

## RICHARD COHEN

### 9/18/79 *The Seberg Case: Actors As People*

IT CAME UP during an interview. He is an actor, worth something like a trillion dollars with two, maybe three, homes and a face that smiles at you from the magazines at the supermarket check-out stand, and he was saying things that night that made you feel sorry for him. Poor man, he thinks he's a person.

He was talking about a film he had made. It was a bad film and he was bad in it and the critics told him so. Only some of them got personal and vicious, ugly and nasty, and it hurt. He read the papers and winced but he said nothing and it was only this one night when he was asked, that he nodded his head yes and said it hurt. "I'd wish they'd remember they're writing about a person."

This comes to mind now because of Jean Seberg. You can imagine how she felt when she read in the gossip columns that the father of her child was a member of the Black Panther party, rather than the man who claimed the child as his own, Romain Gary. He says now that these gossip items killed Seberg, snapped her, sent her around the bend

until annually she tried to kill herself on the anniversary of the stillbirth of the baby. She took the baby back to Iowa with her and buried it and then, recently, she killed herself in Paris. Gary blames her death on items like the following:

"Can a small-town girl from Iowa find happiness in Paris? It seems so, despite the ups and downs of her marriage. 'It is wonderful,' smiled movie actress Jean Seberg, 31, when reporters looked in on her in a hospital in Majorca, where she was recuperating from complications in her pregnancy. 'We are completely reconciled—ironically just when our divorce papers are finally coming through.' She and French author Romain Gary, 56, are reportedly about to remarry even though the baby Jean expects in October is by another man—a black activist she met in California."

That item was printed in the "Newsmakers" section of the August 24, 1970, Newsweek. A similar item appeared in the May 19, 1970, Los Angeles Times—Joyce Haber's gossip column. In what is known in the trade as a blind item, Seberg was called "Miss A" because, Haber explained, "she is the current 'A' topic of chatter among the 'ins' of international show business circles. She is beautiful and she is blonde" and some three paragraphs later Haber says she is also pregnant. "Poppa seems to be a rather prominent black panther."

Both of the Seberg items originated with the FBI. They were planted by the bureau because the

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then-director, J. Edgar Hoover, the only contemporary racist to have the honor of a Washington building named for him, hated black militants. He particularly hated the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and he repeatedly attempted to smear the late civil rights leader in the press. As with Seberg, Hoover leaked details of King's personal life but the press did not bite. It also did not write that Hoover was a smear artist. There are no halos in Washington.

Now maybe the thing to do is lambaste the FBI for what it has done. God knows, it deserves it. It has done a deed so foul that to call it wrong does it no justice and it is disheartening to give the FBI a call and find out that nothing is being done about it—Seberg is a dead letter. No investigation is going on and no one is being asked to explain or account and all we have is the promise that this will never happen again. Sorry and all of that. In fact, very sorry.

But the FBI is not the only culprit here. It could not have done this alone. It had the help of the press, and not the penny, gutter press, but the Establishment press—Newsweek and the Los Angeles Times. The fact of the matter is that both news organizations printed an item they could not prove was true and that, you could argue, was really no one's business. After all, neither Woodward nor Bernstein nor Sherlock Holmes can tell

you who is the father of an unborn child.

No matter. What is troubling is that in many cases no one really cares about the truth of an item when it deals with a celebrity—with a famous person. Time and time again, the rules relating to truth and proof and even good taste go by the boards when it comes to famous people and it helps explain why there is so much antagonism toward the press in this country. Every time you turn on some television talk show, some celebrity is telling some tale of horror about what the press has done and you can almost hear millions of heads nodding in agreement.

The point here is not to suggest that the Seberg case is typical or that the Los Angeles Times and Newsweek sin more or less than, say, The Washington Post. The point instead is merely to go back to what that actor was saying when he complained that he's frequently not treated as if he were a person. What he would say is that the FBI was able to hurt Seberg because they saw her not only as an actress but as a person and therefore vulnerable. The press, they knew, would see her the other way around—an actress and not a person. The FBI has since promised to change its ways. It's time the press did the same.