
Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald

by Edward Jay Epstein

(Reader's Digest Press; \$12.95)

Marina and Lee

by Priscilla Johnson McMillan

(Harper & Row; \$15)

Lee Harvey Oswald may be one of the more magnetic men of our time, if the ever-growing body of superstition surrounding his brief and blighted existence is any report. Two more books can now be added to the Oswald literature. Designed for radically different purposes, the one is as mysterious as the other is lucid.

Financed by the Reader's Digest Press and released in the supermarkets last month, Edward Jay Epstein's *Legend* is an investigative squint at the CIA, packaged in a fanciful account of Oswald's career as a KGB puppet. Epstein won his stars in 1966 with *Inquest*, a rigorous scrutiny of the Warren Report, posing pertinent questions of the Warren Commission's cursory work. At the time Epstein was more interested in the nature of committedness than in assassination plots per se, but this distinction was lost on conspiracy theorists who have been using Epstein's ammunition ever since. Having provided such grounds for doubt, Epstein now agrees that there was only one gunman at the scene of the crime and that that gunman was Oswald. Like the Warren Report itself, Epstein's new book attempts no psychology and proposes no motive. Instead it creates a vague illusion that Oswald was on mission from Moscow, without troubling to explain what interest the Soviet Union could have had in wishing to see Kennedy dead.

Studded with references to beautiful, often nameless, foreign agents,

speculative footnotes and slight allegations, *Legend* stakes its hypothesis on a single disclosure. In 1964 a KGB officer defected to the US, offering information about Oswald in exchange

for asylum. After three years of interrogation, the CIA buried the case, unable to disprove the claim that Oswald entered and left the Soviet Union on his own initiative and that the KGB considered him unemployable. To this day the defector hasn't recanted, yet Epstein insists he is a KGB plant, sent to the CIA with a cover story or "legend" exculpating the Soviets from Oswald's affairs. He spends a quarter of his book exposing the CIA's contortions over the case and detailing minor inconsistencies in the defector's report and the remainder of his script heaping as much doubt on Oswald's identity as the known facts of his life will support.

Skeptics are empiricists, and so Epstein submits Oswald's diary to a handwriting analysis (an obscure science he doesn't deign to discuss) and reports that Oswald's misspellings prove he was taking dictation. Thus attributed to KGB programming, Oswald's personality poses no more problems to Epstein as a writer. Oswald marches through *Legend* like a wind-up toy: his hair turns crinkly, his eyes go dead, his peregrinations make increasingly less sense. Epstein ascribes psychological impossibilities to both the



Lee and Marina in a Dallas bus station photo booth (1962)

Courtesy of Harper & Row

assassin and his wife, associating Oswald with endless women and giving Marina the mind of a political theorist. The author does not ask himself where Oswald came from or how he survived, but ferrets about in the more exotic chapters of his life. Epstein travelled to Japan and California, collecting a wad of unanalyzed impressions from Oswald's army buddies. He did not go to the Soviet Union but paints Oswald's life there as important and glamorous. In 1977 one of the more unstable members of the White Russian community that tried to befriend the Oswalds in Dallas shot himself in the course of a four day interview with Epstein—yet another clue the author boasts but dares not interpret. *Legend*, which purports to tell secrets about Oswald, tells us only that Epstein has authored a highly marketable parody: a spy yarn cloaked as investigative reporting, an anti-Soviet slur, and a dulling, disingenuous thriller about an implausible robot. However Epstein does provide evidence of what a more conscientious writer has in mind when she despairs over her colleagues.

Priscilla McMillan does not think Oswald took dictation. She suggests he couldn't spell because he was dyslexic. McMillan is the author of *Marina and Lee*, a careful portrait of Oswald's marriage, exploring the forbidden question as to why Oswald shot Kennedy. Thirteen years in the writing, McMillan's book probes the pathology of a solo-artist minutely and frankly—too frankly, it seems. When McMillan's publishers sent her on tour this fall, she provoked an outrage in the media with remarks like "There's a bit of Lee Oswald in all of us." Television audiences phoned in, calling her a liar, and the book trade put out word that her 13 year opus was not to be trusted. As a result, McMillan is an unread author with a national reputation as a government agent paid to dupe the American public.

McMillan is a scholar and should have stayed off television. Interviewed at home, she notes that conspiracy theorists are not good researchers: no one has ever confronted her with the fact that she once held a 30 day contract with the State Department when she

was in Moscow, translating newspapers for the embassies and making her name as a foreign correspondent. Prior to that she had been a researcher for Senator Jack Kennedy, campaigned for Adlai Stevenson, and studied Russian in college. In Moscow she happened to interview Oswald when he signalled his defection to the American press. The next she heard from him was in Harvard Square on November 22, 1963, in the riptide from Dallas. Since then McMillan has become an assassination expert and writes psychoanalytically-minded articles on the subject for *The New York Times*.

As McMillan reads her Freud, conspiracy charges are more proof to her point. The knowledge that we are Oswalds is profoundly intolerable. Americans, she says, are a potentially pathological people who use conspiracies to wall out their individual truths. As a nation we are also regicidal. McMillan points to the past three presidencies: Johnson was booted out of a second term, Ford lost his election because he pardoned the man America wanted hanged. Chappaquiddick, too, was a "ritual killing." Faced with the headless corpse of American rulership, we can neither admit nor stop looking for the crime. Conspiracy cults are the way we participate, eyes averted, in the presidential slaying. This reflects in the polls, where 73 percent of the country is said to believe that Kennedy's death was a plot. It also reflects in the assassination field.

