

A Complete Catalogue of

CROSSFIRE **The Plot That Killed Kennedy**

By Jim Marrs
Carroll & Graf. 595 pp. \$25.95

By Deborah Price

READING CONSPIRACY theories about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy is a bit like playing Clue: If it wasn't Lee Harvey Oswald with a telescopic rifle in the Texas School Book Depository, then perhaps it was CIA agents with semi-automatics on the Grassy Knoll.

From almost the instant of the fatal shots Nov. 22, 1963, there has been an obsessive scramble to propose every possibility—some frighteningly credible and many totally reckless. Twenty-six years later, the Library of Congress says it has 253 books on file about the assassination. That of course fails to include the spate of television docudramas, movies, documentaries, television investigative shows and newspaper and magazine articles reflecting nagging doubts that a madman acting alone in seconds changed the course of history.

In *Crossfire: The Plot That Killed Kennedy*, Jim Marrs attempts to bring together the gist of all this material into one "thor-

Deborah Price is the news editor of The Detroit News' Washington bureau.

ough source book" for "basic overview." That's a tall order, and he's at least partly successful. He neatly capsulizes the plethora of theories offered by critics of the lone-gunner theory; these range from the disturbingly plausible to the absurd and reckless.

Crossfire is compelling, albeit macabre, reading. The breezy style encourages the reader to sample sections with such intriguing titles as "The Badge Man," "The Black Dog Man," "The Third Wounded Man," "The Man in the Doorway" and "An Incriminating Palm Print."

Unfortunately, Marrs doesn't demand of his fellow conspiracy theorists the flawlessness he expects of the Warren Commission, the Dallas Police Department and other investigative bodies. Instead, he suggests that the sheer volume of skepticism should tell us something. Yet, by putting the absurd side by side with the persuasive, he undercuts his message, and will probably leave many readers more confused and frustrated than ever.

An example of the troubling: Independent acoustical analysis of a police recording indicates more bullets were fired and in quicker succession than possible for one rifleman. That analysis has since been challenged, but it so disturbed a House special panel that it concluded in 1978 that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy," though it was "unable to identify the other gunman or the extent of the conspiracy." But simultaneously, Marrs seems to

Kennedy Conspiracies

give equal weight to bizarre theories: for example, that the strange opening and closing of an umbrella immediately before the fatal shots was a signal to Kennedy that he was being killed over his failure to provide an "umbrella" of air support at the Bay of Pigs fiasco. And conflicting theories abound. For instance, the slaying of police officer J.D. Tippit, which led authorities to Oswald, is variously portrayed as an unrelated homicide and a vehicle used by conspirators to draw attention to Oswald's whereabouts. Tippitt is also portrayed as a co-conspirator himself.

THE DUST JACKET hints of this fast and loose quality: Below the highly suggestive title is a design of Kennedy, within what appears to be a telescopic sight, surrounded by Oswald, Oswald's killer Jack Ruby, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover and Lyndon Johnson. No one is beyond possible complicity.

Marrs, who teaches a class on the assassination at the University of Texas, believes the president was killed in a "military style ambush orchestrated by organized crime with the active assistance of elements within the federal government of the United States." He walks the reader through what he describes as "a likely scenario." "Who done it?" he asks. "A consensus of powerful

men in the leadership of U.S. military, banking, government, intelligence, and organized crime circles ordered their faithful agents to manipulate Mafia-Cuban-Agency pawns to kill the chief," he concludes. But not to leave anyone out, Marrs implies that someone at the top, presumably Johnson or Hoover, thwarted a thorough investigation, possibly even ordering Kennedy's head wounds to be altered surgically to conform with the lone-gunner theory.

His is not a new theory, of course, and he certainly has company in disbelieving the Warren Commission's determination that Oswald acted alone. It is one theory among thousands; but often lost in the fanfare is that 26 years of digging by skeptics has failed to turn up evidence to convict even one conspirator.

Marrs prefers to direct attention to widely felt uneasiness. As he notes, a Washington Post survey in 1983 found that more than 80 percent of those polled said they believe Kennedy was killed as a result of a high-level conspiracy. Is this really surprising given how broadly some puzzling theories have been circulated?

Marrs writes that he seeks "the persons who killed Camelot—who killed the confidence and faith of the American people in their government and institutions." It is doubtful conspiracy theorists will ever accept that it is time to say goodbye and move on. ■

11/17

BOOK WORLD / DECEMBER 24, 1989