

MEDIA

# BORROWED HISTORY

As Hollywood turns real events and lives into prestige drama, one Kennedy asks what's owed when fame, tragedy and legacy are treated as raw material

BY  
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**T**HE GUY KNOWS NOTHING ABOUT WHAT HE'S TALKING about," Jack Schlossberg told CBS News' *Sunday Morning* of Ryan Murphy, the executive producer of FX's *Love Story*, "and he's making a ton of money on a grotesque display of someone else's life." Schlossberg, the nephew of JFK Jr., described the series—based on his uncle's relationship with Carolyn Bessette and their deaths—as "fiction with a capital F."

Schlossberg is not alone in his assessment. As *Love Story* has become one of FX's most-watched series, questions about who bears the cost of dramatizing real lives have followed it. In a *New York Times* essay published early March, actress Daryl Hannah—portrayed in the series—criticized it for depicting behavior she disputes, warning that audiences often absorb such portrayals as fact.

Schlossberg also showed concern for what had been done with its proceeds. He said he hoped Murphy would donate some of the profits to the JFK Library. "But he's not," he added. "He's making money." Schlossberg does not appear to be calling for the project to be shut down, nor does he frame the show as defamatory. Instead, he is asking what obligations, if any, accompany the conversion of another family's legacy into a commercial asset—who benefits, and what, if anything, is owed in return.

It's not the first time Schlossberg has called Murphy out about the project. When he suggested on Instagram last year that Murphy donate profits to the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum, Murphy replied, "I absolutely will." *Newsweek* could not verify if a donation had been made.

*Newsweek* reached out to Murphy and Schlossberg via email for comment.

Murphy has built one of the most successful careers in television on a single repeatable formula: identify a shocking story involving recognizable names and transform it into prestige

content—*American Crime Story*, *Feud*, *Dahmer–Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, *Monsters: The Lyle and Erik Menendez Story*. There is a structural logic to this that goes beyond Murphy's personal appetite for true crime. Streaming platforms are under constant pressure to green-light content that arrives pre-sold—stories where audiences already know the characters and don't need to be introduced to the stakes, a logic intensified in an entertainment economy dominated by franchises and repetition.

Superhero films, endless sequels and reboots—*Toy Story* and *Frozen* are now effectively permanent properties—are easier to green-light because audiences arrive already oriented. The characters are well-known; the emotional shorthand is already built in. Prestige television follows the same rule. Shows centered on famous families and dynasties tap into an existing appetite for inherited wealth, power and dysfunction.

The success of Netflix's *The Crown* demonstrated how effectively a real, recognizable lineage can be repackaged as serialized



FACE VALUE  
Sarah Pidgeon as Carolyn Bessette and Paul Anthony Kelly as JFK Jr. in *Love Story*.

drama, with no need to explain why viewers should care. Familiarity is the asset and lineage is the hook. Murphy, who defended *Love Story* on Gavin Newsom's podcast as "a love story," not "a takedown," last year, is doing nothing new. The Kennedy family has long been the subject of dramatization, from Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991) to Pablo Larraín's *Jackie* (2016), which earned Natalie Portman an Oscar nomination and grossed almost \$30 million worldwide. There is a proven appetite for these stories.

## Unlicensed Lives

In this environment, real families begin to function like intellectual property. The Kennedy name carries the same brand awareness as a superhero franchise; *Love Story* needed no trailer explaining who these people were, any more than a new Marvel film needs to establish Spider-Man. The Crown did not require a primer on the Windsors. In an era of endless sequels and franchise installments, the appeal of known quantities is overwhelming. Under U.S. law,

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courts generally balance privacy and publicity rights (which vary by state and do not always survive death) against the First Amendment protections afforded to expressive works. In practice, creatively dramatized films and television series about public figures are often afforded a high degree of protection.

"Ryan Murphy doesn't have to pay anyone. Under the First Amendment, he is allowed to tell the story the way he wants to," attorney Ashima Dayal, a partner at Davis+Gilbert LLP, told *Newsweek*. "Any false statements Schlossberg is complaining about, about John Kennedy Jr. and Carolyn Bessette Kennedy, those claims died with those two individuals."

Courts have also held that viewers generally understand docu-series are not documentaries, and that some fictionalization is expected. "This idea that anyone owes anybody anything for telling that other person's story—there's no legal basis for that," Dayal added. "Maybe out of decency he should make a contribution, but that's a private matter. There's zero legal obligation."

What makes the Kennedy case particularly acute is that the asset being extracted is not merely a story but an active political legacy. The Kennedy name still carries measurable value: it shapes elections, animates fundraising and confers legitimacy.

That value is being drawn on from every direction. Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has traded on the family name to advance his political positions. President Donald Trump has folded JFK iconography into his politics, pursued what Schlossberg described as a politically motivated reinvestigation of the assassination, dismantled programs tied to the Kennedy legacy and rebranded the Kennedy Center's flagship honors. Murphy, meanwhile, has embedded his own dramatized version of JFK Jr. and Carolyn Bessette into the cultural mainstream—a version the family had no hand in shaping.

"There's a lot of misinformation now and iconography being used about the Kennedy family, my family," Schlossberg said, "at a time when we really can't afford to confuse people."

At a moment when the Kennedy legacy is being reinterpreted and commodified, it's notable that only one political heir remains—Schlossberg, 33, son of Caroline Kennedy, now running for Congress in New York's 12th District. He's watching it unfold in real time, with both the platform and the personal stake to speak out.

As he navigates the weight of his family's inheritance, Schlossberg is questioning how that legacy is being used. His concern appears not to be with telling the Kennedy story, but with how it is converted into profit—often without acknowledgment that something is being taken. His argument reflects a broader reckoning the entertainment industry faces as it industrializes real lives. The question of who owns a family's public identity and what's owed when others profit from it, isn't going away. The Kennedys are simply the most current example of a growing dilemma. **N**

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