

Woman behind the gun

By Marya Mannes

IN HISTORY, By Jean Stafford, Farrar, Straus & Co. \$3.95.

Months ago the major portion of Miss Stafford's interview with the mother of Lee Oswald appeared in McCalls Magazine. The compelling interest of the portrait—for the writer let Mrs. Oswald herself—was equaled only by the damage of her reaction to the piece. Letter after letter repeating words like "disgusted," "shocked,"

"A Congressman wrote a long diatribe in which he accused both the magazine and Miss Stafford of sensational journalism," expressing shock at exposing the "almost incoherent rant" of this obviously emotionally distraught mother. A widely distributed editorial in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch called the article "tasteless and and charged McCalls with giving Mrs. Oswald a platform from which she spouts a sick diatribe against her son who was involved with the Secret Service in a 'killing' conspiracy" to remove an incurably illident from office.

were more surprised at this storm of protest. Miss Stafford herself and the editors at the magazine. For what she had done was—and is—a valuable analysis of a woman sick with a spiritual malady. Like a good analyst, Miss Stafford hardly speaks at all, letting the wild inner



mindable view alternately deluged and chilled, outbursts and a cry of pain from the woman's lips into a tape recorder as she generates herself and her son from all blame, and her condemning fingers at a shifting host of "They," and heaps scorn on the official establishment and its guilty public alike. Those mostly from other lands who still persist in claiming that the assassination of President Kennedy was a conspiracy, and that it is the product of this small book. For Lee Oswald was not a simple victim and product of what conspiracy or genes and circumstances forced in the person of his mother. He was a man who looked no further for the making of his destiny.

What is in Stafford's great skill is manifest in the precise negotiations, between Mrs. Oswald's copious

statements in which she addresses the question of her own life, in which she is not only a subject but an object of the writer's observation. She observes the own's own mind, and through her husband's profession of being and her own mind, she tells of her own hidden life. Her own life is not the same as the one recorded in the newspaper. She is not the woman who the sons of her husband manages to see in the headlines of her own involvement with this woman without ever raising her voice.

Not only is she far too good a writer to have done so, but her subject did it for her. Matching Mrs. Oswald's parade of incredible statements and admissions which these words were engraved, "MY SON—LEE HARVEY OSWALD—EVEN AFTER HIS DEATH HAS DONE MORE FOR HIS COUNTRY THAN ANY OTHER LEADING HITMAN BEING—MARTIN LUTHER KING, OSWALD. Matching this was Mrs. Oswald's suggestion. On Mother's Day let's come out and say that I am in the service of my country."

There is a certain irony in her past behavior and continuing presence, for attention is understandable. What is disturbing is that so many readers should have considered this report as a tasteless "expose," as an exploitation of Mrs. Oswald and an affront to Jacqueline Kennedy's feelings as a gross invasion of privacy for the sake of publicity and profit, as a desecration of a beloved young president's memory.

Obviously, the book is a public act of obscuring reason and comprehension for nobody reading Miss Stafford's closing chapter, reliving that November day in 1963, could doubt for a moment that her nerve was as raw as theirs that wound as easily opened. This small book is a triumph of control not only over material but over the writer's emotions. Those who misconstruct it are apparently unable or unwilling to face the reality of Marguerite C. Oswald, mother of Lee. *