

Verdict on Manchester

At the height of the long, agonizing struggle over "The Death of a President," author William Manchester declared his confidence that "my book can withstand any objective test."

To apply a test of sorts, the nation's

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book review media called upon super-journalists for judgment of the super-charged Manchester narrative. Their verdict, on the whole, is unfavorable, faulting Manchester principally on two counts: his melodramatic prose and lack of historical detachment.

In a syndicated review, Walter Lippmann, criticizing Manchester's "appalling" passion for detail, concludes that the book "has neither elegance nor grandeur . . . It is no service to Kennedy's reputation, historic or legendary, to put together an infinite number of tidbits and to dwell not on his historic achievements but on the glamour that emanated from him and his family, and on the trivial facts surrounding his murder."

Book Week, the nationally distributed Sunday supplement, assigned the book to two reviewers—longtime Kennedy family debunker Gore Vidal and journalist Alistair Cooke. ("I figured it was a big book," said R.Z. Sheppard, Book Week's managing editor.) Vidal chides the "starry-eyed" Manchester for agreeing to write the "official" version of the assassination. And he finds support for his view that the Kennedys "are playing a great and dangerous game; they want the Presidency of the United States and they will do quite a lot to regain it."

'Winchelliana': Cooke calls the book a mammoth contribution to the "Vass You Dere, Sharlie?" school of biography." To Cooke, the book is "an encyclopedia of Winchelliana," and Manchester lacks "almost everything hitherto prescribed for contemporary historians: sustained political insight, resistance to cliché, the ability to sift significant trivia from hearsay, the disinterested air of a judge hovering over a welter of testimony."

For all its faults, many reviewers find the book a highly readable and compelling narrative. "The total effect is shattering," writes Richard Rovere in *The New Yorker* in a generally negative review. Rovere also praises Manchester's prose, calling it "almost always eloquent and often poetic." But that is a minority view. As to style, Cooke calls the book a "shaggy compendium of Ian Fleming narrative, newsmagazine melodrama, Drew Pearson, imitation Dos Passos, airplane schedules, and the Ladies' Home Journal."

Eliot Fremont-Smith, daily book critic of *The New York Times*, agreed that Manchester's style verged on the "lush-flowery-exotic" but gave it one of its most enthusiastic reviews ("... massive, articulately organized and utterly compelling...").

In the *Sunday Times*, however, Tom Wicker found the book fatally flawed. Like several other critics, Wicker, the paper's Washington bureau chief, sees Manchester's devotion to Kennedy as his ultimate undoing. "I reject the myth," writes Wicker. And Elizabeth Hardwick,

writing in *The New York Review of Books*, simply rejects the book: "A close reading of the text—and a considerable chore that undertaking is—suggests that the work, as it went along its entirely undistinguished way, grew aimlessly fatter and fatter, feeding on any sort of snack that turned up."

Despite the spate of negative reviews, Harper & Row, the book's publisher, reports booming sales. The first printing of 600,000 copies is already distributed and is selling briskly; the second printing (total undecided) began rolling off the presses late last week.