat. Jackie held the baby, John-John, who was eight weeks old.

In Boston, the father of Caroline and John-John is treated as a great statesman who loved his family and his dogs. In Dallas, he is a celebrity. These days, Kennedy is remembered more as a cultural figure than a political leader. He was a role model for a great transition in American life as the veterans of World War II, who came home older than their years, began to break down the restrictions and structures of the society their parents made.

"We'll never laugh again," said Mary McGrory, a reporter for the old *Washington Star* on November 23, 1963. "No, we'll laugh again soon, Mary," said a young White House assistant named Daniel Patrick Moynihan. "But we'll never be young again."

The Americans who are young now will see that time through a darker prism, one as distorted as ours was then, particularly if they are captured by the cynicism and hopelessness at the core of Stone's film.

But the Sixth Floor preceded Stone in defining the story as death and suspicion rather than life and hope. It took more than 25 years for Dallas officials to decide that the American people would accept the museum. "It always requires an act of courage to look back on a tragedy or trauma," begins the museum's guidebook. "We serve neither ourselves nor history by attempting to forget."

Perhaps. But the tone of remembrance is changing. Recent entries in the visitors' book at the Dallas museum read like a petition to release more documents on the assassination. People used to write something like this: "Kennedy was the best president and very handsome." Now it is more often: "Let the truth be told."

Truth or facts were not on my mind as I stood looking through the visitors' book. A young man died before his time, and the rest of us got old too soon. The inscription I related to was signed by Stephanie Nicholson of Knoxville, Tennessee: "It still hurts!" ◀◀