

## Q&A Interview with Novelist **BRYCE ZABEL**, Author of “**SURROUNDED BY ENEMIES:** What if Kennedy Survived Dallas?”



*In time for the 50th anniversary of JFK's assassination, author and Hollywood writer/producer **BRYCE ZABEL** has published a meticulously researched new novel, “Surrounded by Enemies: What if Kennedy Survived Dallas?” which depicts a Kennedy administration that never was but could have been -- with surreal scenes and shocking conclusions. No stranger to the “alternate history” genre, Zabel created NBC's Emmy Award-*

*winning “Dark Skies,” which dramatized the UFO cover-up through the perspective of the Kennedy years. He is the winner of a Writers Guild of America award for his Hallmark miniseries “Pandemic,” and has created five primetime television series. He served as the elected Chairman/CEO of the Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and he has taught producing for the USC School of Cinematic Arts. Zabel's book, “A.D. After Disclosure,” now in its fourth printing, was a Barnes & Noble “New & Noteworthy” selection.*

**Q: What's your inspiration for “Surrounded by Enemies”?**

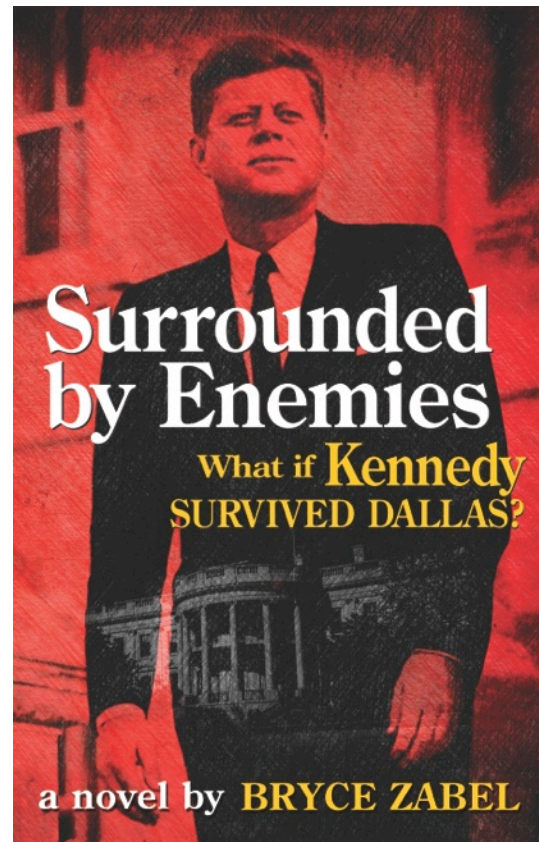
A: The idea first came to me nearly a decade ago. It seemed that the steady drip-drip of revelation about JFK's personal and sexual life that had come out over 40 years would have taken down his administration if revealed during his time in office. That early version had a working title of

“Winter of Our Discontent: The Impeachment and Trial of John F. Kennedy.” As a journalist I already had a special insight into how these potentially damning facts might have been handled by the press and, in addition, my mentor in Hollywood had actually partied with John Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Peter Lawford, Frank Sinatra, etc.

I have always been troubled, as have most Americans, by the awful feeling that John Kennedy’s impact was cut tragically short by Dallas, and I wanted to bring whatever skills I could muster to giving him a realistic but still satisfying ending to his presidency and his later life.

**Q: Why did it take so long to finish the book?**

A: Even though I’ve had the idea for a decade, it seemed that something else was always taking my time, and the 50th anniversary seemed like it was far away. Finally, when 2013 showed up, I realized that it was time to finish it or to admit that I never would. There was one other reason I held off on completing the manuscript all those years, and that was because my mentor who knew John Kennedy personally did not want me doing anything that might tarnish JFK’s image, a man he had tremendous feelings for. When my friend died last year, I felt that it was now appropriate to complete the work.



Another reason it took so long to finish the book is that writing a book like this is very hard work. It involves cramming so much information into your head that you feel it might explode, then letting it simmer for a period of time so that disparate facts and characters begin to assert themselves into a coherent story, and then actually sitting down and writing it. And re-writing it. And editing it. And formatting it. I’m not asking for sympathy, because it was all fun, it just wasn’t all fast.

