

**A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY OF
JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.**

A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.

**Understanding His Inner Life, Achievements,
Struggles, and Courage**

By

JOSEPH G. PONTEROTTO, PH.D.



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Honoring the memory and legacy of:

John F. Kennedy, Jr. (1960–1999)

President John F. Kennedy (1917–1963)

Robert F. Kennedy (1925–1968)

Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. (1915–1944)

Kathleen “Kick” Kennedy (1920–1948)

*Only imagine what they would have
achieved if given the gift of long life.*

and for

John F. Kennedy Roncalli Ponterotto (1965–)

A shining light of the Ponterotto family

*We are tied to the ocean. And when we go back to the sea,
whether it is to sail or to watch it, we are going back from whence we came.¹*

President John F. Kennedy

How you live is how you die.²

William S. Noonan
who was John F. Kennedy Jr.'s
oldest and closest friend

The only value we have as human beings are the risks we are willing to take.³

Ernest Hemingway

PREFACE

How does one develop his own identity in the context of a hero father figure? President John F. Kennedy is revered and idolized throughout the world. It would be difficult to count the number of times when John F. Kennedy, Jr. met an influential figure who would say, “I knew your father,” or “I was close to your father,” or “Your father was a great man.” How does one define himself when he is often seen initially as the President’s son? The long shadow of his beloved and martyred father followed John wherever he went. His close friend Billy Noonan recalled that: “[John] told me once about being shown into a hut somewhere deep in Africa, and there, in the wall, in the humblest of homes, was a picture of his father.”¹

John studied his father, tried to understand him—his strengths and his limitations—studied his speeches, read the same books and poems his father had.² Finding himself, his own unique, core identity beyond being the “son of President Kennedy” was a long process that involved first, knowing his father. Understanding his father as human, with both great character traits and marked flaws, freed John from an impossible task of trying to keep up with a superhero image. John F. Kennedy, Jr. too, had great strengths and some limitations, and by accepting these and coming to truly know himself, he was on route to forging his own personal and professional identity, while also honoring the legacy of his parents and the Kennedy family.

What can we discern about JFK Jr.’s character and personality from his patterns of behavior? For example, he had a yearning to be free and unencumbered, and thus his attraction to adventure and risk-taking activities such as flying, skydiving, scuba diving, heli-skiing, and kayaking in dangerous and isolated waters. He yearned to be anonymous, and thus his great attraction to the acting profession and wearing the “actor’s mask” where, at least for a short time, he could be someone else. Most importantly, JFK Jr. yearned to find himself, his own personal and career identity outside the Kennedy family influence and traditions, thus abandoning his law career with the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office, and starting his own magazine, *George*. John F. Kennedy, Jr. was a complex man, one who in the words of his friend and CNN host Chris Cuomo, was destined to greatness in whatever endeavor

or he chose.³ This book is the story of his search for identity and purpose, and, along the way, we uncover the depths and vibrancy of his personality.

At the time of his death on July 16, 1999 in a tragic plane crash that also claimed the life of his wife Carolyn and her sister Lauren, JFK Jr. was very likely about to enter the world of politics, most likely in a run for New York State Senator or Governor. Would he have succeeded in politics? How far would he have reached? The Governor's mansion? The White House?

What kind of a leader would he have been? In addition to curiosity about JFK Jr.'s political future, the world was also following the ups and downs of his marriage to Carolyn Bessette. Would they survive as a couple? Would they have children? What kind of "political wife" would Carolyn make? These are a few of the questions addressed in this psychobiography.

The goals of this book are to (1) shed light on the life and inner psychology of John F. Kennedy, Jr., one of the most famous and recognizable figures of the last half-century; and (2) to address unanswered questions about his life and potential future had he lived a full life.

This book is organized into four Parts. Part One, "The Death and Legacy of John F. Kennedy, Jr." includes three chapters that set the context for the psychological profile. The book begins by introducing the life of John F. Kennedy, Jr., his place in history, and the rationale for why this book is important to the historical record. The conditions around John's last and tragic flight that claimed his life and that of his wife Carolyn and her sister Lauren, are deconstructed and examined. Finally, Part One locates the psychological study of John F. Kennedy, Jr. in a broader sociocultural perspective. Psychological theories used to frame and understand John's psychological development are briefly introduced, and his ethnic and religious influences are examined.

