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Novels for Our Times

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

THE STAR-SPANGLED CONTRACT. By Jim Garrison. 372 pages. McGraw-Hill $8.95.

In the opening scene of Jim Garrison's new novel, shots are fired at a figure in a limousine, and for a brief moment we are wrenched back in memory to Dealey Plaza and the death of President Kennedy. Because Jim Garrison, the author, is also Jim Garrison the former New Orleans District Attorney, who began an investigation into the assassination that many thought was in itself a fictional scenario, the reader might well expect that he or she is in for another assassination-conspiracy theory, smuggled to him in fictional guise.

But that is not Mr. Garrison's game at all. Although his novel breathes conspiracy through every pore and there is a Presidential assassination in it, there are no direct parallels to the Kennedy murder. The hero, a tough former Green Beret named Colin McFerrin, is simply the obligatory thriller character caught up in a funhouse-mirror world of things that are not what they seem, in which friends become enemies and enemies become dead, as fast as McFerrin can stomp, garrote, break necks or otherwise manage it. The enemy, it soon develops, consists of certain factions in the American intelligence community —"the new and invisible fifth estate, a dimension of government yet undiscovered. . . ."

Mr. Garrison's premise is not unduly farfetched—indeed it is the stuff of our waking nightmares these days. The problem is not with reality; it is with Mr. Garrison's fiction. That is, his novel lacks the tautness, the menacing atmosphere and the characters worth caring about that good thrillers have—indeed the seamy ordinariness that helps set the scene, cast the spell. There are some saving graces—notably Mr. Garrison's occasional talent for patches of baroque Southern courthouse-square dialogue, and his knowledgeability of the wonderful paranoic world of intelligence. But the [illegible] seems jerkily tapped out, like a wire-service story coming in in chunks on the teletype.

I HEAR AMERICA SWINGING. By Peter DeVries. 211 pages. Boston: Little, Brown. $7.95.

Transplant to Middle City, Iowa, the "swinger" mores, the latest countercultural kitsch and all the other specimens of American avant-gardism, and if the author of the book is Peter DeVries, you can be sure he'll be off and running. It seems Linda's [illegible] keeping "on down on the farm out Middle City way since that they've been Upon Tradition." And American [illegible] has become Americana à gogo. Mr. DeVries's hero is thrust into this maelstrom of culture shock in the role of a marriage counselor with a Ph.D. in literature (it seems his thesis on divorce was turned down by the sociology department, despite his plea that it was really an "anti-thesis," making him the "Ionesco of sociology"; he thereupon thriftily submitted it to the English department as an anti-novel).