

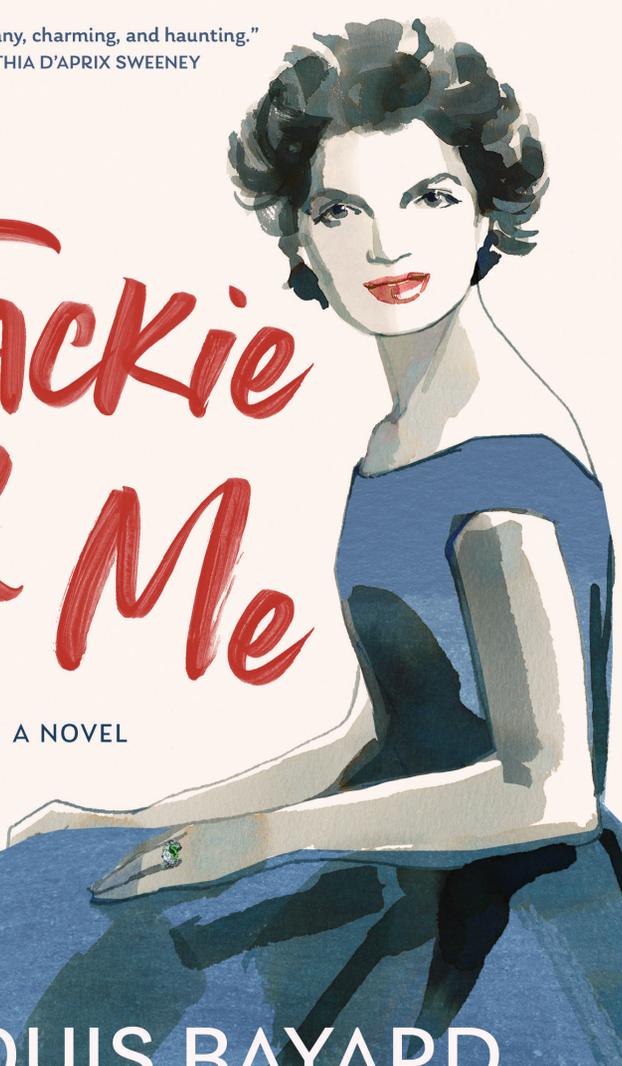


## BOOK CLUB KIT

"Riveting, funny, charming, and haunting."  
—CYNTHIA D'APRIX SWEENEY

# Jackie & Me

A NOVEL



LOUIS BAYARD

author of *COURTING MR. LINCOLN*  
and *THE PALE BLUE EYE*

# Jackie and the “First Friend”

*an essay by Louis Bayard*



IT STARTED WITH A PHOTOGRAPH.

Two young men, 1930s collegiates, leaning against a stone wall, their mouths smiling dreamily, their left hands perched flirtatiously on their hips, their hips thrust at the camera. Lovers, that was my first thought, from the pre-Stonewall era, seizing this one moment with the camera before slipping back into hiding.

Then I looked more closely at the man on the left. Fair, slightly built, rather pretty and . . . familiar. Before I knew it, I was looking at John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Not the engraved figure of cultural memory but a liminal creature on the cusp of maturity. The only remaining question was: Who was the other guy? The tall, bespectacled blond with the overbite and the air of hilarity so pervasive you can almost hear him laughing.

So began my acquaintance with Lem Billings, whose main claim to renown, in his and everybody else's eyes, was being Jack Kennedy's best friend.

But my initial response wasn't too far off. Lem was also a closeted gay man—or, to quote the old phraseology, a practicing homosexual. (I used to wonder: If they keep practicing, will they get it right?) In those days, that meant finding connections where you could. The bathroom at the Princeton library. The bathroom at Grand Central. A frat party. A wedding. A park. An alley. The church vestry. Praying the whole time that the other guy wasn't an undercover cop or a thug or just somebody who would rat you out a minute from now or thirty years from now.

Lem would have run the gamut of all those possibilities, but the more I learned about him, the more I came to see that his heart was reserved for one man. When Jack needed somebody to accompany him in his post-collegiate tour of Europe, Lem was there. When Jack needed somebody to help with his first Congressional run or his first presidential run, Lem was there. When Jack needed “complete liberation”—the freedom to be who he was, without judgment—he picked up the phone and called Lem.

Then I came across another photograph.

It's Jack and Lem again, only this time there's a young woman sitting between them. No question who she is. Jacqueline Bouvier, in her then-fashionable poodle cut.

The mood is light—some joke seems to have passed among the three—but what draws the eye is Lem's arm

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curled around Jackie's shoulder. Drawing her away, as if to protect her.

