

Book Review: Hope Before Thirty-Nine Hours: Patrick Bouvier Kennedy's Enduring Legacy

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“Rather than simply recounting the tragic death of President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy’s youngest son, Levingston argues that Patrick’s brief life became a turning point in neonatal medicine while simultaneously revealing the humanity hidden beneath the carefully cultivated image of Camelot. More importantly, Patrick’s story demonstrates that legacy often begins long before death.”

Steven Levingston’s *Twilight of Camelot: The Short Life and Long Legacy of Patrick Bouvier Kennedy* explores how an infant who lived only thirty-nine hours permanently influenced American medicine, politics, and public memory. Rather than simply recounting the tragic death of President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy’s youngest son, Levingston argues that Patrick’s brief life became a turning point in neonatal medicine while simultaneously revealing the humanity hidden beneath the carefully cultivated image of Camelot. More importantly, Patrick’s story demonstrates that legacy often begins long before death. Before his birth, Patrick represented hope and renewal within a marriage marked by repeated loss; after his death, he became a catalyst for medical innovation and a lasting reminder that even the briefest life can profoundly shape history.

One of the book’s greatest strengths is its argument that the significance of a life cannot be measured by its duration. Although Patrick lived only thirty-nine hours, Levingston demonstrates that his influence extended far beyond those hours through the profound impact he had on his family, the nation’s understanding of premature birth, and the evolution of neonatal medicine. Patrick’s death occurred during a period when many treatments now considered routine for premature infants did not yet exist. While advances in neonatal care were already underway, his highly publicized struggle transformed prematurity from a largely medical concern into an issue of national attention. In doing so, Levingston challenges readers to reconsider how history assigns significance. Patrick’s importance arose not from what he accomplished during his lifetime but from the changes his story inspired afterward.

Perhaps the book’s most compelling contribution is its portrayal of Patrick as a source of hope before he became a symbol of tragedy. Before his anticipated birth, John and Jacqueline Kennedy’s marriage had been strained by repeated miscarriages, the stillbirth of their daughter Arabella, John Kennedy’s infidelities, and the relentless demands of political life. Against this backdrop, this pregnancy represented an unexpected period of optimism. Secret Service agent Clint Hill recalled that “everything was looking up” and that the Kennedys were “very happy...really looking forward to this child.” Rather than presenting Patrick simply as another presidential child, Levingston argues that he embodied emotional renewal after years of disappointment.

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Levingston further suggests that Patrick’s influence continued even after his death. He writes that “expectation, then the sorrow” drove Jack and Jackie “into each other’s arms as never before.” During the weeks following their son’s death at Brambletyde, friends observed Jack openly comforting Jackie and displaying a tenderness that had rarely been visible throughout their marriage. Theodore White later reflected that their “shared grief tore that wall down” and that they were finally “truly coming closer together.” Although it is impossible to know whether Patrick’s survival would have permanently transformed their marriage, Levingston presents persuasive evidence that both his anticipated arrival and his death strengthened the emotional bond between his parents.

The book notes that John and Jacqueline’s “parenthood bound and bonded them,” uniting them through “their nurturing of those who lived and their sorrow for those they lost.” Levingston further observes that, after Patrick’s death, John Kennedy became increasingly attentive to Jackie and their children, revealing how shared grief deepened their relationship. The tragedy became not only a devastating loss but also a turning point that allowed the couple to reconnect after years of emotional distance. The irony, however, is heartbreaking. Just as they began envisioning a healthier future together, President Kennedy was assassinated only a few months later. Looking back, Jackie reflected, “It took a very long time for us to work everything out, but we did. We were about to have a real life together.”

TWILIGHT OF CAMELOT

THE SHORT LIFE AND LONG LEGACY
OF PATRICK BOUVIER KENNEDY



STEVEN LEVINGSTON

One of the book's most memorable passages reinforces this central idea. Levingston writes that "Patrick came and went too quickly, but he was fully realized in his parents' hearts." I found this statement especially moving because it captures the book's larger message. Patrick's significance cannot be measured simply by the thirty-nine hours he lived. Long before his birth, he existed in his parents' hopes for healing and renewal. Long after his death, he continued to shape medicine, history, and public memory. In this sense, Patrick's legacy began before his life and endured far beyond it.

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Patrick's story also reshapes the traditional understanding of Camelot. Although the Kennedy presidency is often remembered for its glamour, youth, and optimism, Levingston reveals the vulnerability hidden beneath that carefully constructed image. The Kennedys were not immune to miscarriage, infant loss, marital struggles, or profound grief despite occupying the nation's highest office. Rather than diminishing Camelot, these hardships deepen its emotional resonance. Patrick's death became another chapter in the succession of tragedies that defined the Kennedy family, reinforcing the reality that Camelot was always as fragile as it was inspiring. Levingston ultimately suggests that the true legacy of Camelot lies not in the illusion of perfection but in the resilience displayed amid repeated personal loss.

