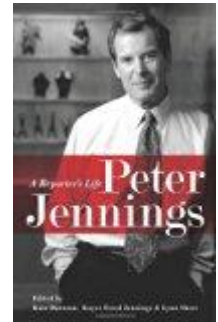


Lynn Sherr, ed. *Peter Jennings: A Reporter's Life*. New York: PublicAffairs, 2007. xix + 321 pp. \$27.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-58648-517-7.



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Peter Jennings: A Broadcasting Legend Remembered

Lynn Sherr, one of the editors of *Peter Jennings: A Reporter's Life* and close friend of the deceased ABC anchorman, writes in her introduction that "This book would have been anathema to Peter Jennings" (p. vii). And reading the biography, one can't help but agree. Not for the reasons she suggests: that he was a modest man who would have protested that he was not worth the fuss. But because if he was half the journalist the editors seek to portray him as, he would have been disdainful of the book simply because it is a fawning, biased piece of fluff.

The biography is a compilation of quotations from interviews conducted after Jennings died August 10, 2005, for use in a two-hour tribute aired by ABC News, as well as excerpts from a memorial service for Jennings that took place a month later. The result is a gushing, one-sided stream of superlatives that you might expect from grieving people speaking publicly about their famous friend right after he died.

The list of the contributing friends include movie stars such as Lauren Bacall and Alan Alda; public officials such as Bill Clinton and Condoleezza Rice; and towering journalists such as Walter Cronkite, Barbara Walters, and Tom Brokaw. They paint a picture of him as a handsome, charismatic man who had a fascinating job and a charmed career. But as sources, it's clear they can't be relied on to dish any dirt, reveal any blots on his character, or even simply give a reliable description of what he was like. If Jennings had been a skirt-chaser, a glory-seeker, or a tyrannical boss, say, you know pretty quickly you're not going to learn about it here.

A few candid remarks do slip through here and there from his peers. There are a few complaints that he could be a perfectionist, a "nitpicker" who could be highly critical of his colleagues' work and personal appearance. Fellow broadcaster Charlie Gibson, for example, gripes that Jennings was "impossible to deal with" and could not

take a time cue. He says: "You may not have liked Peter. He may have been difficult to work with at times. He may have been nettlesome. He may not have been appreciative enough of what you did. But you never begrudged him the job because you knew he could do it better than anybody" (p. 122).

The editors of the book, who include his wife, Kaycee Freed Jennings, call the work an "oral biography" and "collection of memories." And the value of the biography lies in the colorful anecdotes and insights shared by the people who worked closely with him at various points in his career. You learn, for example, that Jennings had secret signals for communicating to his producers and directors while on the air. A tug at his earlobe meant he could not hear their instructions into his earpiece and to please repeat. An adjustment of his tie meant he wanted a tight shot so he could talk directly to the camera. Also, the descriptions of his performance during September 11, when he was on air for seventeen hours straight, show his colleagues' admiration for his ability to keep talking, keep cool, and hew strictly to the facts in the face of hysteria and gossip.

David Westin, division president at ABC when the Twin Towers were attacked, describes Jennings's performance during that time with awe: "It was almost a hundred hours (of-nonstop coverage) and Peter was on the air for over sixty of those hours. So first of all, you just have to look at his stamina, his ability to keep his thoughts together and to keep his emotions in check as he did for the most part. Then he had to try to understand the scope, the range of the problem" (p. 205).

Jennings was born in Toronto, Canada, in 1938, the son of Charles Jennings, a prominent radio broadcaster for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). It is one of the themes in this biography that he spent his life trying to live up to his father, who started off on air, then became a senior executive at CBC, and has been described as the "Edward R. Murrow of Canada" (p. 8). Ted Koppel is quoted in the book saying, "Peter was driven

by a sense that he had to match if not exceed his father" (p.8). The older Jennings would take the young Peter, and his sister, Sarah, into the CBC studios with him on Saturdays while he worked. The two children would hang out with the announcers in the control room and cafeteria. When their father brought his colleagues home, the two would serve drinks to them and pass around food. Jennings's big break as a broadcaster came as a child during a period when his father was abroad. CBC programmers approached his mother and asked if the young Peter would host a Saturday morning music program for children. When his father came home, he was apparently outraged because he hated nepotism but allowed the show to stand as it had become very popular.

At 11, Jennings's parents shipped him off to a private boarding school outside of Toronto. He was not an enthusiastic student and had to submit to the old-style canings administered by the headmaster for bad behavior. He dropped out, and to make amends took a job at the Royal Bank of Canada. His sister says, however, that he was always on the lookout for a way to get back into broadcasting, and after about three years at the bank he landed a job at a small, private radio station.

It was not long before he appeared on camera, hosting a dance show similar to "American Bandstand" for a new station in Ottawa. At 24, he co-anchored the late-night national newscast for Canada's first private television network, CTV. Soon he caught the attention of ABC in New York, and at the age of 26, Jennings was anointed as anchor of ABC's nightly news, becoming the youngest anchor in the history of American network television. His good looks and charm, however, could not make up for his inexperience, so he left the anchor's desk, donned a trenchcoat, and set off to earn himself some real journalistic gravitas, diving into the glamorous life of a foreign correspondent.

By all accounts he relished the lifestyle. He was apparently dogged as a reporter in the field and developed a reputation for being good under pressure. He became an expert in Middle Eastern affairs, and much is made in the book of how he was constantly trying to make up for his abbreviated school career by reading widely. In 1983 Jennings found himself back in the anchor's chair at ABC, beginning his stint as one of the "Big Three" alongside Dan Rather of CBS and Tom Brokaw of NBC. This time, he was ready. By 1990, "World News Tonight" consistently beat the competition in the ratings. He interviewed world leaders and celebrities, and became one of the most visible figures in American journalism for more than two decades.

On April 5, 2005, on "World News Tonight," he announced in a taped segment that he had been

diagnosed with lung cancer. A longtime smoker, Jennings died August 7, 2005.

His death ended the reign of a towering figure in American journalism. This biography is a touching tribute from the people who knew and loved him. But serious journalism, it is not.

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