"You can see a historical progression in people who made their careers on the (Kennedy) assassination," she comments. "I think the first generation had a legitimate need; they couldn't bear the randomness of history. But these post-Watergate investigations are motivated by something else. The fascination is incredible; all this unresolved Oedipal material! Conspiracy theorists can go on elaborating their evidence forever. They have this tremendous need to look away from the assassin. Why do you suppose assassination research is such a male field?"

McMillan, let it be said, is a woman, and even she found Oswald difficult to face. If men need to insert a conspiracy between themselves and the assassin, McMillan sought refuge in Marina.

In 1964 she flew to Dallas and spent seven months with the assassin's widow, taking notes on everything she did and said and keeping her out of the headlines. McMillan comments: "Being a negative celebrity suits Marina fine."

She got herself named Snow White with the dwarves for her performances in front of the Warren Commissioners. And then she had to go and sue for her husband's gun." But not a word of this in *Marina and Lee*, only long, sympathetic accounts of Marina's hardships as an illegitimate girl in Stalin's Russia and her childlike dependence on Oswald. McMillan admits that she wrote her book partly in answer to William Manchester, whose *Death of a President* put Marina in a pointedly tart light. But one wonders if Marina's reputation is so important as to warrant 300 lost pages of repairs—cut from a final manuscript that even as published dwells rather more on Marina than Oswald. All the same; between them McMillan and Marina have brought the assassin back to life. If we see him from a woman's point of view—as a man who spent the grocery money on guns—it helps to understand the extent of his pathology.

McMillan has done a nimble job of reconstructing the Oswaldian universe. Her book pieces together Oswald's ideology, his dyslexia, his daydreams, her petulant letters, diaries and tracts, and his savage behavior toward his wife. Oswald, we learn, read Dostoevsky and Pushkin, adored the opera and fancied himself a hero of the Left. He happened to be highly intelligent, but between his dyslexia and his contempt for authority, school was out of the question. He dropped out in 10th grade, read Marx in the public libraries, enjoyed telling people he was a Communist, and joined the Marines to get away from his mother, his emotional double. Both felt the world was out to get them and extorted charity wherever they could get it. Only where she juggled charge cards, husbands and orphanages, her son juggled governments. He weasled his way out of the Marines into the Soviet Union, where the authorities set him up with a factory job and a private apartment in Minsk. When Lee met Marina at a dance, he was able to offer her a relatively privileged life, but soon complained it was not good enough. He sent out a spate of demands that the US embassy pay his way home, telling his pregnant wife that his son the President must have a native birth. Oswald got daughters. A defector come home, he basked in the brief attention of the Dallas press and was made extremely nervous (and self-important) by routine government checks. Chronically unemployed, he spent hundreds of hours applying his dyslexic Marxism to paper, played with guns and beat up his wife,

isolating her at home so that he could keep up his Russian. In reality his contacts with the Left consistently disappointed him, never got off the ground, gave him more odd ideas. Arrogant, lonely and horribly stingy, he turned increasingly reclusive, putting his wife and children up with friends and—not too surprisingly—kept no friends. The night before Kennedy came to town, Marina, his only stronghold, refused to come live with him. Oswald had already taken a shot at General Edwin A. Walker, Dallas's leading citizen on the Right. All it took at this particularly low moment was a presidential motorcade for Oswald to switch sights. He happened to admire Kennedy and had even read his Pulitzer Prize winning book; but at this point the missionary could not be stopped. Oswald had written and said many things to the effect that capitalism must be decapitated. He pulled the trigger and—for whatever we choose to make of it—hit Kennedy, who actually pantomimed an imagined attempt on his life the same morning he flew to Dallas. Such are the workings of the inscrutable fates—or as McMillan puts it, "the randomness of history"—in her beautiful book, a case

study of an assassin that reads like a Russian novel, with its impeccable footnotes and all.

McMillan has done us the service of pointing out just how deeply the enemy lives within us. One closes her book pondering the odds that America has a sociological victim like Oswald on every block. Compared to this, the conspiracy question looks incidental. The question is not how many assassins can dance on the head of a pin, but what makes one dance, given a particularly ugly set of human circumstances at birth?

McMillan has paid a price for asking this question. Home from a television tour that was not exactly a success, she is still sifting through stacks of newly declassified FBI material ("It only deepens the picture of Oswald's troubles. I don't think it contradicts me.") She has her own quarrels with the FBI, the CIA, and the politics of the inquiry. And she is naturally ambivalent over the book that cost her a decade and a half to produce, only to emerge like the rest of us on a political void.

"Conspiracy theorists should be building a radical movement instead of getting into this crazy stuff," she quips. Asked about her own political involve-

ment, she offers environmental activism, the psychoanalysis of American government, and smiles—a bit wanly I think. A cold war liberal who crusaded for Stevenson and Kennedy, McMillan has old fashioned values and perhaps too much heart. If we are to get on with the business of governing ourselves, we

might start by forgiving our assassins, she suggests. To a public enmeshed in conspiracies, this may be hard to absorb.

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