Part Two, "The Life Story of John F. Kennedy, Jr.," tells the story of John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s life in somewhat of a chronological order. In four sequential chapters, important events and relationships in John's life are discussed with respect to his childhood and early schooling, his high school and college years, his law school study and work as an Assistant District Attorney for Manhattan, and finally, his co-founding of *George* magazine and his life with Carolyn Bessette. A common thread through these chapters is JFK Jr.'s search for and commitment to his own identity, respectful of, but independent from the Kennedy family legacy.

In Part Three, "What Could Have Been in the Life of John F. Kennedy, Jr., and Carolyn Bessette Kennedy," the author speculates on the future of John's professional career and his marriage had the couple lived a full life. Emerging in this section is a strong impression that John was destined for a life in politics and that he would have succeeded in this quest. John's marriage to Carolyn Bessette and the likely directions of their partnership is also

discussed. Though weathering some relationship storms it is possible that the couple would have resolved their issues, matured as a couple, and had children of their own. John even had picked out the name of his first-born son, Flynn Kennedy. A number of John and Carolyn's closest friends interviewed by the author or publishing their own memoirs, were optimistic about the couple's future together. Finally, this section borrows from quantitative research methods in personality psychology to assess JFK Jr.'s personality traits on a popular and well-validated measure of personality. His personality profile is then compared to select U.S. Presidents throughout history.

Part Four, "Psychological Theory, Research Methods, and Ethical Considerations in Profiling the Life of John F. Kennedy, Jr.," provides additional theoretical and research methods information for the interested reader. Leading theories of personality and psychosocial development first introduced in Part One, are expanded upon here. Finally, ethical issues related to this psychobiography of John F. Kennedy, Jr. are explored and discussed.

J.G.P.

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RoseMarie Terenzio is a fellow Bronx, New York native and a fellow alumnus of Iona College, in New Rochelle, New York. RoseMarie, who was essentially John F. Kennedy, Jr.'s "Chief of Staff" for five years at *George* magazine, helped John manage and organize many aspects of both his work and personal life. She was the first close colleague/friend of JFK Jr. that I reached out to, and she was most gracious in providing personal interviews and email correspondence that were invaluable in preparing this book. Her own memoir of her time at *George* magazine, *Fairy tale interrupted: A Memoir of Life, Love, and Loss*, provides poignant descriptions of her work relationship with JFK Jr. and other *George* colleagues, and her friendships with both John and Carolyn Bessette Kennedy. RoseMarie also helped me arrange an interview with Matt Berman, *George* magazine's Creative Director who also was friends to both John and Carolyn. Matt's book, *JFK Jr., George & Me: A Memoir*, provides another wonderful window into the life and personalities of both John and Carolyn. RoseMarie and Matt, thank you for taking the time to talk with me about your memories of John, Carolyn, and the exciting yet frenetic years at *George* magazine from 1995-1999.

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Central to strong psychobiography is accessing critical and sometimes confidential documents. Through the Federal Freedom of Information Act, I was able to access the complete Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) reports on John F. Kennedy, Jr. Specifically, I thank David M. Hardy, Section Chief, Records Management Division of the FBI, and his staff for quickly locating and sending me the complete 150-page FBI File on John F. Kennedy, Jr., focusing on the investigation of his kidnap threats both in the 1980s and 1990s. Further, I am grateful to Melba D. Moye and Brandon Berry of the NTSB for their assistance in helping me secure access to the complete Accident Report records including hundreds of photographs related to the crash and recovery of John F. Kennedy Jr.'s Piper Saratoga Aircraft in July 1999.

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3. Book Cover Photo of John F. Kennedy, Jr. at Press Conference Announcing *George* magazine. Photography by Ron Galella from the Ron Galella Collection. Reprinted with the permission of Getty Images.

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Book Cover John F. Kennedy, Jr. at Press Conference Announcing *George* magazine. Photography by Ron Galella from the Ron Galella Collection. Reprinted with the permission of Getty Images.

**A PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY OF
JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.**

Part One

**THE DEATH AND LEGACY OF
JOHN F. KENNEDY, JR.**

*John was a real person—not only the son of Camelot but also
a funny, passionate, inspiring, yet unassuming regular guy.
John brought out the best in everyone and saw potential in people
when they didn't see it in themselves. He was the guy who, when
approached by A&E for their Biography series, thought they were
crazy and said, "Tell them I'm way too young to do a biography.
Wait till I'm dead.*