Levingston further deepens this portrait by examining the childhoods of John and Jacqueline Kennedy, illustrating how their early family experiences shaped their marriage and emotional responses as adults. Both were raised in households marked by infidelity, emotional distance, and family instability, experiences that influenced how they coped with conflict, vulnerability, and loss. Rather than portraying their marital struggles as isolated events, Levingston places them within the broader context of their upbringing, suggesting that many of the communication barriers they faced were rooted in long-established emotional patterns. I found this perspective especially insightful because it encouraged me to view the Kennedys with greater empathy. Understanding their childhood experiences helped explain why they often struggled to communicate openly during difficult moments and why Patrick's illness and death became such a pivotal turning point in their relationship.

The author's willingness to portray the Kennedys honestly rather than idealize them is another of the book's greatest strengths. He openly examines Jack Kennedy's repeated infidelities and the emotional pain they caused Jackie, preventing readers from romanticizing their marriage while also providing essential context for why this pregnancy represented such a meaningful opportunity for renewal. Likewise, Levingston's discussion of the stillbirth of the Kennedys' daughter, Arabella, demonstrates that Patrick's death was not an isolated tragedy but part of a heartbreaking pattern of pregnancy loss that had already shaped the family. By including Jack's initial hesitation to return home after learning of Arabella's stillbirth, Levingston resists simplistic characterizations. Rather than portraying Jack as merely indifferent, he explores his emotional immaturity, discomfort with grief, and difficulty confronting painful situations. I appreciated this balanced approach because it neither excuses Jack's shortcomings nor defines him entirely. Instead, the book presents both John and Jacqueline Kennedy as deeply human individuals whose strengths and flaws shaped the way they loved, grieved, and ultimately grew together.

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As someone who works in maternal-fetal and neonatal clinical research, I found Levingston's discussion of Patrick's medical legacy especially compelling. Rather than suggesting that Patrick's death single-handedly transformed neonatal medicine, Levingston presents his story as the catalyst that brought premature infant care into the national consciousness. Before Patrick's birth, he notes that the dangers of prematurity and hyaline membrane disease (HMD)—now known as neonatal respiratory distress syndrome—"rarely made news." Following Patrick's death, however, newspapers across the country explained the disease through headlines such as "Disease That Killed Kennedy Baby Is Biggest Danger in Premature Birth and Premature Infants Subject to HMD," bringing discussions of premature birth "to kitchen tables across the country." What had often been experienced as a private family tragedy suddenly became a national conversation.

The public response extended beyond newspaper coverage. Thousands of families wrote to the White House describing their own experiences with premature birth and infant loss, revealing that the Kennedys' grief resonated with parents across the country. In this way, Patrick's death narrowed the distance between the First Family and the American public. The tragedy humanized the Kennedys, reminding the nation that even those with extraordinary

wealth, influence, and access to the finest physicians remained vulnerable to the limitations of medicine.

Levingston also demonstrates that Patrick's influence extended beyond public awareness to research priorities. In the wake of his son's death, President Kennedy requested reports on hyaline membrane disease, neonatal research, and federal support for prematurity studies, encouraging greater collaboration among institutions and helping elevate prematurity as an important area of scientific investigation. Although Levingston does not claim that Patrick's death created the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) or initiated federal funding from scratch, he convincingly argues that it accelerated attention toward research already underway and strengthened support for innovations that would ultimately lead to surfactant replacement therapy, improved mechanical ventilation, continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP), and the development of modern neonatal intensive care units.

“Perhaps the book’s greatest contribution is its distinction between direct and symbolic influence. Levingston acknowledges that advances in neonatal medicine were already in progress before 1963, making clear that Patrick did not personally transform neonatal care. Instead, his highly publicized death became the defining case that galvanized public interest, intensified scientific attention, and inspired physicians to challenge the limitations of existing treatments.”

Perhaps the book's greatest contribution is its distinction between direct and symbolic influence. Levingston acknowledges that advances in neonatal medicine were already in progress before 1963, making clear that Patrick did not personally transform neonatal care. Instead, his highly publicized death became the defining case that galvanized public interest, intensified scientific attention, and inspired physicians to challenge the limitations of existing treatments. As Levingston concludes, Patrick's "brief life and tragic death inspired a revolution in premature care." His legacy, therefore, lies not in a single medical breakthrough but in the momentum his story gave to an entire field dedicated to improving the survival of premature infants.

This distinction is one of the book's greatest strengths because it avoids overstating Patrick's historical influence while still recognizing its significance. Rather than attributing decades of medical progress to one tragic event, Levingston argues that Patrick's story accelerated conversations, research, and public investment that were already emerging. In doing so, he demonstrates how individual lives can shape history not only

through direct action but also through the attention, empathy, and determination they inspire in others.

