

# Advertisements for Himself

Norman Mailer got a full page to "answer" John Simon's review

their intentions or their homophobia as Prescott did (if Vidal's comments are to be believed). The *Times* has been more discreet and private, although there was one spectacular public exception. The episode involved a review by the book critic John Leonard (who is *New York's* television critic). Given the circumstances of the Leonard review, there was no way that the *Times* could avoid public notice of the story. Leonard, then a book critic for the daily paper, reviewed two books on the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Leonard didn't particularly care for either book. He devoted the last third of the review, in his words, "to a sermon which began, 'Frankly, I prefer to believe that the Warren Commission did a poor job rather than a sloppy one. . . .'" According to Leonard, "What followed then was a list of questions about the two autopsies, the washed-out limousine, 'grassy knoll' witnesses, Oswald's marksmanship, Jack Ruby's strange connections. . . ." Leonard's review ran in the first edition of the *Times* of December 1, 1970, with the headline WHO KILLED JOHN F. KENNEDY? In the next and subsequent editions of that day's *Times*, the review ended abruptly right after the observation about the sloppy job and before the list of questions. A new headline read, THE SHAW-GARRISON AFFAIR. According to Leonard, "Nobody from the executive editor to the culture desk to the bullpen to the composing room would admit to this cosmetic surgery." The mystery remained as the microfilms of the *Times's* first edition and final edition for December 1 found their way into reference libraries across the country. Over the next six months, Leonard remembered, he received some 400 letters asking about the two reviews and expressing dark thoughts about various conspiracies in Dallas, New Orleans, Washington, and at the *New York Times*. In the years since, Leonard continued to receive similar letters, especially when a new book on the Kennedy assassination was published. For years, too, Leonard told his correspondents to direct their questions to A. M. Rosenthal, his top editor at the time.

**T**HE TALE OF THE AMPUTATED REVIEW STIRRED VILE thoughts about the politics of book reviewing at the *Times*. The *Book Review* machinery could pump up interest in any given book, or shunt attention away. Its power existed, but it did not necessarily follow that the juice moved in a certain conspiratorial direction or supported a specific agenda. Many of the alleged plots, upon inspection, are more bureaucratic than cabalistic: They appear to be aimed at putting out a newspaper every day and a *Book Review* on Sundays, while trying to keep mistakes to a minimum—all without overtime. Leonard's editors, he recalled, thought he should keep his "leftist views" out of the paper; but in fact, they could

live with his political attitude—up to the point where it implied criticism of the *Times's* news-gathering abilities. Any attack on the Warren Commission's investigation of the Kennedy assassination by extension meant an attack on the news department's coverage of both the assassination and investigation. That's what brought on the Kennedy amputation. The operation over, the surgeons moved on. A few months later, the same people who cut Leonard's Kennedy review promoted him to editor of the *Book Review*, a powerful pulpit to give someone suspected of too much leftist sermonizing.

Leonard's successor, Harvey Shapiro, promoted a different agenda. Shapiro was among the last of a breed of journalists who regarded the *Times* as a day job that enabled them to pursue their muses. "The *Times* paid the rent so that you could write your novel at night or, in my case, poetry. Now it's a full-time occupation." Shapiro edited the *Book Review* from 1975 to 1983. "I looked for the consumer element in our reviews. I wanted to tell people whether to buy and read the book; I didn't think that we could engage in a pure literary exercise." After Leonard, the provocateur-editor, Shapiro wanted to be a more serene presence. "My proudest moment came when I put an anthology of Chinese poetry on the front page of the *Book Review*."

Shapiro was moved off the *Book Review* in 1983. "They"—Abe Rosenthal and his deputy Arthur Gelb—"wanted their own man in." Did that mean "they were unhappy with his editing? Did he fail to carry out management wishes? No, he never felt any pressure from his superiors. During an interview in January 1992, he said he had just sent his ninth book to his publisher. Shapiro smiled a mandarin smile. The *Times* was still a day job.

The editors' "own man" was Mitchel Levitas, a native New Yorker and a graduate of Brooklyn College. He joined the *Times* in 1965, as an editor at *The New York Times Magazine*. Unlike Shapiro, Levitas never regarded the *Times* as a way to help with the rent; he put his full-time energies into his *Times* career. Rebecca Sinkler became Levitas's deputy in 1985 and succeeded him in 1989, the first woman editor of the *Book Review*. During the Levitas-Sinkler years, the *Book Review* paid more attention to politics and current events; it was at once less literary and more predictable. Levitas introduced an essay feature that started at the bottom of page one and often filled one or two inside pages. The essays, usually by big-name authors and academics, were intended to discuss books in ways other than the review form. "I wanted to make the *Book Review* more journalistic," Levitas remembered. "I wanted it to carry news as well as reviews." In pursuit of a newsy *Book Review*, Levitas introduced boxed interviews with authors to accompany the reviews. Levitas and, later, Sinkler placed a high value on the style of writing

