Eunice Kennedy Shriver poses with her husband, Sargent Shriver, at the Third Special Olympics European Games in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1990. (CNS/Courtesy of Special Olympics)

by Tom Deignan

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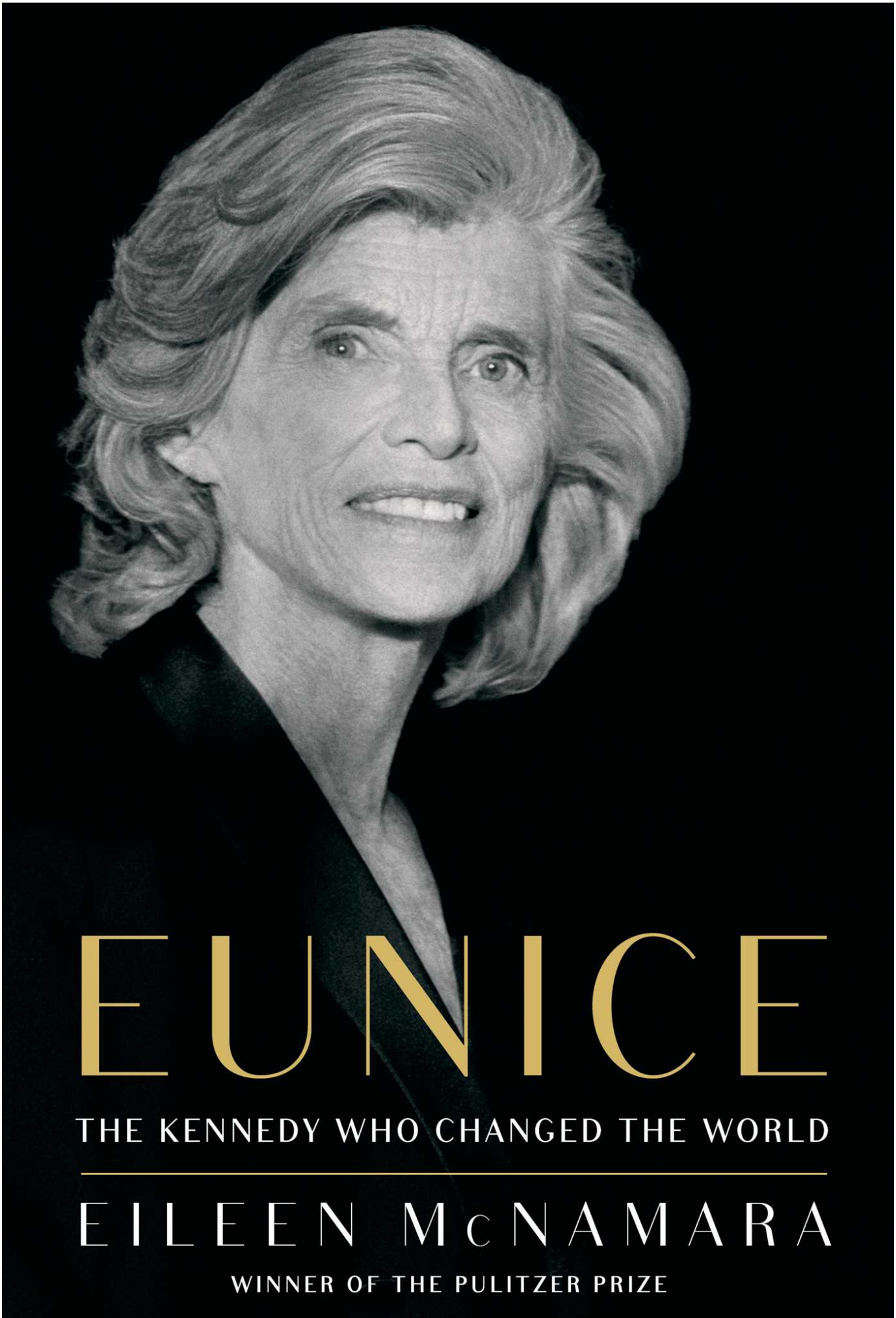


EUNICE

THE KENNEDY WHO CHANGED THE WORLD

EILEEN McNAMARA

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

EUNICE: THE KENNEDY WHO CHANGED THE WORLD
Eileen McNamara
416 pages; Published by Simon & Schuster
$28.00

A recent New York Post feature chronicled a hot new trend in which women "living in the age of female empowerment" are the ones popping the marriage question to their boyfriends.

