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 and NIGHTS*

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Just published by Knopf

## En Route to the Grassy Knoll

A novel in a conspiratorial mode ends just before J.F.K.'s murder.

### AMERICAN TABLOID

By James Ellroy.  
 576 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$25.

By William T. Vollmann

JAMES ELLROY'S brilliantly unpleasant novel chronicles the seething interactions of a bunch of sleazos, spies, thugs and mobsters. In this case I think I will not be giving anything away to begin with the end, which is the assassination of John F. Kennedy. Every such entry in the conspiratorial genre has its own cunning convolutedness to follow. After reading Don DeLillo's remarkable novel "Libra," which "American Tabloid" in some ways resembles, or after seeing Oliver Stone's film "J.F.K.," one remembers less the how and the why of the deed than the sheer wheels-within-wheels complexity of it all.

"American Tabloid" ends a few moments before the assassination, and Lee Harvey Oswald never makes a direct appearance — all of which makes for a certain elegance analogous to that of the sonnet whose form excludes all but essential and perfect words; and while at first sight this novel seems more sprawling than the reverse, it is in fact a supremely controlled work of art, built on sentences of almost unapproachable terseness:

"Hoover bought the lie. An L.A. agent told Boyd that [Marilyn] Monroe was now under intense surveillance: bug/taps and six full-time men.

"Said agents were baffled. Jack the Haircut [Kennedy] and MM have not been in contact.

"Pete laughed himself silly. Dracula [Howard Hughes] confirmed the rumor: Marilyn and Jack were one hot item!!!!

"Boyd said he skin-searched all Jack's girls [for hidden microphones]. "Elegance" in work.  
 "Boyd said Kennedy and Nixon were running neck-and-neck.

"Pete didn't say, I've got dirt. I can SELL it to Jimmy Hoffa; I can GIVE it to you to smear Nixon with.

"Jimmy's a colleague. Boyd's a partner. Who's more pro-Cause [pro invasion of Cuba] — Jack or Nixon?"

"Tricky Dick was hotly anti-Beard [Castro]. Jack was vocal but still short of rabid.

"John Stanton called Nixon 'Mr. Invasion.' Kemper said Jack would green-light all invasion plans.

"Boyd's key campaign issue was COMPARTMENTALIZATION."

Scarcely a word could be deleted from this without wounding the meaning. Every sentence advances the plot. My parenthetical identifications and explanations could be considered an extended compliment to the exacting schematic language that Mr. Ellroy has evolved.

But even more of an achievement than this is what the novelist does with his characters. None of them (with the possible exception of Robert F. Kennedy) are at all likable. John F. Kennedy is a vacuous womanizer ungrateful to those who idolize him. Pretty much everyone else is weak, cruel or twisted. So one would expect not to care, to be merely entertained at most, never to be moved. And, in fact, I cannot honestly say that I cared about So-and-so when So-and-so gets tortured or murdered. And yet these people, while unable to command our empathy on their own account, serve as dye markers to illustrate the vector trails of all the various evil forces that spring from that most

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capitalistic force of all, self-interest.

In the super-logical trajectory of Mr. Ellroy's plot, almost every permutation of betrayal arises. The betrayals are never gratuitous or sadistic (although the violence with which they are often executed is sadistic indeed); the necessity of each becomes apparent only at the last minute, when a proactive or reactive strike has been dictated by self-protection in response to some previously unforeseen move. In the process of betraying others, the characters betray themselves. One agent who becomes a hit man wakes up every morning automatically processing lies to tell his all-too-various interest-conflicted employers. Another begins the tale by zealously supporting Bobby Kennedy's crusade against the mob, and ends by being a lawyer for the mob. J. Edgar Hoover, Howard Hughes and other powermasters of the period are ruthlessly drawn, but no more so than lowlifes like Oswald's murderer, the nightclub owner Jack Ruby, who comes across here as less desperate than in "Libra," but more vile and crawling, reeking of his squalid dogs. What Mr. Ellroy makes us realize is that loyalty to others is one of the few essential

Everyone here, from  
 President to pimp, betrays  
 everyone else in the pursuit  
 of power. They help us  
 understand history.

guarantors of self-identity. If we don't stand for those who trust us, then we stand for nothing and will be ground down into nothing. Of course, safety is not predicated on loyalty, but at least if we are faithful to something or someone then we will die for a reason.

This novel will not teach anybody anything new about the Kennedy assassination. Like "Pulp Fiction," the movie to which in style and content "American Tabloid" is somewhat related, the goal does not seem to be so much accuracy or even verisimilitude as the depiction of a community of interlinked stories and lives. Violence becomes exaggerated almost to the point of caricature, but never crosses the line into mere gratuitousness. Laced with gruesome humor, "American Tabloid" remains far less funny than sad. The different coalitions of people in it struggle, slay, steal ambitiously, recombine, and in the course of striving to get everything they become nothing. Meanwhile, the larger twists and turns of allegiance they act out give us a feeling of history. Schemers rise, overreach themselves and are cut down by schemers. Extortionists and appeasers have their day. Love becomes a means of entrapment. The plot thickens and thickens. No matter that most of the events of the tale are imaginary. The causative agents in human affairs are so very often connivings, greeds and treacheries that Mr. Ellroy cannot but convince. □

#### Author's Query

For a book on age discrimination, I would appreciate hearing from people who have either filed a charge of age discrimination or had one filed against them.

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