

10/20/77

# Jackie Takes a Walk

Jane Perlez

Jackie Onassis, the publishing industry's most famous editor, seems to have a problem with books she doesn't read.

First there was the William Manchester affair 10 years ago, when the former First Lady decided that a finely-researched account of JFK to which she had contributed was not fit for publication.

Now there's the flap about Jeffrey Archer, author of *Shall We Tell the President?* and the novel's publisher, Viking Press, who until last Thursday was Jackie's employer.

It's now media ancient history that Jackie beat a hasty exit over the Archer piece, a slim volume about the would-be assassination of America's President in 1983, Ted Kennedy.

Viking consulting editor, Corlies Smith, who edited the Archer novel, blames the tempest on a "series of misunderstandings."

As Smith explains it, Viking President Tom Guinzberg told his friend Jackie about the Archer acquisition in the early summer: "Tom advised her not to read it and as I understand it, she did not read it . . ." Jackie expressed distress but didn't say "stop the presses." She thought publication of the manuscript was "inevitable" — if not by Viking, by some other publishing house.

After all, says Smith, Viking won the auction on the book (\$225,000 for hardcover alone) over five or six other bidders.

## Pronoun Power

Enter *New York Times* critic John Leonard, who denounced the novel as "trash" and put the icing on the cake with the line: "Anybody associated with its publication should be ashamed of herself."

Sharp eyes at *The Boston Globe* recognized the unusual pronoun, associated it with Jackie and ran a front page news story with Guinzberg saying editor Jackie "didn't indicate any distress or anger when I told her we bought the book." Guinzberg now says he was misquoted.

But Jackie felt she had to quit and sent in her handpenned letter.

That's not how Jackie's first assistant at

Viking, since promoted to editor, Rebecca Singleton, sees it. "Quitting the way she did wasn't a particularly classy thing to do."

"She never said anything about the book. From the time she came, Tom was so consistently protective of her special situation. She didn't tell Tom herself she was going to do it [quit]. There was no personal discussion of the incident itself. You do have the right as an employee to leave. But there are ways and ways to do it."

John Leonard, the villain of the piece in Viking's eyes — "an unconscionable cheap shot," bellows Corlies Smith of that precisely chosen female pronoun — lumps both Viking and Jackie together. Both, he says, could have let the matter ride.

"What makes people in the publishing houses think they're not accountable for what they publish? I spend half my life arguing about *New York Times* stories, wrong assignments. Suddenly it's not fair if they publish a sleazy book. They could have chosen to ignore a blind reference. Now they've had their fun."

Leonard's "herself" refers not only to Jackie, but also to the book's agent, Deborah Schabert Owen — an American married to the British Foreign Minister, David Owen — and two of the re-

searchers, Cynthia Farrer and Natalie Wexler, American students acknowledged in the frontpiece.

Of Jackie, Leonard says: "I think she behaved badly. When she was advised of the book [in the summer] she could have at least read it. Why didn't she bother to exercise a little bit of responsibility at a publishing house?"

Underlying all the statements, non-statements, clammings-ups, silences and Jackie's splendid retreat to horseback-riding in New Jersey at the weekend, was a sudden uneasiness over the nature of *Shall We Tell . . .* "Mainlining on the cesspool of the American mind," says Leonard. "A cheap way for Viking to get into the bigtime commercial market," says one agent.

## A Thin Read

This thin read of a book — it takes 90

minutes — does have problems. They start even before the narrative begins. The top name on the acknowledgment list, spelled as "Barry" McPherson, special counsel to President Johnson, should be "Harry."

The geography of the White House is loused up, with the Oval Office in the East Wing and the press secretary's office overlooking the Rose Garden.

There are a few political errors of judgment. Sen. Birch Bayh, one of the men who helped save Edward Kennedy when his plane crashed in the early '60s and a longtime Kennedy ally, is depicted as a possible conspirator in the assassination plot. So is Sen. Robert Byrd. Hubert Humphrey is described as being a Democratic kingmaker in 1981.

*Shall We Tell . . .* spans seven days of plot action. In addition, there is the Inauguration chapter in which President Ted Kennedy, wrapped in a bathtowel on Inauguration night, tells his chambermaid: "I don't care for the aroma of President Carter's aftershave, but other than that, it's all in great shape."

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Ted Kennedy is the book's throw-away figure. He has the first chapter, two pages at the end, and doesn't get killed.



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