In this, and plenty more, Eunice Kennedy seemed to be ahead of her time.

Way back in January 1953, Eunice, the middle child of Joe and Rose Kennedy's nine children, attended Mass with longtime family friend Sargent Shriver.

After Mass, as described in Eileen McNamara's illuminating new biography, Kennedy and Shriver approached a side altar and "said a prayer," before Kennedy turned and said: "Sargent Shriver, I think I'd like to marry you."

On the surface, the story is pure Eunice — eccentric, brash, dismissive of convention.

But this marriage proposal was also the product of years of planning by powerful men. Joe Kennedy, for example, schemed to get his pious daughter hitched, fearing Eunice might become a nun and hurt the Kennedy boys' political prospects at a time of lingering anti-Catholicism.

Eunice Kennedy's "struggles to be seen — on the public stage and in her own family — mirrors the experience of so many ambitious women in mid-20th century America who had to maneuver around the rigid gender roles that defined the era," writes McNamara, the longtime Boston Globe columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner, who now directs the journalism program at Brandeis University.

Despite these public and private challenges, McNamara makes the provocative claim that "it was Eunice who left behind the Kennedy family's most profound and lasting legacy."

Inspired by her younger sister, Rosemary — whose developmental disabilities profoundly worsened following a prefrontal lobotomy performed at Joe Kennedy's request — Eunice "advance[d] one of the great civil rights movements, on behalf of

millions of people across the world with intellectual disabilities."

From an early age she was "Puny Eunie." Yet, she "excell[ed] at the sports and parlor games that dominated the siblings' interactions."

Aside from being fiercely competitive, Eunice also had a special bond with Rosemary, and was devoutly religious.

While attending Manhattanville College, Kennedy "participated for the first time in the direct social action that would inform her Catholicism and transform her life."

Any biography of a Kennedy child must balance the subject with the rest of this colorful family. McNamara does so admirably, though some readers may want to hear more about Joe Kennedy's flameout as ambassador in London, or Kick's scandalous marriage to a Protestant, or Joe Jr.'s tragic death.

McNamara chooses not to linger on family gossip or scandals, but this is no fawning biography.

"Rose's paralyzing grief at Kick's decision to marry a non-Catholic made one wonder what she imagined became of the souls of philandering spouses and skirt-chasing sons," McNamara writes, in one of several more acidic moments.

Though Kennedy could be "spoiled, and heedless of the social conventions that governed the lives of the less entitled," McNamara also outlines Kennedy's tireless, admirable labors.

After working on juvenile delinquency and other youth issues at the Justice Department, Kennedy immersed herself in life at a West Virginia women's prison, all the while still "seriously contemplating religious life."

By the time she'd married Sargent Shriver, Eunice Kennedy Shriver had learned "what feminists would spend the next two decades preaching: that the personal is the political."

Her experiences with Rosemary — and her brother's election to the Senate, and then the White House — spurred Shriver to turn "mental retardation" (such terms reflect

