

# The Brothers Grim

By Mark Herring

***Seeds of Destruction: Joe Kennedy & His Sons*, by Ralph G. Martin  
(New York: Putnam, 1995) 460 pages.**

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The spate of books recording the satisfaction of the Kennedy family have made us like Macbeth's ocean: we are in these multitudinous seas incarnadine with these brothers (and father) grim, and we'd like very much to get out of it with or without Neptune's help. For the duration of the Kennedy family's rise to power, and the subsequent rise of JFK and brothers Bobby and Teddy, the press remained very tight-lipped. As it turned out, the press also remained rather well-paid for its silence but that is another matter. Since either the funds have been used up, or the dermoidal doings of the last of the Kennedy brother so beyond the ken of oversight, the books, beginning with Reeves's *Question of Character* and running through Hamilton's *Reckless Youth* have been fired at us fusillade with each one revealing more of the clay feet that were the Kennedys. At this juncture, the clay reaches to the nose while only the forehead remains. There really are so many revealing books about the Kennedys that there are nearly not enough reviewers to undertake them.

I have, fortunately or unfortunately depending on your take about these things, read more than five of them. With the addition of this new tome, *Seeds of Destruction*, I find the story growing not only old, but tiresome. One cannot help wondering about halfway through these books: Why didn't someone lock these monsters up? But I outrace myself.

Ralph Martin has taken a slightly different angle from say, Hamilton's *Reckless Youth* or Reeves's *Question*. Both of those books focused on the President Kennedy, with sidebars of his family and friends. Martin's book focuses more on the father Kennedy and offers us a glimpse into the inner workings of the godfather-like patriarch who, literally, bought his way into society and sold his namesake for fame, not for his children only; but for himself especially.

Martin brings to the task near adulation for his subject. He, along with his one-time collaborator Ed Plaut, began writing about the Kennedys in 1959. *Front Runner*, *Dark Horse*, and *A Hero for Our Time* are all near hagiographies of the subject matter. Some

negative images obtain, but the books tend toward the public image the Kennedys wanted to project: Pristine and utopian. With this book, however, the negative images accrue in abundance—how could they not?—on nearly every page. From the malversation of Kennedy Sr., to the sexual antics of the President, the books almost reads like an expanded version of *Star or True Confessions*. Indeed, Clare Boothe Luce wrote, of the Kennedy family,

Where else but in Gothic fiction, where else among real people, could one encounter such triumphs and tragedies, such beauty and charm and ambition and pride and human wreckage, such dedication to the best and lapses into the mire of life; such vulgar, noble, driven, generous, self-centered, loving, suspicious, devious, honorable, vulnerable, indomitable people.... No wonder the American public, their audience—for that matter much of the world—has been fascinated by [the Kennedys.]

Of course what she describes is nothing short of what could be precisely written about any one of America's mafia families. Yet what amazes about the Martin book is that in spite of the prodigious mountain of convincing evidence of the Kennedy horrors, he still finds the inner resoluteness (or hard-headiness) deep enough to draw out lavish praise. The current President might do well to remember this and name Martin his official biographer when he leaves office after November's elections.

Martin's book opens with more detail about the early Joe Sr. and his flagitious doings than any of the other books. While Joe carved out his niche in the pounds of flesh of others, Rose grew up in a reasonably normal home. Her father Honey Fritz proved every much the politician he'd become, but Rose idolized him and perhaps it was through him that she became anesthetized to misdeeds in offices of public trust. Once Rose and Joe met, became engaged, and were later married, Joe Sr. launched the gruesome ship Kennedy, a fully loaded PT-boat extraordinaire of destruction and misbehavior.

Joe Kennedy saw everything in terms of what it could do for him or for his "boys", as he often liked to call the scattergood gang. If you had money, influence or power, Joe sought you out and made you his friend. If you had none of these things, Joe ignored you. Martin attempts to paint a quasi-sympathetic picture in his ebaucher of the debaucheries of Joe Sr, but the effort is emcuate: this is, after all, a work of non-fiction. Joe Sr. could be gentle and kind; he could be honest and noble; but the facts of the matter are that he rarely chose to exhibit these qualities except around those whom he loved—himself and his sons. It is important for all women who swoon or swooned, at the mere name of Kennedy, to mark this distinction well: Joe's daughters were ornamental and as useless to him as bric-a-brac (would that God had given him *all* girls!). This misogyny he taught to his sons and they, with the possible exception of Bobby, returned that learning in spades. Joe Sr's. understanding of women and the legacy of that understanding he passed on to his sons, might well be summed up in the philosophy JFK learned from his father and repeated frequently, as occasion merited: "A day without a lay is not a day." Germaine Greer, call your office!

