

## ***“Last Lion: The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy”*** **Book Review**

It’s been said that a camel is a horse made in committee. That’s meant as an insult, not only to camels but to committees generally. Nonetheless, the effectiveness of a committee effort has been recently redeemed in the form of a biography on the late senator from Massachusetts, Edward M. Kennedy. Compiled by the “Team at The Boston Globe,” and edited by that newspaper’s Washington Bureau chief, Peter S. Canellos, this 480 page bio—published by Simon & Schuster and titled “Last Lion: The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy”—is remarkably fluid and coherent in its retelling of Senator Kennedy’s noteworthy life story.

It begins at 8:19 a.m. on Saturday, May 17, 2008. That was roughly the time at which Kennedy—the longtime patriarch of the storied Kennedy clan—experienced a seizure at his home in the family’s Hyannis Port compound. Three days later, doctors had made their grim diagnosis: The Senator suffered from a malignant brain tumor.

Despite beginning at the end of the Senator’s three-quarters of a century on earth—nearly two-thirds of which was spent as a member of the world’s most exclusive club, the hundred member upper-house of the United States Congress—the crew of scribes at The Globe don’t miss a nuance in describing the various personal periods and historical epochs of Kennedy’s extraordinary lifetime.

Edward—who would come to be referenced in the increasingly affectionate monikers of Ted, Teddy, and (to those closest to him) Uncle Teddy—was the youngest child of Rose and Joseph Kennedy’s nine children. Chubby and good-natured as a youngster, no one could have suspected that this cherub of a child, the perennial baby brother of this well-positioned New England brood, would one day be among the most powerful and influential United States Senators in American history, while also—at the youthful age of 36—becoming the Kennedy paterfamilias, as well as the standard-bearer of the Kennedy name.

As the subtitle implies—“The Fall and Rise of Ted Kennedy—the “Last Lion” doesn’t avoid or pull-its-punches with regard to the more checkered events of the Senator’s life. Documented here is the incident in which, at 19 years old, Kennedy was suspended from Harvard University for cheating on an exam in Spanish class. After an unremarkable stint in the army, Kennedy was readmitted to the university.

Subsequent to graduating, the young heir was accepted at the University of Virginia’s law school. Though he earned his attorney’s credentials within in the specified three year curricular period, it was not without complication. Known as a furious partier, and lover of fast cars, Kennedy was arrested, charged, and convicted of reckless driving in Virginia. In another instance during his stint at Virginia, Kennedy drove a car into a swimming pool. That stunt became a frat-boy legend among the legions of Kennedy hangers-on.

Also, more serious trespasses, as well as the devastating tragedies of Kennedy’s life, are explored in “Last Lion.” The events of Chappaquiddick—the 1969 auto mishap, wherein Kennedy ran off a bridge while transporting a campaign worker, Mary Jo Kopechne, home from a late night party—are vividly and disturbingly recounted here. Kennedy left the scene of the accident; Kopechne drowned there.

Moreover, “Last Lion” lucidly illustrates how, as the youngest of his generation of Kennedys, Ted seemed shadowed by death from early in his life until his last days. In 1944, Ted’s oldest brother, Joe Jr., would lose his life in a secret military bombing mission over the skies of Europe. Four years later, Ted’s beloved sister, Kathleen, died in a plane crash. Of course, in 1963, Ted’s brother, President John Kennedy, was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. And, in June of 1968, Ted’s only other male sibling would also die from an assassin’s bullet while campaigning for the presidency. In addition, several Kennedy nephews and in-laws would die and, as was the case in the 1999 death of John Kennedy, Jr., Ted would preside in making arrangements and shouldering his huge family’s grief. With John, Jr., Ted was called upon to perform the grisly task of identifying his 39 year-old nephew’s remains, retrieved from the Atlantic Ocean after the small plane he was piloting crashed in route to a cousin’s wedding.

Still, amidst the troubled times, there were the triumphs. As the third longest serving senator in U.S. History, Kennedy helped forge over 300 bills that became laws. Everything from the American with Disabilities Act to No Child Left Behind has been somehow shaped by the will of Senator Edward Kennedy. In 1991, after a scandalous trial in which his nephew—William Kennedy Smith (who had been out drinking cocktails with Uncle Teddy)—was acquitted of charges of rape, Senator Kennedy made a public vow to remediate his flawed behaviors. He subsequently married Victoria Reggie, 22 years his junior, and at last found marital bliss (after a controversial divorce from his first wife, Joan—with whom he had three children).

It was in the last seventeen years of his life that Kennedy became a beloved husband and a powerhouse political player, the likes of which has rarely been in the chambers of the United States Senate. In a life as charmed as it was cursed, Kennedy was a man of force, fairness, and magnanimity. Through focus and persistence Kennedy eventually evolved into his best self. After a nearly debilitating airplane crash in 1964 and a failed 1980 presidential bid, Kennedy slowly hit his stride as a politician and as a person.

The Senator's endorsement became a major factor in the election of Barack Obama to the presidency. And now, what Kennedy claimed as "the cause of my life"—an American system of universal healthcare—seems on the brink of becoming a reality. The lion's roar still echoes. In his memoir, "True Compass," Kennedy lends his own perspective to his life. "Last Lion" is, almost by definition, a more objective account of Kennedy's years, but it is nonetheless heartfelt and insightful. Ted Kennedy is an enduring figure from whom we can all learn much about direction, development, and dedication. Long live the Lion.

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