parents, the World War II generation that now runs the country. Implicit in this fascinating study is the assumption that an impact even greater than the turmoil they caused in the '60s and early '70s will take place 10 or 20 years hence when the Vietnam generation succeeds to power in every sphere. Then we'll finally see what is the legacy of the Vietnam War. Whatever it turns out to be, Baskin and Strauss have shown us from whence it came in one of the landmark studies of the war.

Richard J. Walton

Richard J. Walton is most recently the author of Henry Wallace, Harry Truman, and the Cold War (Viking) and The Power of Oil (Seabury).

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Sailing into the Unknown

YEATS, POUND & ELIOT

M.L. Rosenthal

April 29, 1978
assassin and his wife, associating Oswald with endless women and giving Marina the mind of a political theorist. The author does not ask himself where Oswald came from or how he survived, but ferrets about in the more exotic chapters of his life. Epstein travelled to Japan and California, collecting a wad of unanalyzed impressions from Oswald’s army buddies. He did not go to the Soviet Union but paints Oswald’s life there as important and glamorous. In 1977 one of the more unstable members of the White Russian community that tried to befriend the Oswalds in Dallas shot himself in the course of a four day interview with Epstein—yet another clue the author boasts but dares not interpret. Legend, which purports to tell secrets about Oswald, tells us only that Epstein has authored a highly marketable parody: a spy yarn cloaked as a foreign correspondent. Prior to that she had been a researcher for Senator Jack Kennedy, campaigned for Adlai Stevenson, and studied Russian in college. In Moscow she happened to interview Oswald when he signalled his defection to the American press. The next she heard from him was in Harvard Square on November 22, 1963, in the rupture from Dallas. Since then McMillan has become an assassination expert and writes psychoanalytically-minded articles on the subject for The New York Times.

As McMillan reads her Freud, conspiracy charges are more proof to her point. The knowledge that we are Oswalds is profoundly intolerable. Americans, she says, are a potentially pathological people who use conspiracies to wall out their individual truths. As a nation we are also regicidal. McMillan points to the past three presidencies: Johnson was booted out of a second term, Ford lost his election because he pardoned the man America wanted hanged. Chappaquiddick, too, was a “ritual killing.” Faced with the headless corpse of American rulership, we can neither admit nor stop looking for the crime. Conspiracy cults are the way we participate, eyes averted, in the presidential slaving. This reflects in the polls, where 73 percent of the country is said to believe that Kennedy’s death was a plot. It also reflects in the assassination field.

“Can you see a historical progression in people who made their careers on the (Kennedy) assassination?” she comments. “I think the first generation had a legitimate need: they couldn’t bear the randomness of history. But these post-Watergate investigations are motivated by something else. The fascination is incredible; all this unresolved Oedipal material! Conspiracy theorists can go on elaborating their evidence forever. They have this tremendous need to look away from the assassin. Why do you suppose assassination research is such a male field?”

McMillan, let it be said, is a woman, and even she found Oswald difficult to face. If men need to insert a conspiracy between themselves and the assassin, McMillan sought refuge in Marina.

In 1964 she flew to Dallas and spent seven months with the assassin’s widow, taking notes on everything she did and said and keeping her out of the headlines. McMillan comments: “Being a negative celebrity suits Marina fine.”
Isolating her at home so that he could keep up his Russian. In reality his contacts with the Left consistently disappointed him, never got off the ground, gave him more odd ideas. Arrogant, lonely and horribly stingy, he turned increasingly reclusive, putting his wife and children up with friends and—not too surprisingly—kept no friends. The night before Kennedy came to town, Marina, his only stronghold, refused to come live with him. Oswald had already taken a shot at General Edwin A. Walker, Dallas’s leading citizen on the Right. All it took at this particularly low moment was a presidential motorcade for Oswald to switch sights. He happened to admire Kennedy and had even read his Pulitzer Prize winning book; but at this point the missary could not be stopped. Oswald had written and said many things to the effect that capitalism must be decapitated. He pulled the trigger and—for whatever we choose to make of it—hit Kennedy, who actually pampered an imagined attempt on his life the same morning he flew to Dallas. Such are the workings of the inscrutable fates—or as McMillan puts it, “the randomness of history”—in her beautiful book, a case study of an assassin that reads like a Russian novel, with its impeccable footnotes and all.

McMillan has done us the service of pointing out just how deeply the enemy lives within us. One closes her book pondering the odds that America has a sociological victim like Oswald on every block. Compared to this, the conspiracy question looks incidental. The question is not how many assassins can dance on the head of a pin, but what makes one dance, given a particularly ugly set of human circumstances at birth?

McMillan has paid a price for asking this question. Home from a television tour that was not exactly a success, she is still sifting through stacks of newly declassified FBI material (“It only deepens the picture of Oswald’s troubles. I don’t think it contradicts me.”) She has her own quarrels with the FBI, the CIA, and the politics of the inquiry. And she is naturally ambivalent over the book that cost her a decade and a half to produce, only to emerge like the rest of us on a political void.

“Conspiracy theorists should be building a radical movement instead of getting into this crazy stuff,” she quips. Asked about her own political involvement, she offers environmental activism, the psychoanalysis of American government, and smiles—a bit wanly I think. A cold war liberal who crusaded for Stevenson and Kennedy, McMillan has old fashioned values and perhaps too much heart. If we are to get on with the business of governing ourselves, we might start by forgiving our assassins, she suggests. To a public enmeshed in conspiracies, this may be hard to absorb.

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Alice van Buren is a free-lance writer in Boston.

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