



UNH Professor's Book Examines Nation's Grief After JFK's Assassination Through Letters To Jackie Kennedy

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DURHAM, N.H. – The assassination of President John F. Kennedy is perhaps the most memorable moment of the 20th century — a moment that left a family and a nation in mourning, a moment that many recall as their first historical memory. Within seven weeks of the president's death, Jacqueline Kennedy received more than 800,000 condolence letters. Two years later, the volume of correspondence would exceed 1.5 million letters. And for the next 46 years, the letters would remain essentially untouched.

In "Letters to Jackie: Condolences From A Grieving Nation" (Ecco, 2010), Ellen Fitzpatrick, the Carpenter Professor of History at the University of New Hampshire, for the first time examines this extraordinary collection of letters and creates an incredible portrait of the nation's grief from such a cross-section of American life. The book culls about 300 of these extraordinary letters into three parts: Americans' vivid recollections of November 22, 1963; their views on politics, society and the office of the presidency; and personal experiences of grief and loss.

These letters reflect a more innocent time exploded by tragedy, the complex balance of prejudice and tolerance at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, patriotism unchecked by politics, faith or race, the culture, shaped by tradition and yet on the precipice of change, and the sense of the American family that Kennedy fostered, a family of millions who saw him as their father.

Rare in their richness and breadth, the letters are a remarkable human record that perfectly preserves the heart-wrenching grief and the unwavering faith of the nation in a time of crisis. Written in the extraordinary eloquence of so-called "ordinary" Americans — on elegant stationary, in poor handwriting, in pencil, in type, on simple lined writing paper, from across generations, nationalities, races, and religions — the letters capture what John F. Kennedy meant to the country, and how his death divided American history into before and after.

"The coffin was very small," as one 16-year-old girl observed, "to contain so much of so

many Americans." In reflecting on their sense of loss, their fears, and their striving, the authors of these letters wrote an American elegy as poignant and as compelling as their shattered and cherished dreams.

Fitzpatrick draws comparisons between Kennedy's time and our own — and, as a nation, we can still hear the echoes of the immense sorrow that marked 1963. To see how we have changed as a nation is to see how the idealism and hope inspired by the brief but potent, even enchanted Kennedy presidency has shaped us, even those who were born long after that terrible November day. And to revisit that grief is to be reminded what it is to be an American.

Fitzpatrick's book has received critical acclaim.

"A terrific, original, and important work....Fitzpatrick provides a stunningly fresh look at the impact of JFK's assassination on the American people," said Doris Kearns Goodwin, author and presidential historian.

Ellen Fitzpatrick, a professor and scholar specializing in modern American political and intellectual history, is the author and editor of six books and has appeared regularly on PBS's *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*. She has been interviewed as an expert on modern American political history by the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Today*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, CBS's *Face the Nation*, and National Public Radio. The Carpenter Professor of History at the University of New Hampshire, where she has been recognized for Excellence in Public Service, Fitzpatrick lives in Newton, Massachusetts.

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling more than 12,200 undergraduate and 2,200 graduate students.