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NEW BOOKS

Can this book stop Edward Kennedy being President?

DUBLIN, Saturday.

IN DAYS of yore the best-selling American novelist Richard Condon would have been burned for witchcraft, and there is a posse of modern American politicians who would take much pleasure in helping to pile the faggots round the stake.

Not only does he write about them with grand contempt, but he also appears to have a devilish knack of political prophecy.

His most famous novel, *The Manchurian Candidate*, the story of a plot to assassinate the President, has some curious parallels with the actual assassination of President Kennedy in 1963—yet it was published three years earlier.

And in a series of political novels written before Watergate—like *The Vertical Smile* and *Mile High*—he has long made it clear that he believes most American politicians resemble a particularly vicious and malevolent breed of rat.

His latest novel, *Winter Kills*—to be published in Britain next month by Weidenfeld and Nicolson—has even been hailed in America as the book that could finally destroy Teddy Kennedy's hopes of becoming President.

Already a big best-seller in the States, it is a startlingly ferocious hatchet job on American leaders in general and on the Kennedys in particular.

by GRAHAM LORD



RICHARD CONDON

NOVELIST

So controversial is it that

not one film company will have anything to do with it, although Mr. Condon says that every previous novel of his has brought several immediate film inquiries and he believes *Winter Kills* is the most cinematic of the lot.

He should know. Until he became a novelist at 42 he was a Hollywood promotion man and he has always written his books with an eye on the movie rights, and several of his stories have reached the screen. But not this time. Not one company has even asked to see the typescript.

"They're all scared [*expletive deleted*] that Teddy Kennedy will be the next President," he says.

"Every major film company but one is owned by a conglomerate and Government

agencies have the power to repress their other businesses."

Why should they all be so worried about the book?

Well, it maligns Teddy Kennedy's father — that's a good beginning. And it indicates that his brother was not the great hero we think he was, and of course Teddy's campaign depends to a large extent on that.

Mr. Condon's "fictional" President is shot in Philadelphia in 1960, not Dallas in 1963, but the story is quite blatantly based on the assassination of President Kennedy.

In it the President's younger brother discovers that his shallow, hypocritical, womanising brother was the victim of a plot by the very people who had raised him to the Presidency, the oligarchy of big business and military men who apparently control the United States.

They decide to dispose of him when he seems to be becoming too independent and then cover their tracks by producing a stooge "assassin" and a cover-up investigating commission.

Most horrific of all a close relative of the dead President

is deeply involved in the conspiracy.

How much of this is meant to be true? To find out I went to see Condon at the spacious pink Georgian mansion, 90 miles from Dublin, where he lives with his wife and aged parents-in-law.

After years of restless exile in Spain, France, Mexico and Switzerland he has settled, at 59, for isolated opulence on 12 green acres of hillside in Co. Kilkenny.

Nine hours a day, he says, seven days a week he sits at his desk in his huge high-ceilinged study, writing and thinking and playing patience.

It is the sort of study that Harold Robbins or Ian Fleming might have devised for a rich writer. The walls are stacked with books and shelf after shelf of novels by Richard Condon in 19 languages, including Urdu and Twi. On one wall hangs a painting which was a present from Condon's friend Frank Sinatra.

The centre of the room is furnished with a billiards table, the desk with a red electric typewriter, and our glasses with a cataract of champagne and wines both red and white.

BANISHED

Mr. Condon once even used a magnetic card typewriter that could type out—"from memory"—a whole novel when he had finished it, while he was getting on with the next. But he finally banished it when he found he was spending more time contemplating the miracles of the machine than the marvels of his own prose.

And yet despite the trappings and despite his bluff, professional, no-nonsense, roly-poly manner, he is completely serious about his writing.

"The duty of writers," he says, "is to attack invisible power, whether it's in politics or medicine or the food industry. Lord Acton once said that all great men are bad

men, and if they are they deserve to be battered.

"No novel has ever changed anything, but it can uphold the reader's morale and I think it is right to remind people that politicians are just housekeepers, not owners or monarchs or absolute rulers."

When he was 15 he became a political worker for the Democrats and discovered that he was expected to entice "derelict" voters to the polling booths by bribing them with two dollars each.

"I never wondered then whether it was right or wrong," he says, "but it's at the basis of why I feel badly about the selection of leaders in my country."

"And you can't change the system from the inside—when you're inside you have to go along with it. So the choice is either to become a writer or a revolutionary."

He has chosen to live in Ireland, he says, for the quiet and isolation, not because of the Irish tax concessions for writers which do not help him as he still has to pay American taxes.

DETACHED

"It also allows me to sit in a very detached position so that I can be both subjective and objective about America," he says.

"I care and feel deeply about the United States, but I'm not in love with Americans but with the ideals of America, so that's what I love. It was a beautiful place but now it's all changed. It's not just me getting old. There's a sludge in the air."

His new book is yet another of his attacks on that sludge in the air, on the ease with which Americans allow themselves to be fooled by lies and myths and the sort of mystique that once surrounded the Kennedy family.

"It's not the true story of what happened to Kennedy," he says, "but I'm trying to show how millions of people can be imprinted with myths. Nobody could have got near Kennedy to kill him without the permission of some of his entourage."

"The F.B.I. never checked one roof of that plaza, and many other things came out at the time."

"The Warren Commission said there was only one unstable assassin but it was covering up. Some people believe the C.I.A. was behind it, or the Cubans, or Hollywood, or the Mafia, and the

Dallas police were certainly in it up to their ears.

"My own theory is that the Texas people had Kennedy killed for Lyndon Johnson. He was the real beneficiary, but I don't believe it was possible he was in on it himself.

"I know what an old crook and ruffian Johnson was—a Mississippi riverboat gambler, as Kennedy once called him—but he was not that good an actor for it not to have shown afterwards."

Mr. Condon says he has no illusions about the Kennedys and he is positively vitriolic about Teddy Kennedy and his public and private weaknesses:—

"He has no more chance of being made President than Enoch Powell has of being made President. This man is so culpable. People might have been willing to be diverted from even Chappaquiddick if it hadn't been for Watergate, but now they are so upset and offended over America's loss of prestige that they are not prepared to accept a President with Kennedy's background.

"He is totally unstable and the Republicans have a thick file on his peccadilloes. If he's gonna run for President

they're gonna rub their hands and ask if America can stand another terrible scandal. That's how it'll be played."

So maybe some film company will eventually buy those movie rights after all. Not that Richard Condon is hanging around, waiting. He has already finished his next book—a satirical novel about international politicians who are in cahoots with big business—that is so topical it is being rushed straight out in paperback.

I understand it features Richard Nixon, and Dr. Henry Kissinger also appears—as a romantic hero. Well, why not? Mr. Condon once wrote a Western in which the Indians save the white settlers from being massacred by the cavalry.

