

What Did Dorothy Know?

KILGALLEN. By Lee Israel. Delacorte. 485 pp. \$12.95

By RITA MAE BROWN

DOROTHY KILGALLEN'S DEATH on November 8, 1965, was treated by many as just another high-strung female checking out of Hotel Earth. Since she was a person many loved to hate—her sins being intelligence, perseverance and right-wing political affections—her supposed "suicide" gratified her detractors. However, Lee Israel's carefully researched book indicates the chances of Dorothy Kilgallen (a devout Catholic) having committed suicide are about the same as your being struck by a meteorite. Wanting to break the story of the century regarding John F. Kennedy's assassination, Kilgallen, a reporter, first and foremost, had every reason to live.

The daughter of a crack reporter in the Hearst stable, Dorothy followed in her father's footsteps. Covering death in a wide variety of forms—in particular, paying attention to the mortal remains of victims—was her first newspaper assignment in 1931. The *New York Evening Journal's* assistant managing editor, Garry Finley, dumped the gruesome task on her virginal head, thinking he could turn yet another hopeful away from the nicotine-stained cathedral of journalism. But dismembered corpses failed to halt young Dorothy. She pressed on. In 1936 she enjoyed international celebrity as a result of a highly publicized around-the-world air race. She remained famous for 29 years.

She slaved for that fame: the "Voice of Broadway," a daily column; a radio breakfast show with her husband; special assignments for the Hearst chain; and *What's My Line?* the television game show which premiered in early 1950. She was indefatigably social, as well.

Unfortunately for Kilgallen, her husband, Richard Kollmar, didn't work too hard at anything. When she married him in 1940 he was a young actor of some success; then he produced a few Broadway shows, operated nightclubs, and piddled with mixed results. Had he not married a powerhouse he might not have looked so weak. Like



DOROTHY KILGALLEN

many husbands with dynamic wives he retreated into compulsive seduction and alcohol, yet Dorothy remained faithful to him until the late '50s when she embarked on a tempestuous affair with singer Johnnie Ray.

Dorothy Kilgallen drank too much, she was disappointed in her husband and sometimes disappointed in her three children, but she was not a desperately unhappy woman drowning in a vat of booze and pills. This later version of Dorothy gained credence only after her death. As with Martha Mitchell, seemingly the easiest way to attack a woman who has vital political information is to declare her a lush, nuts or both.

Lee Israel painstakingly reveals Kilgallen's character. Without bogus psychologizing the author manages to present a complex, compelling woman and help us understand why she did what she did. *Kilgallen* deserves to be ranked with serious biography just as its subject deserves to be ranked a serious journalist.

Israel is at her best when showing Kilgallen up against the Warren Commission, the FBI, and a hostile administration. Avoiding political controversy, she was content to live for herself, her family, her friends. Nothing larger than her own

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life or her own needs motivated her until she had a fateful, secret interview with Jack Ruby early in 1964. She could have chosen to forget it, what appeared to her to be horrific implications of conspiracy in the death of the president; she could have backslid into her life of glamor. The more she probed the more she felt her own life was in jeopardy. She thought the JFK assassination touched the soul of America and she wasn't going to stop. She put the truth first and paid the price.

We are not accustomed to finding heroes in middle-aged, quirky women. The left never could stand Kilgallen; the right, meanwhile, attacks the left. The feminist movement might balk at her exaggerated dependence on men so they won't salvage her reputation. The other political movements would probably find even the mention of her name a cause for hilarity. So Kilgallen remains difficult to catalogue.

Lee Israel's *Kilgallen* succeeds not only as biography, but it works as a moral reminder: we cannot afford casually to dismiss anyone on the basis of appearance and manner. □