This is actually my second major foray into an alternative interpretation of the Kennedy presidency. So there was also a concern that maybe I should leave well enough alone and move on to re-writing somebody else's history.

**Q: You do seem to be drawn to fictionalizing the Kennedy presidency. Why is that?**

A: The first time I took on the JFK legacy was NBC's Emmy-winning "Dark Skies" that I co-created with Brent Friedman, where we told the story of the UFO cover-up in the 1960s through the Kennedy presidency and beyond. In the pilot episode, JFK was assassinated because he was going to tell the truth about UFOs in his second term, and Robert Kennedy was a continuing character in the series. I'm drawn to it because of its inherent drama and because my creative life has coincided with the time when it's become acceptable to fictionalize Kennedy.

Both of my takes on John Kennedy have a great deal of credibility. There is some actual evidence that JFK knew more than he was telling about UFOs, and it is absolutely fair conjecture to talk about how difficult his second term would have been if he'd survived Dallas.

**Q: Several authors have found inspiration in the idea of Pres. Kennedy avoiding assassination. How does your approach in "Surrounded by Enemies" differ from theirs?**

A: I've elected to take a very different bite of the apple.

The Goliath to my David here is obviously Stephen King. His novel "11/22/63" is a time-travel story and spends 99% of its massive page count in the pre-assassination world with his protagonist trying to save John Kennedy's life, and only a few pages on what might happen if Kennedy had actually lived. I spend zero time in the sci-fi world of trying to save JFK, and 100% of my words deal with the alternative history of what might have happened if he'd survived Dallas. His approach is serious sci-fi, while mine is heavily political and journalistic. Stephen King's a genius, but he is telling an incredibly different story than I am, that's all. My intention is to shock readers without resorting to sci-fi gimmicks.

The other entrant in this field is political reporter Jeff Greenfield, who I also have great respect for. His book, "If Kennedy Lived," isn't out yet so I'm unable to comment specifically. But Jeff has stated that his book will be "agnostic" on the issue of a conspiracy, which seems to me will lead to a more conventional and less controversial story than I'm going for with "Surrounded by Enemies." Jeff is a more establishment guy, with ties to the Kennedys. I think he probably will play it a little safer than I have.

Bottom line: I am not telling a sci-fi time travel, nor am I telling a story that is agnostic on a conspiracy and will necessarily please the Kennedy family. Those are the differences, but I'll let readers judge for themselves.

**Q: In their quest for revenge, who exactly are these enemies that JFK and his attorney-general brother, Robert Kennedy, confront?**

A: Ha! Well, that's the subject of the book, isn't it? So, nope, I'm not saying "exactly" who these enemies are, but I can name some suspects. The Kennedy brothers had already had run-ins with the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the CIA, J. Edgar Hoover and his FBI, Castro, Khrushchev, Cubans of every political persuasion, the Mafia, and even some of the jilted lovers of women Kennedy had made love to. Oh, and LBJ. As JFK says in the book to Bobby, "It might be easier to make a list of all the people who *didn't* want to see me dead."

**Q: In your scenario, the aftermath of Dallas is not exactly the rose-colored Sixties that so many dreamed could have happened without JFK's assassination. In fact, Kennedy's response to his assassination attempt produces a full-blown Constitutional crisis. What in your research led you to believe this would have been a plausible outcome?**

A: Partly it's research and partly it's just plain logic. My assumption for "Surrounded by Enemies" was simply that JFK survived an assassination attempt. That means that he woke up in the White House on November 23rd, 1963 knowing that the day before somebody had tried to execute him in broad daylight on a public street before a global television audience. So life would not have pinged back to normal: not for the Kennedy administration and not for whatever forces were out there that tried to murder the President.

This means there would still have been investigations but they would not have been colored by respect and grieving for a martyred President. Instead the President would have been right in the thick of them, and they would be taking place in the run-up to a national presidential election. It's really no huge leap to say that a man like John Kennedy who had some secrets would have found himself in a political fight for survival even after surviving an actual physical threat such as happened on the streets of Dallas.

As for research, well, there were plenty of things that were changed when Kennedy died. Investigations into LBJ, even newspaper investigations of women of notorious reputation that the President had bedded, and so on. They wouldn't have stopped if JFK survived, they would have intensified.

