

Nothing Is What It Seems

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

NOT THE LEAST of the victims of Harvey Lee Oswald was his mother, Mrs. Marguerite Oswald. Up to the moment her son fired a bullet into the President's brain, Mrs. Oswald's life had been spent battling a world she found not only hostile but bewildering. Since that day in Dallas she has been transformed into a character from Kafka, caught in a nightmare in which she suspects nothing is what it seems and every face wears a mask. Hers is the story of a brave, indomitable, pathetic, wretched creature whose only refuge lies in refusing to accept reality.

Jean Stafford spent several days not long ago with Mrs. Oswald in Texas, talking to her (or, rather, listening to her) and recording her views on the role her son played in the assassination. Miss Stafford confesses that she never was able quite to grasp what Mrs. Oswald's views actually were except that there was more to the affair than meets the eye. The reader, caught in the toils of Mrs. Oswald's strange and wonderful use of the English language, can only helplessly agree. It is clear that Mrs. Oswald is convinced that the assassination was the result of a vast and sinister plot, but the nature of the plot and who was behind it never becomes clear. She thinks her son, in fact, is a hero and she has said as much in a formal manifesto, the meaning of which is as elusive as an eel: "My son, Harvey Lee Oswald even after his death has done more for his country than any other living human being."

Future historians will no doubt have a great time trying to figure what made Harvey Lee Oswald tick, as they have with Wilkes Booth. In "A Mother in History" (the term is Mrs. Oswald's own), kind and even compassionate, Miss Stafford does not probe or pass judgments. This is Mrs. Oswald speaking for herself.