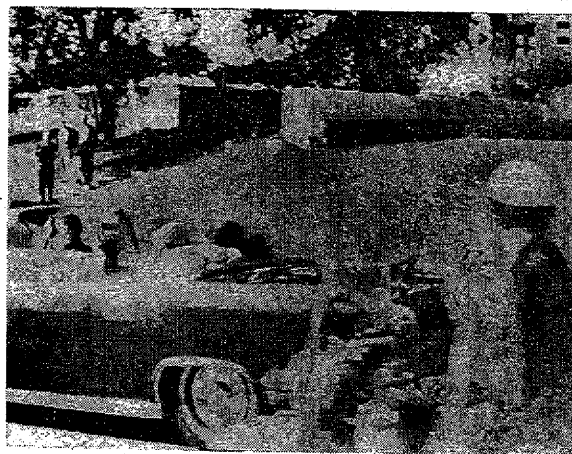




The books about ...



... the assassination.

By CHERYL BENTSEN

HISTORY PROFESSOR David Wrone knows of 150 books about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

He uses the books in a University of Wisconsin class he teaches about political assassinations, and he notes with chagrin that their number has doubled since he first compiled the list in 1973.

The rash of new books, he said, includes a couple of dozen novels which deal with the subject in a style one reviewer calls "paranoid surrealism," blending fact and fiction with sensational results.

"Looking at these books," Wrone said, "I am struck in an overall sense by an impression that the American people have a genuine, critical heart. But I am also struck by the extreme shallowness, the exploitation and the perversion of the assassination and its investigation."

"There are responsible critics, of course, like Sylvia Meagher, who indexed the Warren Report's 26 volumes and wrote 'Accessories After the Fact.' There is no greed in people like that. But recently I've noticed an increase in irresponsible books, and what shocks me is the money they make."

★ ★ ★

Publishers agree that books on this subject—as well as those on the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King—are proven money-makers.

"Where our books really move is on college campuses," said Judy Hilsinger of Bantam Books, which has published six assassination books. It printed the "Report of the Warren Commission on the Assassination of President Kennedy," 80 hours after it was released. Last year, it published and heavily promoted Robert Sam Anson's book, "They've Killed the President! The Search for the Murderers of John F. Kennedy."

Almost all the books on Wrone's list, from Mark Lane's "Rush to Judgment" (1967) to former New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison's new novel, "The Star Spangled Contract," take issue with the Warren Commission's conclusion that Kennedy was killed by a lone assassin.

Some go about this business in a scholarly fashion, others are frantic in tone and casual with fact. But those that sell best fuel public suspicion that there has been a coverup of gigantic and possibly dazzling proportions.

But the broader public interest can be explained by looking at the latest national Harris survey which found that 65 per cent of the American people are convinced the assassination was not the act of one individual, but rather part of a larger conspiracy.

And that doubt, which some say has developed into justified national paranoia, continues to provide a very profitable market for book publishers and movie-makers.

Whatever your favorite conspiracy theory

Making a Buck On the Death Of a President

Post Daily Magazine

—and in the wake of Vietnam, Watergate and recent investigations into the intelligence community, the possibilities now seem limitless to even the most unimaginative mind—there is a book for you. And many of those books are likely to soon be major motion pictures.

The books that do well typically suggest conspiracy among any or all of the following: the CIA, FBI, Mafia, pro-Castro Cubans, anti-Castro Cubans, Texas oilmen and giant corporations.

Mark Lane, a New York lawyer, has probably made more money from books, lectures, and movies than anyone else. But Lane, who heads the private Citizen's Commission of Inquiry, said any money he has made has gone into furthering his investigation.

Lane's "Rush to Judgment" sold 100,000 copies in hardcover and is doing even better in paperback. In 1967 it was made into a documentary film. In 1973 Lane and writer Donald Freed co-authored a screenplay, "Executive Action," later released as a book. It is about Kennedy's assassination, but uses fictional names for the conspirators.

