

NYTimes JUN 4 1976
 Novels for Our Times

By RICHARD R. LINGEMAN

THE STAR-SPANGLED CONFRONTATION By Jim Garrison 372 pages, McGraw-Hill \$8.95

In the opening scene of Jim Garrison's new novel, shots are fired at a figure in a limousine, and for a brief moment we are wrenched back in memory to Dealey Plaza and the death of President Kennedy. Because Jim Garrison, the author, is also Jim Garrison the former New Orleans District Attorney, who began an investigation into the assassination that many thought was in itself a fictional scenario, the reader might well expect that he or she is in for another assassination-conspiracy theory, smuggled to him in fictional guise.

But that is not Mr. Garrison's game at all. Although his novel breathes conspiracy through every pore and there is a Presidential assassination in it, there are no direct parallels to the Kennedy murder. The hero, a tough former Green Beret named Colin McFerrin, is simply the obligatory thriller character caught up in a farmhouse terror world of things that are not what they seem, in which friends become enemies and enemies become dead, as fast as McFerrin can stomp, garrote, break necks or otherwise manage it. The enemy, it soon develops, consists of certain factions in the American intelligence community—the new and invisible fifth estate, a dimension of government yet undiscovered.

Mr. Garrison's premise is not unduly far-fetched—indeed it is the stuff of our

waking nightmares these days. The problem is not with reality; it is with Mr. Garrison's fiction. That is, his novel lacks the tautness, the menacing atmosphere and the characters worth caring about that good thrillers have—indeed the seamy ordinariness that helps set the scene, cast the spell. There are some saving graces— notably Mr. Garrison's occasional talent for patches of baroque Southern court-house-square dialogue, and his knowledgeability of a wonderful paranoid world of intelligence. But the novel seems jerkily tacked out, like a wire-act-out coming in in chunks of copy on the teletype.

I HEAR AMERICA SWINGING

By Peter DeVries, 211 pages

Boston: Little, Brown, 1975

Transplant to Middle City

Iowa, the "swinger" moves, the latest countercultural kitsch and all the other symptoms of American avante-gardism, and if the author of the book is Peter DeVries, you can be sure he'll be out swinging. It seems there's some keeping up the farm out Middle City, way out that they've been "open throat." And American, if it has become American a ago, Mr. DeVries's book is thrust into this, a mixture of culture shock in the role of a marriage counselor with a Ph.D. in literature (it seems his thesis on divorce was turned down by the sociology department, despite his plea that it was really an "anti-thesis," making him the "Ionesco of sociology," he thereupon thriftily submitted it to the English department as an anti-novel).

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