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**A Reporter's Life**

Review by David M. Alpern

(11/13/2007) "This book would have been anathema to Peter Jennings." So begins Lynn Sherr, a longtime colleague of the late TV newsmen and the driving force behind the creation of a not-quite biography of the man who, as evening anchor for more than 20 years, was the face, the voice, the conscience, and the spirit of ABC News.

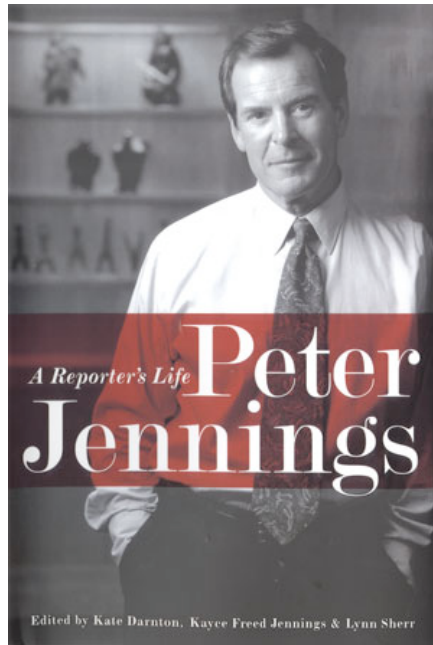
At the very least, this book suggests, Jennings probably would have rewritten the opening sentence to say simply that he'd have hated it.

Credit Jennings's determined modesty, and perhaps the feelings of inadequacy that colleagues sensed he could never quite shake. The American TV superstar apparently never forgot that he began his career as a high school dropout, and that his father was an even more famous figure in broadcasting — Charles Jennings, a pioneer of Canadian broadcasting, comparable to our Edward R. Murrow or Walter Cronkite.

But Peter Charles Archibald Ewart Jennings became a consummate journalist in his own right, a voracious reader and a student of history. And he would surely have argued that a real biography should be much more than the edited transcripts of the inevitably flattering eulogies by friends, family, and associates collected mainly in just three days after his death for a loving ABC News special. They are interspersed with snatches of Jennings's own scripts and speeches.

And yet this collection confected by Ms. Sherr, along with Jennings's fourth wife, Kaycee Freed Jennings, and the editor Kate Darnton, tells enough truth about the charismatic, dedicated, sometimes difficult newsmen, his remarkable career, and the inner workings of broadcast journalism to merit one of those devastating grins for which Jennings was famous.

Because many of the book's contributors are also veterans of the news and TV



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business — from Tom Brokaw to Barbara Walters, and including a number of Jennings's fellow Hamptonites (the actor Alan Alda, Ken Auletta of *The New Yorker*, Don Hewitt of "60 Minutes," John Leo of *U.S. News and World Report*, the author Linda Bird Francke, and Ms. Sherr herself) — the recollections are colorful and pointed.

"I was bad in school. I was bone lazy," Jennings himself once admitted. And his sister, Sarah Jennings, recalls how the family decided it would be best for him to quit high school and take advantage of some family contacts to get a teller's job at the Royal Bank of Canada. "We felt he'd either be president of the bank or in jail because he couldn't count," she says.

After two and a half years at the teller's window, and with an understandable yen to follow in his father's footsteps, young Peter found a job at a small radio station on the St. Lawrence Seaway — "without any help from his family," his sister says, "although I'm sure that people in the industry knew" who he was. That led to jobs with Canada's CBC Radio and the fledgling CTV television network, where an ABC correspondent in Ottawa saw him on screen

It was a measure of ABC's weak third place versus CBS and NBC in 1964, and its limited resources, that the handsome, charming, 24-year-old novice seemed a promising prospect — first as a reporter, then, at the age of 26, as this country's youngest-ever network evening anchor.

Jennings once recalled a lunch at which the veteran NBC anchor David Brinkley claimed his only concession to show business was having the bags under his eyes painted out, after which Mr. Cronkite cracked that Jennings "has them painted on."

But it wasn't long before the ratings, the bosses, and Jennings himself decided he was just too inexperienced. Recalls his former colleague Ted Koppel: "... you had these crusty old print veterans who were ostensibly reporting to this young whippersnapper of an anchor who ... clearly didn't have a lot of experience, and clearly didn't know a great deal. Peter was smart enough and sensitive enough to realize this wasn't going to work."