Levingston further illustrates that Patrick's death became inseparable from the public identity of the Kennedy presidency. The nation's response to Patrick's illness and death revealed John and Jacqueline Kennedy not simply as the President and first lady but as grieving parents confronting a loss shared by countless families. Americans followed Patrick's hospitalization through newspaper reports and television updates, while thousands of parents wrote to the White House describing their own experiences with premature birth and infant loss. In this sense, Patrick's death narrowed the distance between the First Family and the public, fostering empathy that transcended politics. Levingston demonstrates that while grief is universal, the experience of grieving is profoundly altered by public life. John and Jacqueline endured the same heartbreak as countless parents, yet they did so beneath relentless national scrutiny, illustrating the emotional cost of leadership and the sacrifices that accompany public service.

“Patrick’s story also challenges conventional assumptions about privilege by revealing its limits in the face of tragedy. As the son of the President of the United States, Patrick received the finest medical care available, access to leading physicians, cutting-edge technology, and the full attention of the nation. Nevertheless, despite the Kennedy family’s wealth, influence, and unprecedented resources, medicine in 1963 could not save him.”

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“Another of Levingston’s greatest strengths is his careful balance between emotional storytelling and historical scholarship. Rather than relying solely on sentiment, he builds his narrative through archival documents, government memoranda, newspaper accounts, interviews with family members, physicians, historians, and neonatologists, and an accessible explanation of the medical science surrounding neonatal respiratory distress syndrome.”

Another of Levingston’s greatest strengths is his careful balance between emotional storytelling and historical scholarship. Rather than relying solely on sentiment, he builds his narrative through archival documents, government memoranda, newspaper accounts, interviews with family members, physicians, historians, and neonatologists, and an accessible explanation of the medical science surrounding neonatal respiratory distress syndrome. Although the subject matter is deeply emotional, the book remains grounded in evidence. Even when Levingston reflects on the emotional significance of particular events, he distinguishes interpretation from documented fact, allowing readers to appreciate both the historical record and the humanity behind it. This balanced approach makes the book persuasive without becoming overly sentimental.

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One passage near the conclusion of the book encapsulates Levingston’s broader message. Reflecting on Patrick’s brief life, he cites an editorial observing that pregnancy is “the waiting time” and that Patrick “did indeed have a life of his own,” existing “prospectively, in the minds and imaginations of his parents.” I found this observation especially powerful because it reinforces the idea that Patrick’s legacy began long before his birth. Before he became associated with advances in neonatal medicine, he embodied hope, anticipation, and emotional renewal within his family. After his death, that same hope evolved into a lasting commitment to improving the care of premature infants, giving profound meaning to a life that lasted only thirty-nine hours.

Ultimately, *Twilight of Camelot* argues that Patrick Bouvier Kennedy’s significance lies not in the brevity of his life but in the enduring influence of his story. His death challenged the illusion of Camelot’s perfection, revealed the humanity behind one of America’s most admired families, and helped bring national attention to premature infant care during a pivotal moment in medical history. Levingston reminds readers that history often assigns meaning retrospectively. Patrick was not born as a symbol of medical progress or national grief; he became one because later generations recognized the changes his life and death inspired.

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Given my role at Loma Linda University Children’s Hospital, I found this perspective especially meaningful. Clinical research is driven by the determination to learn from difficult outcomes so that future patients may benefit. Patrick’s story illustrates that principle in a deeply human way. Although no single tragedy transforms medicine on its own, some losses become powerful catalysts that inspire greater awareness, collaboration, and scientific progress. Levingston’s account reminded me that many of the advances now considered routine in neonatal care exist because physicians and researchers refused to accept the limitations exposed by families like the Kennedys.

“Levingston’s careful blend of historical scholarship, medical history, and human compassion makes a persuasive case that Patrick’s legacy should be measured not by the brevity of his life but by the enduring impact it had on his family, neonatal medicine, and generations of children who have benefited from the progress his story helped inspire.”

Overall, I found *Twilight of Camelot* to be a compelling and thoughtfully researched account that successfully reframes a largely forgotten chapter of American history. Rather than presenting Patrick Bouvier Kennedy’s story solely as one of tragedy, Levingston convincingly argues that it is ultimately a story of hope, resilience, and enduring influence. Patrick represented hope for his parents as they sought to rebuild their marriage, hope for a nation captivated by the promise of Camelot, and hope

for a medical community determined to improve the survival of premature infants. What stayed with me most was the realization that Patrick's greatest influence came not during the thirty-nine hours he lived but through the countless lives his story continued to touch afterward. Levingston's careful blend of historical scholarship, medical history, and human compassion makes a persuasive case that Patrick's legacy should be measured not by the brevity of his life but by the enduring impact it had on his family, neonatal medicine, and generations of children who have benefited from the progress his story helped inspire.

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1. Levingston, S. (2026). *Twilight of Camelot: The short life and long legacy of Patrick Bouvier Kennedy*. Gallery Books.

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