Matt Berman, John's colleague and friend at *George Magazine*¹

On the evening of July 16, 1999, a Piper Saratoga small aircraft took off from Essex Country Airport in Fairfield, New Jersey headed for Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts. The pilot of this plane was John F. Kennedy, Jr.; his two passengers were his wife of three years, Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, and her older sister Lauren Bessette. The weekend plan was to first drop Lauren off in Martha's Vineyard where she was visiting friends, and then fly to Hyannis Port. On Friday night, July 16th, John and Carolyn hoped to join John's oldest and best friend, Billy Noonan and his wife Kathleen to celebrate the couple's fifth wedding anniversary. They would then board the fifty-three-foot ocean yacht, the Bryemere, owned by their good friends Brian and Miriam O'Neill, who would join the two couples and head to Nantucket for dinner at Billy's favorite restaurant on the island. On Saturday, there was a big Kennedy family event, the wedding of John's cousin Rory Kennedy (the last child of Senator Robert F. Kennedy).²

Roughly one hour after the plane took off, it disappeared, crashing into the Atlantic Ocean some 17 miles southwest of Martha's Vineyard, killing John, Carolyn, and Lauren. The coroner's report de-

clared that the deaths were instantaneous upon impact.³ In one fell swoop, the “Prince of Camelot” as John had been called, and two vibrant and dynamic young women had perished a half-century prematurely.⁴ The country and the world would mourn the death of the gorgeous, tender-hearted, down-to-earth son of President John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline (Jackie) Bouvier Kennedy Onassis. A whisper heard around the country at the news of John’s death was “Thank God Jackie had already died, for the loss of her only son would have been unbearable for her.”

Much is known about John’s life, as almost every minute of it has been chronicled by a Camelot-frenzied media and by the loyal, if not dogged, Jackie and President Kennedy watchers (and paparazzi). John was born a public figure, instantaneously famous and a world celebrity. He had no choice in this matter, yet throughout his life, he handled this fame with class and grace.

Within 15 years after John’s untimely death, there have appeared at least 10 biographies or memoirs related to his life, his loves, his careers. Books about John, or referring to John’s life at length, include memoirs written by his closest and oldest friends, William (Billy) Sylvester Noonan and Robert (Robbie) L. Littell, as well as his close colleagues and friends at *George* magazine, Matt Berman, RoseMarie Terenzio, and Richard Blow. Carole Radziwill, who was a friend of John’s and the wife of his close cousin, Anthony Radziwill, has penned a poignant reflection of her life with John, Carolyn, and Anthony. John’s first girlfriend, Meg Azzoni, and a later long-term girlfriend, Christina Haag, have also written books about their time with John. Michael Bergin, the former boyfriend of Carolyn Bessette Kennedy has added his memoir to the growing literature about John and Carolyn.⁵

In addition to these books written by individuals who personally knew John and/or Carolyn quite well, there have appeared a number of third person biographies, journalistic reports, documentaries, and films.⁶ In this book, I have relied much more heavily on the memoirs written by those close to John and Carolyn. Though I occasionally reference the third person writings on John and Carolyn, I generally found these to be less reliable in providing an accurate and balanced profile of John and Carolyn.

Common threads across many of these books, articles, and films characterize John as (1) a gentle soul, warm-hearted, humble and

down-to-earth, humorous and a jokester, adventurous and risk-taking; and cherishing family, close friendships, and his love interests; (2) being highly influenced by his mother's expectations for him in career, love, and life; (3) determined and committed to finding his own career identity as Co-Publisher of "George" magazine; (4) excited and yet challenged in forging a life and family with Carolyn Bessette; and (5) feeling the pressure and having the desire to carry on the Kennedy legacy in terms of public service and politics.

Despite the broad literature on the life of John F. Kennedy, Jr., what is currently missing is an analysis of his inner psyche, the deep psychology unearthing the drives and motivations that led to his life path. On the exterior, John was a confident, poised, gentle, friendly, and humble man. What was in his interior, the deepest recesses of his mind? What was his inner experiencing not open to the public, not to his friends and family, and, perhaps, not even to himself? The investigative tool that explores the inner psychology of the person is called psychobiography. This book represents the first detailed psychobiographical sketch of John F. Kennedy, Jr., the "Prince of Camelot."⁷

Chapter One provides a rationale for why a psychological study of John F. Kennedy, Jr. is timely and important to the historical record on American history. In Chapter Two, the tragic plane flight that claimed the life of JFK Jr. his wife Carolyn, and her older sister Lauren, is deconstructed in an effort to understand how John lost his way over the water and on route to Martha's Vineyard. John's activities in the last days of his life are recounted to understand his psychological state on that tragic day. Finally, Chapter Three provides a sociohistorical context and introduces the theories of personality and psychosocial development anchoring the interpretation of the life of John F. Kennedy, Jr.

