

WORLD OF BOOKS

Manchester's Account of Kennedy's Assassination Is Surprisingly Good



By MAURICE DOLBIER

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT: November 20-November 25, 1963, by William Manchester. (Harper and Row) \$10.

WHAT SURPRISES ARE LEFT? It sometimes seems that William Manchester's account of the assassination of President Kennedy and the difficult days of transition to a new administration has been out for a long, long time—that all the new revelations that it had to make have already been made public (and many of them denied by “authoritative sources”)—that it was packed with clichés and purple patches, that it contained some embarrassingly “tasteless” material that as a historian Manchester was not scrupulous enough in separating fact, opinion, and imagination—that it was a bitterly anti-Johnson book.

★ ★ ★
THE SURPRISE is the book, which is a good one. And Manchester, fending off attacks these last few months by critics, radio and TV interviewers, and public figures emotionally and politically involved in the events he describes, was right in urging that judgment be delayed until the complete work was available.

There are clichés, and Manchester's prose style does sometimes zoom out of control (“As the Presidential plane rocketed toward West Virginia the star Capella rose majestically a thousand miles to the northeast, over Boston” is a fair example).

Taste is a personal thing; I found no element in the book that I thought was in “poor” taste. Some of Manchester's facts have been disputed; history may clear up the question of who is right (though history often doesn't), but in most cases I think there should be no difficulty for the reader in distinguishing between facts and Manchester's well-educated guesswork.

And it is not an anti-Johnson work; in his own sympathies, Manchester is undoubtedly closer to the “loyalists” than the “realists,” but he gives the latter full credit for their “valuable and difficult” performance in the national interest, and Johnson is honored for his courage and integrity (if not his tact) during this tragic and dangerous period.

★ ★ ★
WHAT GIVES “The Death of a President” its special force and value is its amazing accumulation of facts, based on hundreds of personal interviews, published and unpublished documents, and the author's travels which took him to every setting described in his book. Many books would benefit by compression; with this one, in length is strength (which is why the excerpts published in magazines gave a misleading impression of the work). As for new revelations, the 654-page book is a seemingly inexhaustible source.

Manchester says in his preface that “research is not wisdom, and the sum of a million facts is not the truth,” but research and fact-finding are ways to the truth, and Manchester's diligence has taken us further on the way to the truths about those harsh November days than we have been brought before. Errors may be found, and some events may prove to have been misinterpreted, but even so, through this book future generations will learn what kind of people we were and what kind of America we lived in.

Further reviews of “The Death of a President” will appear in next Sunday's issue of Book Week in the World Journal Tribune. The reviewers are Gore Vidal and Alastair Cooke.