

J.F.K. and the Beautiful Democrat Nun

FLYING IN TO LOVE

By D. M. Thomas
(Scribners: \$20, 256 pp.)

Reviewed by Ron Carlson

D. M. Thomas is correct in assuming—that the public murder of John F. Kennedy in 1963 has assumed the proportions of a modern myth. It has now become the proper terrain for fiction writers who might offer us new ways to see the event, understand it and find a place for it in our personal histories. In his new novel "Flying in to Love," Thomas (the author of eight other novels, including "The White Hotel") focuses on the assassination in a series of interrelated episodes of re-created, dreamed and imagined history. The book features the full confluence of real people who came together on that November day after the Kennedys arrived at Love Field in Dallas, as well as a host of others who would have met had things gone another way. Kennedy was scheduled to speak at the Trade Mart in Dallas. Thomas notes, where a woman would slap his face and another would come on to him, and then he and Jackie would spend the evening of the 22nd at Lyndon Johnson's ranch.

The novel is presented in 55 short chapters, and if there is a thread that runs through the book it is probably the story of Sister Agnes, a "an exceptionally beautiful Democrat nun" whom Kennedy shakes hands with that morning in Dallas, a person obsessed by him and his death. "Every moment of her life was the moment between firing and impact." Kennedy is sexually attracted to her—he's sexually attracted to nearly everyone in this book—and wants to try to see her again. For her part, she feels the charge of his personality and it stays with her all her days. But the Sister Agnes story is not enough of a story to carry the novel. It's too thin and she's too generic a character. The best reading of her would have her as a metaphor for the American people:

Their lives were forever changed by the death of the President they loved; they were raped—or dreamed they were—by the assassin; they will never know the whole and real truth; and their ability to find any solace has been shaken. And? Beyond this, her story—brought forward to the 1990s—seems simply a facilitating device for the novel. Sister Agnes seems a kind of place holder, and not a real woman bearing her consuming torment. But too many of the characters have the same problem. Even when we recognize the name (Oswald, Tippitt, Connelly) the figure that emerges does so simply to advance whatever scene, real or imagined, is being

Carlson's new collection of stories, "Plan B for the Middle Class," was published this year by Norton.

played. So much of the novel seems strangely mundane, flat. It is as if Thomas had shuffled all the scenes correctly in synopated increments and gotten the people in place and then not imagined—or dreamed—this world deeply enough.

This is a surprise. "The White Hotel" is an absolute tour de force in which sex and death mesh stunningly in a dream that is both personal and historical. In "Flying in to Love" there is no mesh. Though certain scenes and motifs are repeated from different angles to reveal new facets, there is no real connection or build in the narrative. It seems a forced lyricism, a wooden dream.

Sex and death are juxtaposed throughout the novel. At least three characters—two of them nuns—find elements of the murder a turn-on. This is the kind of thing that could be darkly erotic, but here seems simply sensational and without any real heat. And at every turning Jack Kennedy lusts after someone (except Jackie).

During the motorcade itself, Thomas has the President thinking, "So many lovely women all over the States. This is just one street in one city. It would be the same in every street in Dallas and every city and town and the country. Millions of white-bloused secretaries; and all, if given the chance, would respond to me. . . . There's just so little time." This kind of thinking, of course, belongs on bumper stickers, and it makes Kennedy—as all the characters—lightweight, oversimplified, and prevents the personal and sexual agenda of the book from taking on real energy. In one imagined scene Kennedy has a tryst in a hospital bed with a woman who actually says, "You're still one helluva kisser!" and "Be gentle."

So much of the dialogue seems oddly superficial. One morning greeting between the President and his wife is: "Hi Jack!" "Hi, honey!" Is this the stuff of which dreams are made?

As for trade secrets on the assassination, Thomas offers us a body switch, some ugly autopsy surgery, and a brain transfer. Lyndon Johnson—who is portrayed as simply crass—and J. Edgar Hoover have a little chat, and a man confesses to Sister Agnes. Except for the vulgarity that colors Thomas' portrait of Johnson, it's all standard fare, the kind of thing that informs the 10,000 dreams he tells us are had every night about the event.

We weren't really looking in this novel for any new answer or really any new light on this obsessive subject, but we were hoping Thomas' prism would be arresting. He's taken on big deaths before and taken our breath away. Sister Agnes thinks at one point, "History is a trance," but in "Flying in to Love" the trance is not sustained and finally offers us no dream as compelling as the ones we already had.