Lem would have had reason to feel protective because he knew what marriage to his friend Jack would be like. Isolation, endless rounds of campaign appearances, the serial humiliation of infidelity . . . these would be the fate of anyone taking on the mantle of "Mrs. Kennedy."

But I think Lem would also have seen how much he and Jackie had in common. They were both, in their way, outsiders: aristocrats who lived among great wealth without having any of their own, Europhiles who cared more about art than politics—or touch football. Two rather lonely people who happened to love the same man, more than perhaps they should have. I wondered: Who would Jackie Bouvier, presented with the problem of Jack Kennedy as a suitor, have turned to for counsel or encouragement? Wouldn't it have been Jack's best friend?

On the heels of that speculation came *Jackie & Me*, a different sort of love story and one that shows us a Jackie we don't necessarily know. In the early '50s, she's a career girl, ambitious enough to land *Vogue's* prestigious Prix de

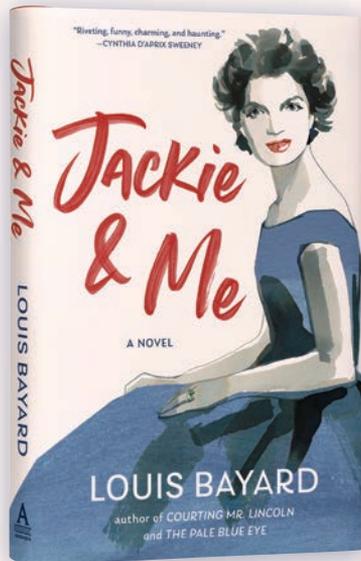
Paris and to talk her way into a daily journalistic gig as the Inquiring Camera Girl, where she conducts man-on-the-street interviews for the *Washington Times-Herald*. It's a grueling, six-day-a-week job that's not about to land her a Pulitzer, but she's already declared that her mission in life is "not to be a housewife."

Yet she's also a young woman of her time. So when she meets a charismatic congressman from a wealthy and powerful family, she finds herself drawn into a new world of wealth and power. Who better than Lem to help her negotiate it? And who better than Lem to provide a ringside seat on an epochal American courtship?

That seat might have begun to chafe. After Jack's death, Lem became a surrogate father to the next generation of Kennedys, trying to steer them onto a straight or at least straighter path (while also doing pretty serious drugs with them). Yet there are signs that, in his final days, Lem grew increasingly embittered about the Kennedy family and what he had renounced for them. And the more I thought about Lem—about his *Remains of the Day* arc from adulation to lonely disenchantment—the more I thought he would make a great fictional memoirist. Camelot, from the inside out.

At the same time, in refracting those long-ago events through memory, Lem couldn't help seeing all the roads not taken, the choices that he and Jackie might have made and that they might, in some alternate world, still make. So *Jackie & Me* also became a meditation on contingency—the moments in every life where a particular future pivots on a single, possibly infinite point of possibility.

I see this same principle at work in my own career. For many years, I wrote Gothic mystery-thrillers like *The Pale Blue Eye*, but in recent years, to my own surprise, I've found myself pivoting toward a new genre: the courtship novel. With *Jackie & Me* and *Courting Mr. Lincoln*, the thrill has become finding something within the historical record—something that resists explanation—and plumbing it not for a solution but for the full extent of its mystery. Which ends up always being the mystery of the human heart.



## Questions for Discussion

1. Although the bulk of *Jackie & Me* takes place in the early 1950s, the story is told by Lem Billings from the vantage point of 1981. What does this perspective do for our understanding of the book and its characters?
2. What common ground do Jackie and Lem find during their initial meeting? Does the nature of their relationship change as they become better acquainted? What do they get from each other that they don't get from anyone else?
3. Lem uses quantum physics as an analogy for life's potentialities, suggesting that "embedded in every human life, there are traffic crossings, where . . . we would see the contingencies of our fate coming together and commingling, before charging off in opposed directions." What do you think of this model? Does it apply to moments in your own life?
4. Over the course of the book, Jackie moves in what were in that era seemingly opposed directions—toward career and toward matrimony. Where do you think her true heart lies? Would she make the same choices if she lived today?
5. "You don't think freedom comes free, do you?" asks Jackie. How does the theme of freedom play out through the story?

6. In her application for *Vogue* magazine's Prix de Paris, Jackie jokingly refers to her career goal as "Overall Art Director of the Twentieth Century." How close does this come to realizing her actual achievements later as First Lady and style icon?
7. Games and athletic competitions figure prominently in this story. How do they relate to the book's larger themes?
8. The first conversation between John Kennedy's father, Joseph, and Jackie takes place in a doll room. What does that setting convey about the individual characters? About the dynamic of their relationship?
9. One way or another, Lem tells us, Jack has been battling death since childhood. What does Lem mean by this? How does that color his behavior toward others? Does it affect your opinion of him?
10. Mr. Kennedy insists that Jack can only be elected to highest office if he's married. Jackie, by contrast, concludes that Jack's appeal to women voters depends on his remaining single. Who's right? Do the old political rules still apply today?
11. In a critical moment, Lem lies to Jackie about Jack's ability to remain faithful. Why? How does his decision reverberate through the story?