Lane and Freed said they got about \$20,000 for the script and "very little" of the \$15 million the film grossed in the U. S. and Canada. They claim the film distorted their script.

Edward Lewis ("Seven Days in May," "The Fixer") produced "Executive Action" and said it was an "enormous success—not only here but in places like Japan."

"In our wildest dreams we never expected the movie to do as well as it did," he said. "But it supported peoples' doubts about the Warren Report. The budget was very small—about \$600,000—and most of the money came from me. Right after this movie I got

offers for all kinds of assassination movies. I was never a buff and my eyes didn't get opened about it until I made this movie."

"Executive Action" recently has been re-released and is double-billed in many places with "All the President's Men," Lewis said.

Critics generally disliked the movie and called it exploitative and shabby. The TV networks refused to run ads for it, and Lewis hired armed guards to protect the set for fear of sabotage. But it did, as Donald Freed said, "break the ice."

At least two big-budget movies are now in the works. Fred Caruso, associate producer of "Network" and production supervisor for "The Godfather," is producing the movie version of Richard Condon's best-selling novel, "Winter Kills."

The story involves a rich, young, handsome, Irish, liberal President, the son of the country's richest man, who is assassinated. Fourteen years later his half brother takes up a new investigation involving conspiracy. The film will star Jeff Bridges, John Huston, Anthony Perkins, Richard Boone and Eli Wallach. Caruso denies the movie is exploitative: "President Kennedy didn't have a half brother," he said.

Another heavily promoted book is "Betrayal" by Robert D. Morrow who says he was a CIA contract employe privy to the successful efforts of CIA and FBI-connected right-wing extremists to murder President Kennedy. Movie and paperback rights have been sold since the hardcover edition was published last March.

The paperback version by Warner Books will include an introductory letter from Rep. Thomas N. Downing (D-Va.), chairman of the House Select Committee on Assassinations, calling the book's conclusion, "... a remarkably plausible reconstruction of

what could have happened on that dread day in Dallas."

Last September, the House of Representatives voted to reopen an investigation of the Kennedy and Martin Luther King assassinations after the Senate Intelligence Committee accused senior officials of the FBI and CIA of covering up crucial information during their investigation.

The House Select Committee, which will begin hearings tomorrow, technically expires with the end of the 94th Congress on Jan. 3 but is expected to be continued on an expanded basis next year.

With that prospect in mind, publishers and movie-makers anticipate even more public interest.

"We think that Morrow was right," said Peter Graves of Agape Productions, a film company that bought the rights to "Betrayal." "But we're ready to change the script if the Committee finds anything new. We think this movie is going to be a bonanza. Several major studios are interested and we're thinking in terms of a \$6 million budget. Now is the time."

Next February Zebra Books will publish "The Assassination of John F. Kennedy: Coincidence or Conspiracy?" by Washington attorney Bernard Fensterwald, who represented James Earl Ray, now serving 99-year prison term for King's murder. Fensterwald is also head of the private Committee to Investigate Assassinations.

★ ★ ★

Publisher Roberta Grossman suggests that the book, which includes 200 profiles of people involved in the assassination investigation, might be useful as a guide for viewers if the hearings are expanded and televised.

Miss Grossman was candid about her company's motives in publishing books about assassination: "We publish anything that makes money," she said. "We've done a lot of science fantasy books, but I'd like to think we have the monopoly on assassination books. I think the Fensterwald book will be the book. We also published Hu McDonald's 'Appointment in Dallas' which sold a million copies."

Bill Grose, editor-in-chief of Dell Books which published the Lane-Freed paperback "Executive Action," said, "Once you publish a book like this, everybody in the world starts approaching you with others. A number of things have been offered to us but we've turned them down."

"Unless I come across something that sheds a whole new light on the assassination, I would be inclined to wait and see what happens with the new hearings. I hope finally this time there will be an explanation. After this happens, yes, there will be any number of hurry-up books, but then maybe someone will write a thoughtful and important book. If the hearings are then the books will probably continue to be published."