

WHO SHOT JFK?: A Guide to the Major Conspiracy Theories
By Bob Callahan
Illustrated by Mark Zingarelli

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For 30 years now the true identity of John F. Kennedy's assassin—or his possible accomplices—has been as elusive and enigmatic as, say, that of Thomas Pynchon. The first cathode-age assassination drama, the events of that November afternoon in Dealey Plaza are perhaps the most analyzed six seconds in world history, a watershed not only in politics but in the evolution of television and technology: the first post-modern moment. The immediacy of the



news, and of Oswald's murder on live broadcast, made it TV's primal scene, and popular fascination with the events and their explanations has never waned since.

The past decades of tape-delay revisionism have been less an interminable "ending of innocence" than the dawning of a new way of reacting to and interacting with history. JFK wasn't just murdered—he was transformed from human body to textual body. Stir the bones of Kennedy, Oswald, and Ruby and their signifiers slip, everything falls apart, and it was me firing from behind the wooden fence on the grassy knoll.

Bob Callahan's *Who Shot JFK?* arrives just in time (and in some ways too late, thanks to Gerald L. Posner's *Case Closed*) for the diamond anniversary. More than 2500 books, one million pages of government

documents, and several ongoing newsletters and magazines have been published on the subject, largely by a grassroots network of amateur muckrakers and scattershot theorists: according to *U.S. News & World Report*, seven out of 10 Americans believe a conspiracy was involved. In his introduction, Callahan defines this "strange new genre of literature," a blend of murder mystery, political thriller, and true crime, where espionage meets ESP and investigative journalism meets astral projection.

The study of JFK's assassination—call it Dealeyology—is the shortest distance between points on America's mainstream and margins, a convenient portal to the subculture of self-publishers, fanzines, and obsessive collectors. *Who Shot JFK?* offers a Cliff's Notes for beginner buffs. Callahan, a former speechwriter for Robert F. Kennedy, intends the book for "concerned people who don't have the time to read for themselves all the major books, pamphlets, and government reports," and pauses briefly for each hypothesis. Special consideration is given to the more absurd offerings, like "the Coca Cola Theory" (Oswald was confused by a sugar rush) and the "Penguin Strikes Fear in the Heart of Gotham" theory (an onlooker's umbrella was a blow gun used to kill the president with poison darts).

Mark Zingarelli's black-and-white illustrations and graphics accentuate the irreverent tone, and Callahan writes with a welcome neutrality, although he clearly falls on the side of conspiracy. He points out the many miscues on the part of the Fourth Estate, like CIA recruitment of journalists at CBS, and he includes useful information on how to obtain source materials. Part of the process, of course, is running your own personal House Select Committee in the comfort of home.

But Callahan doesn't include enough critique of the conspiracists themselves. He is properly dismissive of Jim Garrison's circus trial of Clay Shaw, since celebrated in Oliver Stone's *JFK*, observing that "it relinquished the high ground in the debate back to the Lone Gunman crowd." But he reprints matter-of-factly dubious incidents and scenarios. In his effort to be fair to all parties, Callahan ultimately loses his

way, treating cranks as critics. David Lifton, who proposed that JFK's body was switched or tampered with while en route from Dallas to D.C., is described as a "careful and original analyst"; this is the same David Lifton who suggested that the grassy knoll had been excavated prior to the assassination in order to build a tunnel and bunker system for assassins.

Despite its flaws, *Who Shot JFK?* is a welcome primer to conspiracy culture, covering almost as much territory as an Amok Dispatch. Posner's Lone Gunman bulletproof clincher notwithstanding, the JFK assassination case can never be closed: The grassy knoll of possibilities beckons. Perhaps it's

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time to consider more seriously the modest proposal of Norman Mailer, who in 1966 suggested that a Writers Commission be established to tackle the unanswered questions of the case. "I would trust a commission headed by Edmund Wilson before I trusted another by Earl Warren," declared Mailer. "Wouldn't you?" —*Mike Rubin*