

## Mama Oswald

A MOTHER IN HISTORY. By Jean Stafford. 121 pages. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$3.95.

Marguerite Oswald's voice is flexible and histrionic, and she uses it like a bludgeon, syllable after syllable thudding like blows upon the listener's ear. Her pudgy face is folded into iron wrinkles and her tubular frame is neatly packed into chic little suits.

"She is not a woman we have not encountered before. She's the woman who treads on your foot in the bus and turns to berate you for it," sighs Jean Stafford, who can now be a little calmer about her encounter with the mother of the man who assassinated President Kennedy. But nine months ago when Miss Stafford went to Fort Worth, Texas, to interview her, impelled by "an enormous curiosity to see what had produced Lee Harvey Oswald," the experience was nerve-shattering.

The result of those interviews, a thin little book with big type, stands as a masterpiece of character study and a gem of personal journalism.

**Mercenary:** Mrs. Oswald emerges as a woman almost too terrifying to believe, a woman whose first act upon hearing of her son's involvement with the assassination was to call the local newspaper, a woman who will not sign an autograph without being paid and who for periods of time has not known the addresses of her children. She is a woman totally without friends, so errantly mercenary that she honestly cannot understand why, as the mother of the murderer of the President, she should have to worry about money.

In a very real sense, the assassination



Carl Fischer

Mrs. Oswald: Journey into fantasy

crepancies. In a way, it is a kind of grotesquely heroic quest, for what she is really chasing and trying to explain is her own past.

But the quest, begun in an event all too real, has now escaped past unreality into fantasy. Here she is rambling about her son's Russian wife and other matters: "Marina, as I have said, seems French to me . . . When she went to New Orleans, she did not want to live in an apartment with high ceilings. Now where does she know about high ceilings? There may be a simple answer for this and all the other things, but I don't have it and I want it. And she complained about the cockroaches . . ." "I was fired [from a job held during the war] right on the spot! When I think about all these things that have happened, and there must be a simple explanation for them. It is my job to find that explanation." "He was in the Philippines, he was in Corregidor, he was in Formosa, he was in Japan, so he's been

all over besides Russia. That boy was being trained [as an agent]."

Strangely, "A Mother in History" is a very funny book. One might expect competent comedy from a New Yorker writer who is the widow of A.J. Liebling, but hardly on such a subject. Yet, as Mrs. Oswald talks on and on, her house, her habits and the furniture of her mind become incredible, then grotesque. Finally, as Texas erupts into a "Wild West" rainstorm, as Mrs. Oswald calls it, she herself erupts into a whirlwind of mementos, documents and evidence, and Miss Stafford erupts into laughter that skirts the edge of tears. Humor that is the only alternative to hysteria, comedy that is aware of its genesis in tragedy.

**Pitiable:** "After a while I began to feel that I was being affected by her," Miss Stafford says now. "I had to get away or I might have continued the Texas tradition and killed her. Her situation is utterly pitiable, but there were only two split seconds when I felt any pity at all for her—and I am generally a patsy."

The national reaction to the assassination has faded somewhat now. It is not quite so painful to reread the memorial issues of Life or to open the blue cover of the Warren report. Still, the reaction of McCall's readers to the parts of Miss Stafford's book that appeared there is hard to explain. "It was terrifying," she recalls, "99 per cent denunciatory. And

saved Mrs. Oswald. What happened on Nov. 22, 1963, inspired a deep personal grief and horror in almost every American, but in a few people it touched off a kind of fascination that fed on perpetuating the event. Mrs. Oswald herself was one of these. Her drab, automaton's life stopped dead, and when she took it up again it had a direction and a purpose. She didn't think her son had shot the President, ergo, he hadn't shot the President; or if he had, it was because—and here Mrs. Oswald has evolved a theory so outrageous that the reader can only gasp—Kennedy was dying anyway and Lee had been hired as a mercy killer.

To vindicate her son, she has dedicated herself to chasing down rumors, collecting "documents," examining dis-

a great many of the ladies who wrote in to cancel their subscriptions took the line that I had no right to make fun of a poor widow."

Even more decried "the cheap sensationalism" of the piece. Yet Marguerite Oswald is a legitimate object for this kind of character analysis. In her own deadly way, she greatly influenced an event that shifted the course of American history. *END*