

A born reporter

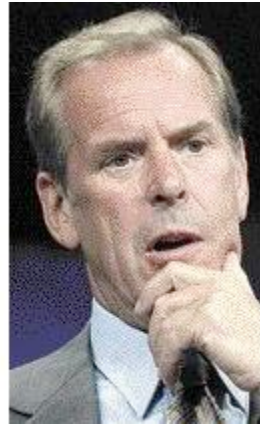
Peter Jennings as remembered by those close to him, high and low

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For much of his life, Peter Jennings defined himself in two ways: as a journalist, and as a Canadian. Like all good journalists, he was relentlessly inquisitive. By the end of lunch with him in a restaurant you invariably knew either the server's life history or, say, the origins of each item on the menu, because he simply couldn't bear to miss an occasion to learn something. And he was exquisitely polite, in the way that the rest of the world -- rightly or wrongly -- often expects Canadians to be.



CREDIT: Jim Ruymen, Reuters

Those two traits can seem contradictory, but Peter made them work together. That he held on to them even after he had become one of the most famous people in the United States says a lot about him as well as the values that sustained him until his death two years ago of lung cancer at the age of 67.

Peter Jennings saw himself foremost as a journalist and a Canadian, combining civility with a compulsion to learn the facts.

By then, he had become, quite literally, a man who walked alongside presidents and kings the world over. But he still said that two of his favourite places were the property in the Gatineau Hills where he retreated every summer, and the Byward Market, where he liked to roam on his frequent returns to Ottawa. Although he was barely into his 20s when he last lived full-time in Ottawa, his affection for the city he considered his hometown (despite being born in Toronto) only grew over time.

In fact, less than a year before he was diagnosed with cancer, he was sending friends e-mails with photographs of a mahogany-hulled 1920s yacht that he planned to buy, restore, and pick up in Kingston to sail down the Rideau Canal to Ottawa.

How Peter achieved his remarkable success -- and how he evolved as a person in the process -- are the focus of an unabashedly fond but revealing new book, *Peter Jennings: A Reporter's Life*. It gives voice to many of the people who knew him best, including its editors -- Peter's wife, television producer Kayce Freed Jennings; editor Kate Darnton; and ABC correspondent Lynn Sherr. The book is composed almost entirely of quotes and anecdotes collected immediately after Peter's death.

Though the editors acknowledge they haven't hit a full cross-section of his inner circle, they have found many -- including his sister Sarah who, from her base here in Ottawa, remained arguably his lifelong best friend. There are quotes and memories from people like Bill Clinton, U.S. Supreme Court Judge (and fellow baseball fan) Antonin Scalia, and

Condoleeza Rice, and his longtime friendly rivals Tom Brokaw and Dan Rather. And we hear from his beloved children Christopher and Elizabeth (by his third wife, Kati Marton) -- as well as one of the less-known but most important constants in his life: Gretchen Babarovic, his longstanding personal assistant, gatekeeper, schedule manager and trusted confidante.

Peter's childhood is inspiration to any parents who have despaired of their offspring. He worshipped his father Charles (a famous CBC radio personality) and mother Elizabeth, and through his life fretted about how they might judge him. But he was also, by his admission, something of a hyperactive brat who bored easily, drifted indifferently through school, and found it near impossible to maintain focus.

He was saved by his charm, good looks, intelligence and genuine interest in others -- although even his famed ability as a quick learner had some bounds: Sarah recounts how her brother was effectively invited to leave his expensive private school by the headmaster, and got a job as a bank teller. "We always felt," recalls Sarah, "he'd either be president of the bank or in jail because he couldn't count."

But Peter did many other things with a deceptive ease that contributed to his meteoric rise: he was a nine-year-old CBC radio personality (to the dismay of his dad), he went from being a 21-year-old radio reporter in Brockville to co-anchor of CTV's national news within four years, and in 1964, at age 26, signed on with ABC as the youngest news anchor in U.S. television history.