**Q: What were your favorite parts to write?**

A: I could cop out and just talk about how writing about John Kennedy meeting the Beatles on the "Ed Sullivan Show" was the highlight, and it was fun, for sure. And I sure did get a kick out of writing a Lenny Bruce stand-up routine about JFK's women. But I think the greatest dramatic challenge as a storyteller was the chapter that takes place in 1965 after John Kennedy is re-elected to a second term. It's at that time that the men who were behind the assassination attempt decided that if they couldn't end the Kennedy presidency with rifle bullets they could still assassinate his character, mostly because he had painted the target for that on himself. It's a profound and sad chapter but, to me, it feels very, very real.

**Q: What were the most difficult scenes to create?**

A: It was hard to write about John Kennedy having to fight for his political survival. I was just a very little kid when he was President, but I loved the man, his style, his vision, the way he made America, or at least a majority of Americans, feel about themselves. I would have liked to have written that safe and sanitized version, but it didn't seem real or responsible to do it. So I did what writers do when it gets tough. I kept on writing and I wrote through it.

**Q: You've used the conceit of having the book told from the perspective of a fictitious newsmagazine, *Top Story*, that played an instrumental role in JFK's downfall. Why?**

A: I might have used *Time* or *Newsweek*, but that would have been a nightmare, and they would never have given me permission. So I made up my own magazine. After all, I'm telling a story that takes place in an alternate universe, right? The point of it, however, was that I have always collected weekly newsmagazines and, in particular, I have a near complete collection from the 1960s. I call them "Instant History," and I wanted to use that perspective as a literary framing device. It gave me one other huge benefit, namely it allowed me to commission five spectacular faux newsmagazine covers from the alternative timeline from graphic artist Lynda Karr. They're all in the book and, particularly in the eBook, you can click on them and see them in full-screen high resolution and they will just blow your mind.

**Q: Why is that?**

A: Because they tell the story in the text in a different way, and they do it by proving that a picture truly can be worth a thousand words. Imagine these covers: "Ambush in Dallas" about JFK actually living through the attack; the beginning of the 1964 election with the jarring image of JFK welcoming the Beatles to America on the "Ed Sullivan Show"; the publication of the revelations of JFK's secret life; the impeachment and trial of John Kennedy; and his post-presidential life in an issue featuring Kennedy, Nixon and Neil Armstrong together in 1969. They are each beautifully rendered and aged to look like they were put away in a desk drawer by a collector, found during an estate sale fifty years later and scanned for use in our book. They have to be seen, close up, to be truly appreciated.

**Q: What attracts you to the alternative-history genre? If you go down this path again, what other historic events would you be tempted to tackle?**

A: My father was a high school history teacher and I guess history is in my DNA. I can't say that he would be 100% comfortable with re-writing history, particularly given the fact that high school students are at an all-time low for understanding actual historical events, so doing what I'm doing may only spread confusion. But I think what alternate history does best, when it's really working, is it shines light on the actual history, like a reversed mirror image. I love doing it.

This novel -- "Surrounded by Enemies" -- starts a line of books for me that I'm calling Alt.Worlds. The next one will be "Across the (Other) Universe: What if the Beatles Stayed Together?" and should come out in 2014. The year after that I've got "In the Shadow of the Saucers: What if Truman Disclosed Roswell?" After these three books, having done alt histories of JFK, the Beatles and Roswell, I think I might take a breather. But if they catch on as I hope they do, then I'm sure I'll find another one to follow-up with.

**Q: Are you concerned about what the Kennedy family might think of your book?**

A: The family has suffered plenty and if I thought I was piling on in a significant way, it might bother me. But when I think about the 500 or 5000 other books written about John Kennedy and Robert Kennedy, I figure that the family must be rather immune to any overreaction. I would hope that they understand that the fact that Abraham Lincoln was seen as flawed and human made him no less great as a President and that the same can easily be said about John Kennedy.

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*"Surrounded by Enemies: What if Kennedy Survived Dallas?" by Bryce Zabel is available as a Publish Green eBook through Amazon, iBook, Nook and other sellers; as a Mill City Press trade paperback; and as an Audible.com audiobook narrated by Edd Hall ("The Tonight Show").*

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