



Jack and Lem: John F. Kennedy and Lem Billings: The Untold Story of an Extraordinary Friendship

By David Pitts

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I'm not that kind of boy," Jack angrily wrote to Lem after his friend made a sexual advance. But Jack didn't end the relationship. From the time John F. Kennedy and Kirk LeMoyne "Lem" Billings met at Choate, until the President's assassination thirty years later, Jack and Lem remained best friends. Lem was a virtual fixture in the Kennedy family who even had his own room at the White House. Drawing on hundreds of letters and telegrams between the two, plus Lem Billings's oral history and interviews with family and friends like Ben Bradlee, Gore Vidal, and Ted Sorenson, award-winning Kennedy scholar David Pitts tells the story of an unusual friendship that endured despite an era of rampant homophobia.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Freelance journalist Pitts thoroughly documents the long, intimate association of JFK and Kirk LeMoyne "Lem" Billings. The son of a Pittsburgh physician, Billings first met JFK in the early 1930s at Choate, where they systematically set about violating every campus rule possible. Although Lem was gay, their relationship was evidently always platonic and continued through WWII and after, as Billings pursued a career in advertising while also devoting much energy to advancing Kennedy's political career. Lem became an adored member of the extended Kennedy clan and loomed large in the lives of the children of the martyred Jack and Bobby. Billings also became a much-sought-after source, courted by dozens of Kennedy biographers until his death in 1981—a devotee to the end and somehow incomplete as an individual separate from Jack. Gore Vidal, no friend of Lem's, belittled him, saying, "He's the guy who carries the coat.... He's the guy who runs errands.... To Jack, Lem was a kind of idiot friend." But Pitt, in a well-done first book, insists JFK had "absolute trust in Lem" though their friendship remained an enigma to others. (May)

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From [Booklist](#)

Those familiar with the life of John Kennedy have probably wondered about his lifelong best friend, Lem Billings. The duo met at Choate, traveled together, and corresponded copiously over the years (Lem had his own room at the White House). For years there was speculation that Lem was homosexual, but facts were scarce, as Billings' personal papers at the Kennedy Library were restricted—until Robert Kennedy Jr., Billings' executor, gave Pitts unprecedent access. Through interviews and some deductive reasoning based on the documents, Pitts reveals that Billings was not only gay but also in love with JFK, who did not reciprocate his friend's feelings. Still, it is remarkable that Kennedy would ignore the mores of the day and keep such a close association with a closeted gay man. Pitts explores the emotional reasons this should be so as he tells the story of the two friends. The account is sometimes repetitious, and Pitts (perhaps in deference to RFK Jr.) skirts the previously documented issue of Lem's relationship with the younger Kennedy generation, which purportedly included drug use. Still, this offers a fascinating look at an unexamined subject. Illustrated with rare photographs. Cooper, Ilene

Review

Instinct

"Finally—proof that a 'mo lived in the White House...This simple-to-digest study features fascinating, firsthand accounts from Camelot...What we leave with is that inevitably haunting question: Had he lived, what more could JFK have done for the progression of human rights?"

San Francisco Chronicle, 11/22/13

"[An] excellent book...Essential reading for those seeking that which shaped JFK's indelible personality."

Users Review

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