Joe Sr.'s contempt for women, later exemplified in his son John, did not stop with the mere view that women were for "laying". Given Joe's wild Irish roots and Joe-Sixpack underpinnings, such a philosophy of women would be understandable if not forgivable. But his contempt for women and, further, the sanctity of marriage, went far beyond a crude philosophy of sex. When he dove into the movie business world, for example, he decided he must have, or in the Biblical parsing, "know", Gloria Swanson. It didn't matter to him that there was this small obstacle called "being married" and further, children, of that marriage, between them. In fact, so well did he get to know Gloria, that is, so often did he parade this particular trophy about, that his young children, including the son born to be President, called her "Aunt Gloria". His flagrances were so bombastic that Rose Kennedy would finally leave Hyannis Port in self-defense and fly to Europe so Joe and "Auntie" could be alone. Ah, the life of the *jeunesse doree!*

Joe Sr. earned his money the same way Michael R. Milken did, only Joe Sr. was never charged with cheating. Before insider-trading became completely illegal (it was always ethically wrong), Joe Sr. made many of his millions. After that, he merely added to them. Once he moved into liquor, Joe, himself a teetotaler, acquired numerous unseemly characters to carry out his dirty work. These injudicious characters, along with their incommodious behavior, figured largely into every one of Jack's campaigns. While one would paint too unkind a picture of Joe Sr. as a godfather who broke the legs of nonconformists in his ranks, the grand genearch was not above breaking the *financial* legs of anyone who dared not follow his lead. And while he proved to be an astute and sometimes brilliant businessman (one must debride from among his many achievements those which were gained illegally), he did not always make the wisest of choices.

There were failures along the way, particularly poignant, the one with Aunt Gloria when the epic movie *Queen Kelly*, Joe had, so to speak, laid out for her in 1928, proved a debacle, both in its public reception and its financial losses. But Joe Sr. had a knack for making money. It helped, too, that if he could not get it honestly, he would get it anyway he could. The Psalmist cries out, "Who can know the mind of God!" Witnesses to the creation of the multimillions (in excess of \$100 million) of Joe Sr. can only conclude that God's ways are not only inscrutable, they are also incomprehensible and seemingly indefensible. There can be no doubt that without the vast fortunes of the Kennedy estate in hand, not only would Jack Kennedy have never been President, nor would he have been senator, his bother Bobby neither Attorney General nor senator, and the not-so-little Teddy never senator. *En fin*, Mary Joe Kopechne would, doubtless, still be alive. But the will of God is the necessity of things.

Father Joe was not the loving, kind father that one might think. Though the money he lavished on his sons' political campaigns were kings' ransoms, he was far more frugal with his love. He did hug the children often and he offered them advice whenever he could. But both Rose and he were as abstemious as any two stereotypical Presbyterians: frozen to the core when it came to love. Some biographers have made Joe Sr. out to be the one loving parent while Rose is made out to be Nurse Ratchet of the family. But if anything, the roles are reversed. Rose showed extraordinary love for her first daughter,

the mildly retarded Rosemary, and did much not only to help her, but to hide her lethargic abilities. But Joe Sr. would have none of this imperfection on his nearly picture perfect clan, and Rosemary was soon enough carted off to the asylum and forthwith lobotomized, or so the story is told.

Many *protestations* of love were offered in surfeit by both parents but actual displays were few and far between. Joe Sr. rarely made it to any “rites of passage” for his sons: graduations, awards, special recognitions. In fact, Joe Sr. showed up only when his sons were in trouble. Then, typically, it was to pay off whoever needed the pungle.

Pungle-payment occurred frequently while Jack was in school, and later with his other brothers. Joe Jr. had a fine scholastic record. But Jack simply wanted to spend time chasing girls, something he made into an art, as well as a lifelong career. His grades were remarkably bad for one so honored to have the best of everything. While plowing through the accounts of Jack's inability to perform well in school, coupled with his horrendous spelling, one finds the later accounts of his first best-seller, *Why England Slept* hard to take. Inevitably, the ghost writer, Arthur Krock, emerged and Kennedy's best-seller turned out not only not to be of his own making any more than Mrs. Bill Clinton's book, *It Takes a Village* is hers, but it also was not a best-seller save only by virtue of his father's money.