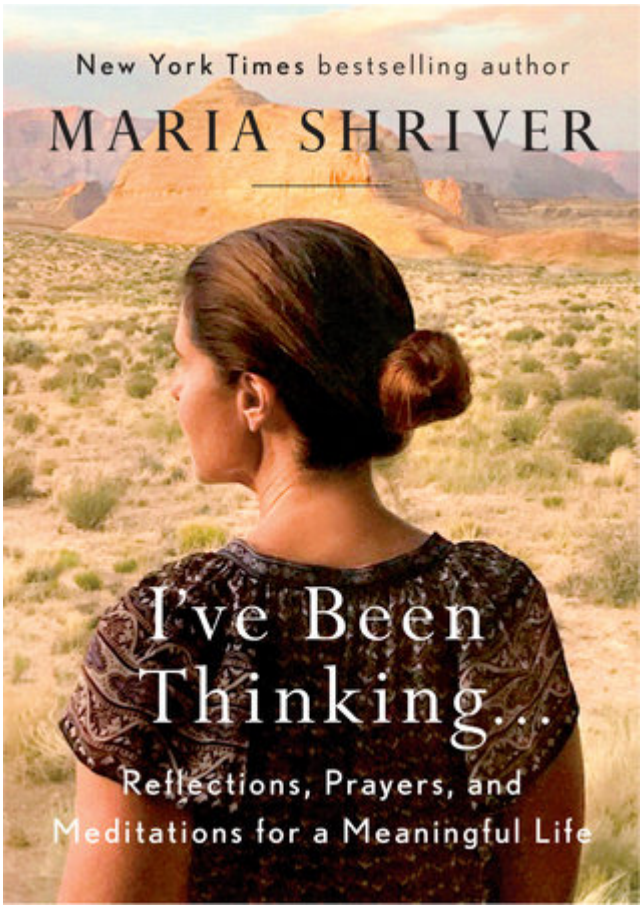
"common usage … during the historical period described," McNamara notes) into a national issue.

By 1968, Shriver (along with activists in Chicago) had organized what would come to be known as the Special Olympics, which, annually, feature nearly 5 million participants from over 170 countries.

Driven as Shriver was by her faith, a conflict looms as the '60s turn to the '70s: abortion.

"For Eunice, abortion represented an existential threat to the mentally retarded," writes McNamara, whose own views diverge from her subject's. Yet McNamara handles this issue fairly, noting that many on the left were also opposed to abortion in the early '70s. McNamara illustrates the shallowness of the current pro-choice/pro-life divide by quoting Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister: "Your morality is deeply lacking if all you want is a child born but not a child fed."

Overall, McNamara captures the contradictions and complexities of this ambitious, accomplished, absurdly privileged woman. McNamara dubs Shriver an "ambivalent" and "maternal" feminist, who opened her own home to former prisoners, yet could be cruel to subordinates and profoundly closed-off with her own children.



I'VE BEEN THINKING ...: REFLECTIONS, PRAYERS, AND MEDITATIONS FOR A MEANINGFUL LIFE
Maria Shriver
209 pages; Published by Pamela Dorman Books/Viking
$20.00

Kennedy Shriver's daughter, Maria Shriver, told McNamara there was "something 'obsessive in the family about not talking about things.' " Maria Shriver adds that she "wanted to be a different kind of mother ... I wanted to know each of my children intimately because I wanted to know my mother intimately."

This is clearly reflected in Maria Shriver's latest book, a collection of "reflections, prayers, and meditations." There are sound, inspiring, wondrous words here from the diverse likes of Carl Jung, Ann Landers and — fittingly — Joan Chittister.

This type of book is not for everyone. But, overall, Maria Shriver's tone is deeply empathetic and her enthusiasm for religion quite refreshing.

Shriver alludes to her famous family (the Kennedys as well as her four children with Arnold Schwarzenegger), though the only explicit references to gossip note how

shallow and damaging it can be.

Perhaps most revealing are Shriver's (indirect) explorations of how she managed to become a "different kind of mother."

She writes, "I grew up in a family that experienced lots of tragedy and loss, but no one ever discussed it," later adding, "There must be a better way."

Ironically, Shriver's "better way" of mothering may well have been deeply influenced by her father, whom she quotes as saying: "You have to go internal if you want to go eternal."

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, of course, would probably have disagreed.

[Tom Deignan served as a contributing writer for the new book *Nine Irish Lives: The Fighters, Thinkers, and Artists Who Helped Build America* (Algonquin), and has written about books for The New York Times and The Washington Post.]

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