It was the best thing that could have happened. Jennings turned his new assignment as foreign correspondent into a first-rate education on the way the world works, charming both V.I.P.s and ordinary folks in markets, taxis, airport waiting lines, always asking questions and jotting notes in the pad he kept tucked in his belt.

He also fought hard for the foreign news he was covering, most notably in the Middle East, where he drew some criticism for sympathetic coverage of the Palestinian cause and condition. "As a producer, an Israeli producer, it was sometimes hard to get him interviews on the Israeli side because of that," says Yael Lavie, another ABC colleague.

Jennings's familiarity with the Middle East served him well as the sole ABC newsman in Munich when bloody terrorism blighted the 1972 Olympics. "Peter knew all the ins and outs of the various factions of the Palestinian movement and many other movements," recalls ABC's Bill Blakemore.

"It was really the beginning, in my opinion, of Peter's career," adds Roger Goodman, the director of virtually all of Jennings's live-event coverage over the years.

And just as he could demonstrate graceful professionalism under pressure, Jennings also appreciated higher values. Mr. Blakemore recalls how, while covering the Bangladesh war for independence, they were approached by a guerrilla about to execute a collaborator before their film crew: "We walked away and put our camera down to make sure that if the man were executed, it wouldn't be because we were there. That was Peter. He instinctively understood what was right in journalism."

By the time he was brought back as anchor, Jennings's experience around the world was hard to beat, as was the personal roster of V.I.P. phone numbers he would share with others headed to overseas assignments. And once in New York again, despite the growing taste of the media (and its audience) for tabloid fare, he

continued pressing to keep “World News Tonight” true to the broad scope and seriousness of its name.

“If people want sports and fashion and cooking, and cooked-up personal conflict, there are plenty of places to find it,” Jennings once insisted. Says Jon Banner, still the show’s executive producer: “. . . there were stories that you knew it wasn’t even worth mentioning, because we just weren’t going to do them. Peter didn’t do them because he thought they were unworthy.”

So worthy he was. But not always easy to work with, it turns out, pressing reporters to learn more and say it better, making them prepare for questions he never asked on screen, so they would seem spontaneous for the ones he did ask. “Oh, he was a pain in the ass,” recalls David Gelber, the executive producer of several Jennings documentaries, who is now at CBS. “Peter was very good for my physical condition,” adds Mr. Gelber, who escaped the annoying anchor at a gym across the street. “But I never lost track of how deeply committed the guy was to the stories we were doing.”

Jennings was surely my favorite anchor in those years. Still, some of the praise heaped upon him in this book seems better left at the memorial service. Matthew Myers, the president of the Campaign for Tobacco-Free Kids, says Jennings did more than any other journalist in the world to increase awareness of smoking’s dangers. Yet I feel I got that message from many other sources (though Jennings’s death from lung cancer did provide an ironic underscoring to his prior reporting).

Similarly, I’m not sure I can agree that, despite death threats and a near-miss bombing in Sarajevo, Jennings was “the guy who saved Bosnia,” as Mr. Gelber puts it. Or that, as Chris Isham, a veteran of ABC and CBS, maintains, “There is no question that Peter put AIDS on the national agenda.”

And while I watched Jennings at least as much as any other anchor in the chaos of Sept. 11, 2001, I can’t say I feel his calm professionalism and honest emotion (“Now we’ve all got to talk to our children,” he said at one point, having just seen a message from his own son and daughter) were the crucial keys to getting us through that dreadful day.

It should be enough that this book shows Jennings as a master of his medium, a model of civility, expert at using both his charisma and his clout to pursue important stories and human values. His legacy is the inspiration he has left for current and future generations of journalists — if they hew to it against the lure of lower standards and the higher ratings they may often bring.

To quote the book’s last line, from the veteran ABC and CBS producer Paul Friedman: “I guess Peter would say, ‘Not worth speculating about. We’ll just have to wait and see.’”

“Peter Jennings:

A Reporter’s Life”

Edited by Kate Darnton, Kayce Freed Jennings, and Lynn Sherr

PublicAffairs, \$27.95

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Kayce Freed Jennings is the executive vice president of the Documentary Group, an independent production company. She was married to Peter Jennings from 1997 until his death in 2005. They had a house in Bridgehampton.

Lynn Sherr is a part-time resident of East Hampton.

David M. Alpern, a reporter, writer, and editor at Newsweek for 40 years, now produces and hosts the magazine’s syndicated radio and Internet program, “Newsweek on Air.” He lives in Sag Harbor.



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