

Big Bid Reported for Book on Kennedy

By HOMER BIGART

Look magazine is reported to have agreed to pay \$650,000 for first serial rights to "The Death of a President," William Manchester's account of the assassination of President Kennedy. The book project was authorized and assisted by the Kennedy family.

The price is believed to be the largest ever offered for first serial rights, that is, the right to reproduce a book or portions of it in other publications.

For a reason so singular as to be perhaps without precedent in literary sales, the signing of the contract has been delayed and the check is still unwritten. The reason is that both Mr. Manchester, who has never made a great deal of money out of his writing, and his publisher, Harper & Row, are somewhat appalled at the prospect of making a "commercial bonanza" out of a project they regard as a trust.

Author and publisher are casting about for some revision of the original agreement they made with the Kennedy family so that more of the proceeds would be donated to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston and less would be allotted to themselves.

Under the agreement, all profits after the first printing would go to the library. Author and publisher would receive from the first printing "a moderate return on investment." Any book club or paperback royalties would be split, the library getting half and author and publisher a quarter each.

There was apparently no decision on how to dispose of the serial rights income. First serial rights income normally goes to

the author, according to Evans Thomas, vice president of Harper & Row, who served as editor of President Kennedy's "Profiles in Courage". Mr. Thomas was present with Mr. Manchester when the President's brother, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, then Attorney General, discussed the book project early in 1964.

Of several authors who wanted to write the authoritative story of the assassination, Mrs. John F. Kennedy chose Mr. Manchester. She recalled that President Kennedy had expressed admiration for Mr. Manchester's "Portrait of a President," a biography of her husband. Harper & Row was selected because it had published Mr. Kennedy's books.

Reached at Belgrade Lakes, Me., where he is vacationing with his family, Mr. Manchester said he had never entertained the notion that he would make much money from the book.

"I felt I was in a position of special trust," he said. "I wanted to make a generous contribution to the library. The last thing in my mind was money. I had no idea it would be anything like this."

"Maybe it sounds naive," said Mr. Manchester, explaining that he was "strictly a sandlot ball player" as far as making big money as a writer is concerned.

He said that he had 10 hours of taped recollections of the tragedy from Mrs. Kennedy and that President Johnson had supplied written replies to questions.

The author heard over 1,000 interviews, including one with former President Eisenhower, who said he wished that the same investigation had been ar-

ried after Lincoln's assassination.

Only one person, Marina Oswald, wife of the assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, refused to cooperate.

Mr. Manchester, while reluctant to disclose the results of his research prior to publication, said he agreed with the finding of the Warren Commission that Oswald was the lone assassin.

He said he hoped the book would put at rest the "dangerous myth" that a leadership vacuum exists from the moment a President is assassinated to the moment the Vice President is sworn in to succeed him. Actually the oath taken by the Vice President on inauguration day is still valid and sufficient for the transfer of power, Mr. Manchester maintains.

The myth is so persistent that Mr. Johnson telephoned from Dallas after the assassination to seek advice from Robert Kennedy on when he should be sworn, the book will disclose. Mr. Johnson had no choice but to put the question to the then-Attorney General, the author concludes.

His previous books, all well received by critics but never in the best-seller category, included, besides the Kennedy book, biographies of H. L. Mencken and the Rockefeller family and four novels.

"Bill Manchester deserves \$5-million," Mr. Thomas said. He said Mr. Manchester had given "two years of his life" to intensive research on the assassination and on the circumstances of the shift of power to President Johnson.

No member of the Kennedy family has seen a word of the book.