



Failure Of A Mother

BEFORE pronouncing judgment upon any criminal, a noted psychologist has written, we should first ask how he happened to become a criminal—in short, what was his mother like?

In the case of the most notorious criminal of our time, the assassin of President Kennedy, evidence continues to mount suggesting that mother is not the name for God in the hearts of all little children. Certainly not in the heart of Lee Harvey Oswald where pent-up rage and hostility impelled him to an act so wild, so desperate that much of the civilized world still is incredulous.

In the stunned days immediately following the awful event in Dallas we learned that Lee Harvey Oswald was a fatherless child reared in poverty. And that the mothering he received was somewhat imperfect, to state it charitably.

Now with the publication of Jean Stafford's rivetingly frank book, "A Mother in History," we have a new—and rather staid—insight into the character of Mrs. Marguerite Oswald. The book is more than a reporter's account of a three-day interview with Mrs. Oswald. It is a biography of her personality.

Here, on laboratory slides, so to speak, are bits of the pure culture Oswaldiana. We finish the book, a synthesis of a virtual non-stop three-day monologue, and we feel as if we'd been locked up in an airless room with one of Tennessee Williams' dotty old harridans. We must applaud remarkable performances by both Mrs. Oswald and her scribe, Miss Stafford.

Mrs. Oswald is not for an instant unaware of her niche in history, we learn. She regards herself as the guardian of her son's "good name" and is not above comparing herself to the holiest mother of all. "If you research the life of Jesus Christ," she says, "you find you never did hear anything more about the mother of Jesus after He was crucified."

Mrs. Oswald's voice, Miss Stafford tells us, has considerable histrionic range. She regulates its pitch and volume adroitly as she enters her successive roles of "mother, citizen, widow, public figure." At all times, there is a suggestion of rehearsal and past performance. Mrs. O. is never visibly caught off her guard, we learn.

One accepts the statement because Miss Stafford has made it. But how could anybody say in a *guarded* moment: "Killing does not necessarily mean badness. You find killing in some very fine homes for one reason or another."

The convolutions of Mrs. Oswald's mind are almost too much for a reader unversed in clinical psychology. She believes President Kennedy to have been a dying man ("Atkinson's disease . . . of the kidney"). In one breath she insists that Lee Harvey was absolutely innocent. In the next she is positive that he was an agent, chosen to commit a mercy killing. The mind boggles.

The oddest criticism of Miss Stafford's book has been that it treated Mrs. Oswald cruelly. If capturing her distinctly peculiar personality and quoting her accurately constitutes cruelty, very well, this is sadism. But I am inclined to feel that it is a book of such unflinching honesty as to make an obsessive mother acutely uncomfortable.

It is, after all, the mother who plays the major role in shaping a child's personality. With the mother a boy sets the pattern for his subsequent relations with the world and, most particularly, with women. A boy growing up with fierce buried resentments against the woman who begot him and neglected him is bound to take vengeance one way or another.

As Mrs. Oswald sees herself today she was a noble-hearted, put-upon mother with "everybody against me." Naturally, she must proclaim her son's innocence, as well as her own goodness of heart. Such is the way of the world. Such is the shame of failing in motherhood.