12. What do the wedding negotiations between the Kennedys and the Auchinclosses reveal about the families' respective places in society? Does anybody “win” or “lose”? How does the outcome reflect changes in mid-20th-century America?
13. At story's end, Lem is beginning to take down some of the Kennedy photographs on his wall. What does that signify? Has he been changed by what he remembers?
14. In the final scene, Lem and Jackie are reunited in Central Park. Is this a real-life encounter or part of some “alongside life”? Or something else entirely?
15. Does this story make you feel differently about Jackie Kennedy than you did before reading it?



# A Selected Cast of Characters

## KENNEDY

*Joseph “Joe” Kennedy, Sr.* Self-made millionaire who earned his fortune from stock manipulation, film production, liquor, and real estate. Political hopes scotched while he was U.S. ambassador to Great Britain, where he became known as a Nazi appeaser. Continued to work behind the scenes for his sons and lived to see one become president, though a 1961 stroke left him convalescent in his final years.

*Rose (Fitzgerald) Kennedy.* Joe’s wife and deeply pious daughter of John “Honey Fitz” Fitzgerald, a legendary Boston pol. Bore her husband nine children and outlived four of them. Died at 104.

*Joseph “Joe” Kennedy, Jr.* Oldest Kennedy son and political heir apparent. Died at 29 in WW2 bombing mission.

*Kathleen “Kick” Kennedy.* Second oldest Kennedy daughter. Known for her vivacious, fun-loving ways. Scandalized her mother twice, first by marrying a British Protestant marquess who was then killed in WW2, then by taking up after the war with a married British Protestant earl, with whom she was killed in a plane crash in 1948.

*Robert “Bobby” Kennedy.* Jack’s younger brother and confederate. Managed Jack’s 1952 Senate campaign and entered national spotlight as Senate counsel charged with grilling Jimmy Hoffa. Would become Jack’s attorney general,

then, after Jack's death, U.S. Senator. Assassinated in 1968 while campaigning for Democratic presidential nomination.

*Robert "Bobby" Kennedy, Jr.* Third of Bobby's and Ethel's 11 children. Inherited Lem Billings's Manhattan home. In 1983, while serving as assistant DA, was arrested and pled guilty to heroin possession. Went on to long career as environmental lawyer. In recent years, has courted controversy for anti-vaccination stances (disavowed by his siblings) and COVID-19 conspiracy theories.

#### AUCHINCLOSS

*Hugh "Hughdie" Auchincloss.* Standard Oil heir with two estates to his name: Hammersmith Farm in Rhode Island and Merrywood in Virginia, frequent gathering spot for D.C. A-listers. First wife was the Russian émigré daughter of Count Nicolas de Chrapovitsky. Second wife was mother of Gore Vidal. Third wife, Janet, would outlive him.

*Janet Lee Bouvier Auchincloss.* Daughter of a successful lawyer and real estate developer, she papered over her family's humble Irish origins with a freely invented Old South lineage extending back to Robert E. Lee. Bore two daughters with first husband "Black Jack" Bouvier and a son and daughter with Hughdie.

#### BOUVIER

*John Vernou "Black Jack" Bouvier III.* Swarthily handsome socialite, stockbroker, alcoholic, philanderer, and charmer. Reviled by his first wife, Janet, beloved of his older daughter, Jackie. Died of liver cancer at the age of 66.

*Lee Bowier.* Black Jack's younger daughter and Jackie's lifelong frenemy. Elegant and much-photographed, she divorced three husbands: publishing executive Michael Canfield, Polish aristocrat Stanislaw Radziwill (the source of her courtesy "Princess Lee" title) and director-choreographer Herbert Ross. Died in 2019.

*Big Edie and Little Edie Beale.* Black Jack's sister and niece, immortalized by the 1976 documentary, *Grey Gardens*, which showcased them in their eccentric squalor. (The Grey Gardens home was later bought and renovated by Kennedy pal Ben Bradlee and Sally Quinn.)

#### SKAKEL

*Ethel Skakel Kennedy.* Sixth of seven children of a self-made Chicago millionaire. Married Bobby Kennedy in 1950. Provided Joe Sr. and Rose with their first grandchild (Kathleen, born in 1951) and went on to have 10 more children. Became a human rights advocate after her husband's death.