Joe Sr. invested all of his physical energies in Joe Jr. and demanded from his children a line of accession not unlike England's, or even Israel's, own. He demanded of his children nothing less than the best, in and of itself an uncommon good, but importuned it of them in such a way as to make them think they had to be derring-dos, or worse, heedless show-offs. Joe Sr. had invested in them the knowledge that political fame required gain at various levels in some of nearly all walks of life: academics, belle lettres, war, business and so forth. To achieve that required impavidity in the extreme, and the Kennedy boys went after it with an unthinking relish. Some of them had to cheat their way to it, as Teddy did on his Harvard exams. But a not insignificant portion of these achievements came from sheer reckless abandon. Jack's PT-boat fiasco evolved out of his own hodman's work on same. And Joe Jr.'s death may very well have been owing to his own inability, not to say no to opportunity, but to say no to his own impetuosity.

Joe Jr.'s death during the first World War nearly took his father's life as well. But soon father Joe was pushing his next son's ascension to the throne. Here the real Joe Sr. and Jack Kennedy were shown in true colors. After a less than stellar college career, Jack, with PT-boat confidence, took control and made his bid for the political hustings, or in this case, hustlings. This ascent was not simply made smoother by the Kennedy money but that wealth made possible altogether. This is even more true of the later Presidential campaign. Joe Sr. thought nothing of buying newspapers and then laughing about it. If he got word that a key paper's editorial would be coming out in favor of another candidate, he swung into action, offering his considerable wealth for whatever value it might be. For example, when the Boston *Globe* took a none to kind stance on Jack, Joe Sr. pulled a million dollar's worth of advertising from its coffers. For the Boston Post, it was the so-

called \$500,000 editorial. The paper's publisher, John Fox announced plans to endorse Lodge for senator in 1952, against JFK. Then, suddenly, an editorial appeared touting Jack in the highest. Very soon thereafter, Fox got a \$500,000 "loan" from Joe Sr. Talk about "walking around" money! At least Jack was honest about it in his own Camelot-charming patois. To his Harvard classmate Fletcher Knebel he later admitted, "You know, we had to buy that f\*\*\*\*\* paper, or I'd have been licked." Whew, what a close call.

It would be inaccurate to give the impression, however, that there is nothing in the Kennedy family that is good and noble and true. What makes the story so complicated is that those good and noble and true things inevitably come tied with something evil-seeming, ignoble and full of lies. For example, one can almost admire the loving, caring nature of the bothers for one another, and their tenderness to their father. But this is only as it should be. Even hopelessly dysfunctional families seem to have some fellow-feeling for family members, though it may express itself in outrageous and unacceptable ways. But in the case of the Kennedy brothers, even this love does not come unmixed. It is often tied to out-right lying for each other, malversation of the first order, or grim and unseemly paraphiliac misdoings of an extraordinary profligate appetite. While Martin repeatedly reminds readers that how one conducts one's personal life has nothing to do with how one governs a country, the reader is made haggard with the sheer number of the sexual liaisons. When these amourettes either put the country in jeopardy, as in Jack's case, or merely make for nefarious reading, as when Jack and Bobby share Marilyn Monroe, only the most myrmidonic of true-believers will not bow his head in shame at the iniquities.

This book, to its credit, places everything in clear view for the readers. From Joe Sr.'s meteoric rise to power on Lucifer's wings, to Jack as embusque to avoid sure military danger, to Bobby's boasting of having Marilyn in his bed, to Teddy's acquitted murder of Mary Jo Kopechne (for we must call this tragedy by its true name). Also here are all of the Kennedy achievements: father Joe's unlikely rise to power from shoestring beginnings; Jack's sheer determination to overcome his multitudinous health problems, Jackie's dignified and majestic handling of her role in the White House, Bobby's relentless dogging of the Teamsters and Jimmy Hoffa, and Teddy's... well... we're still waiting. Throughout it all are the many friends of the Kennedys—Lem Billings, Peter Lawford, Ken O'Donnell, Dave Powers and more—forever covering up, touching up and making up whatever had to be said or done in order to preserve the family's prestige and name. *Seeds of Destruction* is aptly named for in it are the seedlings that grew to become the thicket that nearly strangled America.