It was too fast a rise, and Peter understood in later years that this one "failure" was the key to his ultimate success. When ABC moved him to a job as their Middle East correspondent, it led to his coming of age as a journalist. To the surprise of many -- who saw him as a pretty and earnest-looking face and great voice but more about style than substance -- Peter proved to be a born reporter. His indefatigable energy, breathtaking self-confidence, dizzying charm and the clout of working for a major American network combined to give him access and influence that he used in the best of ways. By the time he returned to the anchor chair in 1978 he had matured and developed a sophisticated, first-hand knowledge of the world outside North America.

Peter was no saint, and never pretended to be. He married four times, finally finding his match with Kayce. He was -- to use the famous description of Bruce Springsteen -- a "notorious heterosexual." He suffered fools not at all, and his temper on occasion trumped his usual courtesy when he faced obstacles in his reporting, or felt that colleagues or friends had done less than their best. Friends became accustomed to occasionally receiving calls beginning with the famously clipped voice saying "It's Jennings." He would then swiftly move on to whatever information he had to impart. You were expected to act immediately and with appropriate vigour, and if you didn't, to have a good explanation as to why not.

All of those qualities are amply illustrated in this book. The three American editors knew him well enough to understand Canada's emotional place in his heart. That said, it's a shame that the book's chronology of key events in Peter's life omits the Order of Canada he received shortly before his death -- although it's also true that the award was given so shamefully late to the man who was arguably our most important goodwill ambassador in the U.S. (That tardiness diminished some of the meaning it once would have had for him.)

There is also a large section devoted to his decision to take out American citizenship in 2003 while keeping his Canadian citizenship. He was proud and delighted to become an American -- but troubled by whether Canadians would think he was forsaking his roots. (He phoned his Canadian friends to explain his reasoning.) As Gretchen Babarovic recounts, there was another reason for his long delay in doing so: "His mother [who died in 1991] really didn't want him to become an American citizen, and she had told him so in no uncertain terms."

As Lynn Sherr notes in her introduction, the prospect of a biography of him "would

have been anathema to Peter." (He often said he would never write his memoirs because "that's something you do when you're retired -- and I have no intention of retiring.") Despite the huge force of his own personality, he was troubled by and disdainful of the modern trend toward first-person, personality-driven journalism. He refused to say the word "we" on a newscast because, he explained, "Journalists shouldn't include themselves in the story." (He added that was something he "learned at the CBC.")

Regardless of whether Peter would have wanted or felt his life merited a biography, there are several aspects he surely would have liked. One is the vast range of voices, from the likes of Bill Clinton to Peter's longtime driver, as well as the children of friends. That speaks to the way he engaged with people at all levels.

Peter would also have surely approved of the format of quotes and anecdotes that can be read as stand-alones without intervention or editorializing by a third party. That's in keeping with his view that his job was to help people to find the information they needed to form their opinions -- not to tell them how to think.

Sarah Jennings in the book recalls "Pete" (only a very few people called him that) being asked whether he was able to be objective. His answer: "Probably that's impossible. But it was very important to be fair."

If that sounds like a modest ambition, it's one that many nonetheless never achieve. Peter managed that, and much more -- and so does this deceptively and appropriately understated book (from which any profits go to the charitable Peter Jennings Foundation).

Peter did Canadians -- and Americans -- proud. In all the right ways, this book does the same for him.

Anthony Wilson-Smith, a former Maclean's editor, was one of Peter Jennings' many friends.

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WHAT WAS SAID

I remember walking down 67th Street with Peter ... and a panhandler stopped the two of us. We each gave him money, but Peter stayed and talked to the man for about 10 minutes. He asked about his life, and he listened, and thereby he invested a damaged soul with dignity.

--Ted Koppel

I think the best journalists, be they in print or electronic media, understand that someone signs their cheques, but that's not really their boss. I think the public understood that Peter worked for them and that he was their representative, trying to ferret out the truth.

-- Ken Auletta, author, magazine writer and Jennings' friend

The legacy he gave each of us who worked with him is to strive to be as caring, as thorough, as passionate about our work as he was.

-- Barbara Walters

He helped hold the barbarians at the gates -- those who wanted to diminish the news, or do it in a softer way. I think he stood for integrity.

-- Brian Ross, ABC's chief investigative correspondent

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