

Ellen Goodman

The Past Still Plagues Jackie

over
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BOSTON—No, I am not going to stay up nights worrying about Jackie.

She is not your average unemployed worker, I'll grant you that. For her there will be no embarrassing encounters at the credit office, no humiliation at the bank, no midnight terrors about putting food on the table. She can survive without a paycheck.

Still, I was struck by the announcement of her resignation from Viking Books last week—struck by the way in which her life is still inexorably ruled by a marriage that has been over longer than it lasted.

She began life as a Bouvier and she later became an Onassis. But she was Jack Kennedy's wife for 10 years—a 14-year lifetime ago—and it seems she will be judged as his widow forever, locked into our National Family Soap Opera.

When the latest of the Kennedy exploitation books, "Shall We Tell The President?" was bought by her employer, it could hardly have been a shock. The story about the planned assassination of Ted Kennedy in 1983 is as predictable as it is appalling. If there's a national fear to sell, someone will sell it. If there's a mass emotional button to push, someone will push it.

"She has a feeling of resignation that people will go on using this black material," said Viking publisher Thomas Guinzburg to Boston Globe reporter Bob Lenzner, and it had a ring of truth.

Jackie had stayed as far from politics as possible. Her editing work had been on books as noncontroversial as Russian antique arts. But there was no way for her to be isolated from the family business.

After 14 years of articles and books, after 14 years of being "sold" by former housekeepers and friends, after Ron Galella, after Mark Lane, after Judith Exner, she must have developed some immunity to trash.

After all, the Kennedy family story is like a rigged slot machine. Someone will keep pulling the handle as long as

the coins keep falling into their lap. To survive, this in-law had to stop caring, and to lower her threshold of outrage.

In her resignation letter, Jackie wrote: "Last spring, when told of the book, I tried to separate my lives as a Viking employee and a Kennedy family member."

Should she have protested? Should William Randolph Hearst have protested the coverage of his daughter Patty in the San Francisco Examiner? Her obligation, even her right, to protest seems a bit fuzzy.

After all, she had tried to object to the publication of books before—as in the Manchester affair—and been accused of trying to suppress them. This time, she was criticized for not trying to suppress one. She had no more ultimate responsibility for the publication of this ghastly little book than the average reporter does for another story in his or her paper.

It was only when this conflict of interest became a public collision that Jackie had to resign. She was called to account in print. Sadly, but almost inevitably, she was unable to separate the Viking employee and the Kennedy family member.

Now, I agree that \$26 million softens the blow of unemployment. But even if you inherit \$26 million on Tuesday, there is still the business of what you do on Wednesday. And Thursday. And next year.

Jackie isn't a sympathetic character in this national soap opera anymore. She would have had to remain a professional widow to be that. Preferably, an impoverished widow. But it seems to me that she had finally tried to make a life rather than marry one. And she tripped on her past.

Today she is a single, 48-year-old woman, whose children come home only for vacations, who wakes up in the morning with no place she has to go. Her limitations are as impressive as her freedoms.

For the most exceptional set of reasons, she still faces the most universal problem: What do you do with the rest of your life?

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