*George Skakel, Jr.* Ethel's older brother, he became, upon his parents' death in a plane crash, president of Great Lakes Carbon Company. Died himself in a plane crash, at the age of 44.



# THE COCKTAILS OF JACKIE & ME



## *Sloe Gin Fizz*

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Not too different from a Tom Collins, this New Orleans blend of gin, lemon juice, and sugar, topped with soda water, was so widespread by Lem's and Jackie's day that it was even a staple of Parisian bars.

### INGREDIENTS

- 2 ounces sloe gin
- 1 ounce fresh lemon juice
- ½ ounce simple syrup
- Soda water

### DIRECTIONS

Pour sloe gin, lemon juice, and syrup into highball glass. Add ice, fill with soda water, and stir. Garnish with lemon.

## *Mint Julep*

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Totemically Southern, this mashup of bourbon, simple syrup, crushed ice, and, yes, mint had already migrated to New York by the 1830s.

### INGREDIENTS

- 4 sprigs mint
- ½ ounce simple syrup
- 2 teaspoons water
- 2 ½ ounces bourbon



#### DIRECTIONS

In silver julep cup, silver mug, or highball glass, muddle mint leaves, powdered sugar, and water. Fill glass or mug with shaved or crushed ice and add bourbon. Top with more ice and garnish with a mint sprig.

### Grasshopper

Crème de menthe, crème de cacao, and cream.  
To cut it, drink it in a roomful of Gauloises.

#### INGREDIENTS

- ¾ ounce green crème de menthe
- ¾ ounce white crème de cacao
- ¾ ounce half-and-half or cream

#### DIRECTIONS

Shake with ice and strain into chilled cocktail glass.

### Gibson

A nearly identical twin to the martini: gin and vermouth, plus maybe a splash or two of bitters.

#### INGREDIENTS

- 2 ½ ounce gin
- ½ ounce dry vermouth

#### DIRECTIONS

Stir with ice and strain into chilled cocktail glass.  
Optionally, serve with cocktail onion or bitters.

## Scorpion

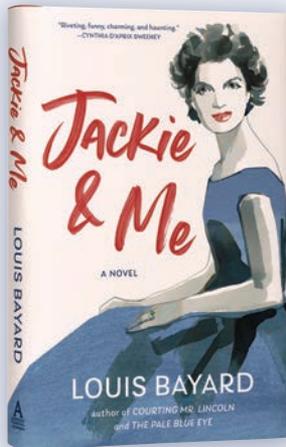
Communal drink with rum, brandy, orgeat syrup, lemon juice, and orange juice. Lem Billings would order bowlfuls of the stuff at Trader Vic's at the Plaza.

### INGREDIENTS

- 2 ounces orange juice
- 1 ½ ounce fresh lemon juice
- ½ ounce orgeat syrup
- 2 ounces white rum
- 1 ounce brandy
- 1 cup crushed ice

### DIRECTIONS

Put all ingredients in a blender and blend for 10 seconds.  
Pour into a serving glass, unstrained.



# A Jackie Bouvier Reading List

## *The Raven: A Biography of Sam Houston*

by Marquis James

This 1929 Pulitzer Prize–winner helped ensure Houston’s place in American historical lore and was still the definitive take when Jack and Jackie were courting.

## *The Voices of Silence*

by André Malraux

Part of Jackie’s Sorbonne curriculum, this set of aperçus by the famed novelist, theorist, and French Resistance hero deeply informed her ideas about art.

## *Forever Amber*

by Kathleen Winsor

A runaway bestseller in the 1940s, this bodice-ripper, featuring a heroine who sleeps her way to the top of Restoration England aristocracy, was actually banned in 14 states. Though quite tame now, it would have provided a piecemeal sex education to the teenaged girls who read it under covers with flashlights.

## *Sybil*

by Louis Auchincloss

The author, related to Jackie by marriage, was a probing chronicler of high society in the Henry James vein. After reading this novel, Jackie told him: “Oh, you’ve written my life.”

### *Emily Post's Etiquette: The Blue Book of Social Usage*

In postwar America, every well-to-do home would have had this “complete guide to good manners and good taste for the entire family.” From hosting a bridge party to laying out dessert forks to addressing the newly divorced, whatever Emily said had the force of law. (Her only rival was Amy Vanderbilt.)

### *The Second Happiest Day*

by John Phillips

The author's father, J. P. Marquand, was famed for his deft satirical takes on the New England Brahmin class, and this accomplished novel, Phillips's first and only, refreshes that template for the postwar generation. Out-of-print but worth finding.

### *Why England Slept*

by John F. Kennedy

A reworking of the author's senior thesis, this critique of Britain's response to Nazism, published at the behest of Kennedy's dad, was a 1940 bestseller. Chances are good that Jackie boned up on it.

