

The Importance of Being Jackie

If you don't know, celebrity biographies aren't going to tell you.

JACK AND JACKIE

Portrait of an American Marriage.
By Christopher Andersen.
Illustrated. 400 pp. New York:
William Morrow & Company. \$24.

ALL TOO HUMAN

The Love Story
of Jack and Jackie Kennedy.
By Edward Klein.
Illustrated. 406 pp. New York:
Pocket Books. \$23.

JACQUELINE BOUVIER

An Intimate Memoir.
By John H. Davis.
Illustrated. 208 pp. New York:
John Wiley & Sons. \$24.95.

JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS

The Making of a First Lady: A Tribute.
By Jacques Lowe.
Illustrated. 128 pp. Los Angeles:
General Publishing Group. \$30.

By Larissa MacFarquhar

THERE are those who get the Jackie Onassis thing and those who don't. This became clear when she died two years ago, and even more so during the bewildering auction of her belongings last spring. But beyond this basic dichotomy — a matter of instinct and deepest sentiment — there is a further divide, which is the generational one.

People who were around when John F. Kennedy was shot tend to wonder about her as a person. (Was she a good mother? How did she cope with her husband's infidelity?) But to many of us born after Camelot was over, who are accustomed to seeing her and her samurai hair share tabloid pages with space aliens and Michael Jackson, the mystery of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis is not her inner self but the enduring allure of her public persona: \$85,000 for a cigarette lighter engraved with a gold letter "J," \$211,500 for a set of fake pearls. This is what needs to be explained.

A large measure of her reputation



Leaving West Palm Beach, Fla., for John F. Kennedy's inauguration, Jan. 18, 1961.

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derives from the role she played in the services for John Kennedy. Copying Lincoln's funeral was her idea, as was the eternal flame at Arlington. (She was also the one who came up with the brilliant if cheesy Camelot metaphor.) People who watched the procession at the time say her dignity helped them recover from the trauma of the assassination. For those of us who were not alive then, this can be hard to understand. Certain events leave an imprint so profound that they require their own anthropology: people who lived through them belong to a different culture from those who did not.

The posthumous crop of Jackie

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books unfortunately contributes little to an understanding of her public impact. With the exception of Jacques Lowe's "Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis: The Making of a First Lady" (which is mostly pictures), they are celebrity biographies of the usual type — worshipful, yet crammed with tabloidy details. (Jackie losing her virginity in a Paris elevator; she and the President shooting up speed in the White House.)

One of the things the books do bring out is the wonderful way she went about being an aristocrat. American aristocrats generally try to be understated and tasteful, not understanding that the whole purpose of aristocrats now is to put on a show — to dress up and make life more exciting for the rest of us. Jackie was not an old-fashioned aristocrat, thank goodness, so she did everything aristocrats are supposed to. She spent fantastic sums on clothes. She was always late. She spoke in a demure, whispery voice. She patronized the arts. She was too smart to be a Marie Antoinette, but she knew how to play the role. Once when Robert Kennedy and his father, Joseph, were discussing air pollution, she suggested the Air Force fly around spraying Chanel No. 5.

Of course, whether Jackie was a real aristocrat, whatever that is, is a matter of some debate. The Bouviers' glittering French genealogy was brazenly invented by her grandfather. Still, Jackie was certainly an aristocrat of the Social Register variety. Born in 1929 to a philandering, charming, handsome drunkard, John (Black Jack) Bouvier (and Janet Bouvier, née Lee, daughter of a self-made Irish banker), she was raised with all the usual upper-class

trappings: summers in the Hamptons, horses, a society debut.

It was an unfortunate consequence of her being a political wife that her amusing, catty side had to remain hidden. The real Jackie could be delightfully bitchy. She referred to Lyndon and Lady Bird Johnson as "Colonel Cornpone and his little pork chop." She required her designer to make all her dresses unique, wanting "no fat little women hopping around in the same gown." When Congressional wives gave a party for her, she didn't bother to show up but went to the ballet instead. She had, as a man who knew her put it, "a whim of iron."

Above all, she was expensive. Jackie was the kind of woman who is paid for in camels. In 1955, Joseph Kennedy reportedly offered her \$1 million (about \$12 million in today's dollars) to ignore his son's philandering. When she married Aristotle Onassis in 1968, he forked over \$3 million up front for the privilege, gave her \$5 million in jewelry during their first year of marriage and paid her an allowance of \$30,000 a month.

Of the four recently published Jackie books, Christopher Andersen's "Jack and Jackie" — which sketches the childhoods of both, then focuses on the marriage — is the most worth reading. It is odd that Mr. Andersen bills his book as "a great American love story," since it's clear from his (and others') account of the marriage that, at least initially, it was nothing of the sort — she would never have married him if he hadn't been rich, and he would never have married her if his father hadn't said he had to for career reasons. Still, Mr. Andersen, the author of books about Madonna and

Mick Jagger, comes the closest to making Jackie sparkle.

"All Too Human," by the journalist Edward Klein, examines much the same material that Mr. Andersen does, but through a moist, Harlequin-romance haze. The general tone is conveyed by the chapter and section titles: "Pleasure First," "Indiscreet," "Love Lies Bleeding" and, more obscurely, "Bongo, Bongo, Bongo." It comes across even better in Mr. Klein's

sweaty description of Jackie's defloration: "Her skirt bunched up above her hips, the backs of her thighs pressed against the decorative open grillwork. . . . When the elevator jolted to a stop, she was no longer a *demi-vierge*." Mr. Klein's first chapter contains this astonishing description of the author meeting with his subject: "She fixed me with those widely spaced, asymmetrical brown eyes in a gaze that could only be described as adoring."

John H. Davis is a career Jackie cousin — he spent summers with her as a child, and has written three books about Jackie and the Bouviers. The latest, "Jacqueline Bouvier: An Intimate Memoir," which covers her life until her first wedding, is enlivened by the fact that Mr. Davis obviously loathes Jackie's mother and includes many nasty details about her — for instance, how she employed a "Scandinavian snooperette" (as the unfortunate woman was called by Jackie's grandfather) to entrap her husband into verifiable adultery. Mr. Davis has also dug up a bizarre little tidbit that will be relished by conspiracy theorists: a close friend of Jackie's father, with whom Jackie played as a child, later moved to Texas and became "the principal mentor and friend" of Lee Harvey Oswald.

THE books do not always agree about matters of fact. For instance, did Jackie's mother deliberately conspire to get her father too drunk to give his daughter away at her wedding, as Mr. Klein says she did? When John Kennedy's sister Kathleen died in a plane crash in 1948, was she with her fiancé (as Mr. Klein says) or her "married lover" (Mr. Andersen)? The discrepancies are telling. Mr. Klein in particular adopts the annoying habit of putting quotation marks around conversations whose precise content he cannot possibly know.

Jacques Lowe's "Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis" is a book of photographs, accompanied by a brief text. Mr. Lowe took some of the most famous pictures of the couple: Jack and Jackie with baby Caroline nibbling Jackie's pearls; Jackie at Hyannis Port in that marvelous yellow-and-white check dress; the trip to Paris. Above all else, Jackie was fabulous in photographs, so paging through Mr. Lowe's book is a pleasure — that is, if you can forget what she herself thought of people who liked to look at her. After being stared at all night at the inaugural ball, Jackie compared her guests to "mesmerized cattle." □