

**'Changeling
Who Matured
Late'**

ROBERT KENNEDY: A MEMOIR
by JACK NEWFIELD
(E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc.) \$6.95

Back in the early '60s my friend Jack Newfield, an assistant editor of *The Village Voice*, did me a favor. *Monocle*, an occasional journal of political satire which I serve as editor and chief fund-raiser, was on hard times and Jack wrote a sympathetic piece about our plight. In addition to the high metaphor count which marks his style, it was distinguished by 23 errors of fact, which prompted one of my more literal-minded colleagues to draft a letter of correction. *The Voice* declined to print it on the grounds that *Monocle* had gotten enough free publicity and besides, "Newfield distorts in the direction of truth."

Now, the 31-year-old tax withhold-er, S.D.S. founding member, war pro-

testor, Dylan worshiper, demonstrator, Warren Commission critic and proselytizer for the so-called New Journalism, has memoirized his friend—yes, his friend—the late Robert Kennedy. And again it is, in my opinion, a distortion in the direction of truth. But this time the fact-errors are few, the distortion is illuminating and the truth is so penetrating that he has made an original and unique contribution in what is perhaps the most overworked territory in American publishing—the Kennedy psyche.

Newfield's message: Robert Kennedy was "a changeling who matured late." At the end he was conflicted, vulnerable and in transition, but "He was a contemporary man. His basic sensibility was not shaped by the Depression, World War II or McCarthyism. It was shaped by modern traumas like the Cuban missile crisis, Dallas, Watts and Vietnam." His outstanding quality was an "existential streak" (at war with his "political streak") which Newfield says means that he defined himself in action, although on occasion it seems to mean whatever Newfield wanted him to do.

Along the way, he has some nice analysis ("What his romanticism did was provide an emotional ballast for his pragmatism, to give it a humanist political thrust"); some astounding off-the-record comment (Kennedy told him, says Newfield, "The big problem with Johnson is that he is

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personally a coward. That's why he had to have half the Cabinet stand behind him when he went on television during the Detroit riot. . . ."); some disturbing-if-true tidbits (Richard Goodwin was writing speeches for Kennedy while still working for McCarthy); and some uncommonly shrewd observations ("Johnson and Kennedy seemed strapped onto opposite ends of the same seesaw, separated by generation, geography, politics, temperament and ambition. One of them could not rise in popularity without the other falling.")

The distortion comes from an air of Cinderella-ism which attends the proceedings. Partly this is because Newfield ignores the relation between role and rhetoric. Senators and presidential aspirants can (and should) do and say things Attorneys General and Presidents don't and can't. But mostly it is because he rides a profound yet particular insight into universal territory. As a 1963 civil rights activist Newfield felt that Kennedy was, as James Baldwin had said, "insensitive and unresponsive to the Negro's torment." Then, he says, the assassination of his brother "punctured the center of Robert Kennedy's universe"; he went through what Robert Jay Lifton called an "immersion in death," pain, suffering and dread and he saw the absurd. "Experience

began to stretch him and tragedy transform him" and he began to identify with peace, Negroes and the newer world he sought. My own view is that with proximity (the author became friendly with R.F.K. in '66) Newfield's perception changed as much as Kennedy's persona. As Attorney General, R.F.K. had more stuff than Newfield credits him for and his candidacy was less romantic than this book leads us to believe.

The perspective here is insider. But the real strength of *Robert Kennedy* is that Newfield has brought to it the intellectual apparatus of the outsider. We have learned from other sources that while Kennedy's younger staff were pumping the candidate full of radical formulations, Ted Sorenson, Steve Smith and Ted Kennedy were helping him make the key campaign decisions. It is not clear from this book whether Kennedy regarded Newfield as friend, court jester, flack, adviser, confidant, leak to the left, or all of these. What is clear is that Newfield had seen into the heart of his man from an angle unavailable to the innermost circles. It is not the whole truth, it is not nothing but the truth, but it is a part of the truth and an important one.

Mr. Navasky is writing a book on Robert Kennedy's Attorney Generalship.

by Victor S. Navasky