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No One Gets Hurt In Kennedy Book



FOR THE FIRST INSTALLMENT, anyway, of Look magazine's "The Death of a President," the course of behavior for all those who have been involved in the controversy seems clear. Nobody interested in maintaining his front as a literate should admit now that he had even a passing objection to anything in the material. There is not a line in the 15,000 words which hurts anybody, except the usual cast of megalomaniacs always found in political stories, a governor and a senator or so. And the suspicion is, anything that was deleted from the first installment was of such no-account that the way to damage people now is to publicize their stupidity by releasing lines they felt were important enough to fight over.

The reading of only 15,000 words out of a 300,000 word book is not a test of the book. But it certainly is a test of the style of the book. And the style of "The Death of a President" is wooden and the organization of material is not good at best. The material in the installments to come, and in the book itself, is the story of our time. It will stand up no matter how it is put down. But a look at the first 15,000 words leaves the impression that author William Manchester writes narrative that does not build well and, in the process, does not reveal very much and, most certainly, does not hurt anybody.

Right now, I am afraid to ask for an explanation of why the fight over this book ever started. The answer could be that embarrassing.

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THE LEAD SENTENCE in the magazine installment says, "Despite obvious differences in temperament and style, John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson shared one grand passion — politics — and in the autumn of 1963, a political issue was about to take the president and his vice-president a thousand miles from Washington, into deepest Texas."

This is textbook approach and textbook wording. It is a long, long way from a lead sentence such as, "The village of Holcomb stands on the high wheat plains of western Kansas; a lonesome area that other Kansans call 'out there'."

There were other sentences in Look which fell into the category of the opening one. "The origins of its implacable hostility to the new frontier lay in a profound longing for the values, real and imagined, of the old frontier." And the quotes seem to be spectacularly bad:

"You were great today," he said.

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, gosh, I'm exhausted."

You picked this magazine up looking for more than this. You looked for things like the one passage out of the whole installment which sticks with a reader:

"... On a rostrum, the illusion or spontaneity was almost perfect; only his hands would have betrayed him, and he was careful to keep them out of sight. They weren't out of Valenti's sight, though. They were just above him, vibrating so violently at times that they seemed palsied. Now and then, the right hand would shoot up and out, the index finger stabbing the limelighted air to make a point. The moment it dropped, the trembling would begin again..."

"The guy's hands shook when he gave a speech," you say to yourself while you're at this part. "Can you imagine that? The guy's hands shook."

You are supposed to be hit by a lot of things like this. You are not, and it is the fault of the writing of the material.

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THIS IS ONE REACTION which 15,000 words of reading produces but the reading also sharpens the opinion that Manchester rates, and therefore must have, a lengthy hearing on his side of the controversy. So far, he has said almost nothing. But he has been accused of writing a tasteless, distorted book which is being published only because he acted dishonorably.

The style of the book, as reflected in this chunk in Look, most certainly is not tasteless and distorted. Make a bet that the entire 300,000 words are not tasteless and distorted. Manchester does not write that way. As a reader, I have arguments with the way he writes a story such as this. But I don't have any argument with his taste or his reporting.

And from what was learned during the controversy, his honor stands up pretty good, too.

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THE BURDEN IS STARTING to fall on the other side right now. Particularly for the statement issued by Mrs. John F. Kennedy which used the words "tasteless and distorted" and left Manchester's reputation shredded. The statement was written by Theodore Sorensen. He was not heard from on the matter again.

And then the other day, Sorensen came up again. Sen. Robert F. Kennedy designated Sorensen as the man to study the New York State Democratic picture and see where the party could be reorganized. Just like that. Life goes on. First, there is a job to do on a lone writer named Manchester. The job is done totally. Very good. Manchester is ruined. Now let's go on to the Democrats. And if anybody else tries to write a book, there always is Sol Linowitz in the waiting room.

Sol Linowitz is the head of Xerox Corp, and he is said to be very good, particularly when he has somebody from the Justice Dept. in the room with him, at talking to a domestic worker who is writing a book the Kennedys might not like.

Well, just for form, and if Sorensen from Nebraska, isn't too busy straightening out New York's Democrats, for their own good, of course, we would like very much to see his "tasteless and distorted" statement brought up again at length.