

KIRKUS REVIEWS

TITLE INFORMATION

JFK

The Last Speech

Ed. by Neil Bicknell, Roger Mills and Jan Worth-Nelson

Mascot Books (376 pp.)

\$27.95 hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-64307-074-2; October 2, 2018

BOOK REVIEW

A collection of essays revolves around a speech President John F. Kennedy gave on the relationship between poetry and power.

In 1963, only weeks before he was assassinated, Kennedy spoke at Amherst College, commemorating the groundbreaking of the Robert Frost Library. In the rhetorically inspiring convocation address, Kennedy discussed the importance of a liberal education to democracy as well as the ways in which poetry functions as a literary check on the untethered employment of political power (“At bottom, he held a deep faith in the spirit of man, and it’s hardly an accident that Robert Frost coupled poetry and power, for he saw poetry as the means of saving power from itself. When power leads man towards arrogance, poetry reminds him of his limitations”). Mills (co-author: *240 Beats Per Minute*, 2018, etc.), Worth-Nelson (*Night Blind*, 2006), and debut editor Bicknell gathered an assemblage of essays from those who were present at the event—which included Kennedy’s remarks after his formal speech and a “convocation address by Archibald MacLeish”—that explore their remembrances. The volume features pieces that reflect on Kennedy’s political legacy and the tumultuous times within which he governed and meditations on the core message of his speech—the profound significance of liberal education for a flourishing democracy. The editors also curate concisely synoptic and illuminating essays on Frost’s career and his shifting relationship with Kennedy. The author read a poem at the president’s inauguration, but after Frost traveled to the Soviet Union, Kennedy felt stung by his betrayal. All the relevant primary source documents are included as well, including Kennedy’s handwritten edits of the speech originally prepared by Arthur Schlesinger Jr.

The editors exhaustively furnish a kaleidoscopic view of the event, its historical and political context, and personal ramifications. Some of the essays speak to the inspiration Kennedy provided—activist Ted Nelson discusses his time spent in the Peace Corps, an institution created by an executive order issued by the president. And while the book focuses on Kennedy, a captivating window into Frost’s troubled but prolific life is provided as well, and the Whitmanesque way in which he became interested in limning the democratic nature of poetry, its power neither reducible to nor independent of its political effects. The book crescendos into a discussion of the political significance of a liberal education, with commentary supplied by well-known luminaries, like journalist/author Fareed Zakaria and actor/director Robert Redford, drawn from diverse fields. While the volume is tinctured by the kind of idealism Kennedy preached, it also delivers a pragmatic acknowledgment of the challenges that face higher education. For example, economist Joseph E. Stiglitz, after observing the ways in which college education will necessarily have to change in order to meet new fiscal realities and technological innovations, argues that its fundamental mission remains unaltered: “Still, for all these changes, the humanist core of a liberal arts education remains unchanged. It is the outgrowth of the Enlightenment, the view that through disciplined reasoning we can come to a better understanding of our world, of our society, and of ourselves.”

A thoughtful introduction to a philosophically vital subject.