

CONTRIVERSIES: *about the book*
The Best Kennedy Book?

Of all the books prompted by the assassination of John F. Kennedy, only one carries the Kennedy family imprimatur: William Manchester's forthcoming "The Death of a President." From the start, the book has been the subject of the most intense curiosity. And last week, the rumor mills bubbled over with gossip that the Kennedy clan had begun acting like Manchester's guardian angel, selling author and publishers to vet the manuscript for sensitive material.

The trade winds blew so briskly in fact that Look magazine, which is paying more than \$500,000 to serialize "The Death of a President" next year, sched-

uled a full-page ad in The New York Times this week. The ad will reprint Manchester's foreword to "The Death of a President," describing how the book was done and the freedom he had on the project.

Even so, it was an open secret that the Manchester book was having a rocky road to publication. (Author Manchester, himself a tweedy, 44-year-old, ex-newspaperman and author of a 1962 JFK biography, was hospitalized with fatigue last spring.) Indeed, one Look editor conceded that the whole question was still "up in the air" last week and that the decision to go ahead with the serialization was not made until Friday.

'Strong': "The kind of material in it doesn't usually find its way into print," said a Look executive. "This is the best of the Kennedy books. It's extraordinarily strong. The President is going to have to read it and I don't think he's going to like it."

Actually, the Kennedy family's concern centered not on the substance of the book but on the serialization. Mrs. Jacqueline Kennedy was fearful that Look's original scheme to condense the book in seven installments would subject her children and herself to an unduly prolonged spate of newspaper stories about the book's revelations. ("There are 200 page-one stories in it," says one insider who has read the manuscript.) The Kennedys would probably have preferred no serialization at all, but under the plan finally worked out, Look will carry the book in four installments, starting in January.

"The Death of a President" focuses on the shift of power triggered by the

assassination. And, wrenched out of its full, 350,000-word context, much of the drama of Manchester's story might be open to misinterpretation. Prepublication readers say it details the evidence of human fallibility, the momentary flare-ups and lasting misunderstandings inevitably generated when powerful public figures struggle to cope with momentous tragedy.

Brief Encounter: There is, for one, the scene in which Mrs. Kennedy, her hair and clothing matted with blood-wandred into Air Force One's bedroom cabin, seeking a place to rest before the flight back to Washington from Dallas. In the cabin, she found Lyndon Johnson on the telephone with a Dallas lawyer seeking guidance about the Presidential oath he would shortly take. LBJ immediately stood up and left the cabin to Mrs. Kennedy, returning shortly with Lady Bird to console her and suggest, in many members of the Kennedy party were later to say, that she might want to change her clothing.

Another vignette involves the Kennedy family Bible used by Judge Sarah Hughes to administer the oath to the

new President. After the ceremony, Judge Hughes handed the book to a stranger she presumed to be a Secret Service agent. He wasn't, and the Kennedys have yet to trace the Bible.

A third fascinating historical sidelight concerns the last Washington talk between JFK and his Vice President. It was, according to the book, an argument. The President didn't want to make the trip (whose purpose was to patch a Democratic feud in LBJ's home state) and complained that the Vice President's political clout should be sufficient to settle the rift. Mr. Johnson is said to have replied that his influence had waned since taking over the Vice Presidency and that the trip was vital.

Beyond that, the book (to be published by Harper & Row) contains other never-before-told stories. Among them: the text of a letter, written in longhand by Jacqueline Kennedy on her last night in the White House, to Nikita Khrushchev, expressing, as a mother of two children, her hopes for peace.

Manchester spent two years on the book, assembling 45 volumes of transcribed, tape-recorded interviews (ten hours with Mrs. Kennedy alone) and documents. He went to extraordinary lengths to establish his editorial independence of the family. He has a letter from Robert Kennedy pledging not to read the manuscript before publication and guaranteeing no family interference with its contents. He did submit the manuscript to a panel of five ex-New Frontiersmen (headed by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. and including no Kennedys) and blue-penciled most portions they objected to on the basis of propriety or violation of the national interest and some that had "an anti-LBJ bias." "Bill and LBJ have never been on the same wave length," admits one dopest.

Amidst all the literary and political hubbub last week, one thing was undeniable: the well-publicized flap wouldn't hurt the sales of "The Death of a President" one whit. (So far, it has 210,000 copies sold.)