

Interpretive Report

Madison Avenue Version Of the Publication Battle

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By Richard Wilson

WASHINGTON — Draw up chairs, disciples of Madison Avenue, and listen to the tale of the sale of the serialization rights to "The Death of a President." Madison Avenue's modern wisdom told it instantly this was not the story of a widow wronged, nor even of an idealistic writer shorn of his literary integrity.

The denizens of this drab avenue of high-powered ad agencies and slick magazines — the very home of the executive suites of the makers of modern manners and morals — these in-people knew instinctively that the lawsuit brought by Mrs. John F. Kennedy was only one act in the drama of a big-time deal.

In the end, Bobby Kennedy got his way.

The Madison Avenue story, as its in-people knew it would, disclosed Sen. Robert F. Kennedy in the strongest role in negotiations which led to the sale to Look magazine of the serial rights to William Manchester's literary sensation of the decade.

NO MATTER if Mrs. Kennedy got worried about the sensation. Sen. Kennedy, accepted as the spokesman of the family, had already gone too far for any turning back. The competition between Look and Life was too keen.

Manchester had been consulting Sen. Kennedy on the critical Saturday afternoon when Look won the prize. The senator is quoted as aving told the author: "Gee that's great. That the \$665,000 price) is a record, isn't it? I'm so glad it went to Look instead of to Luce."

Before this enthusiastic endorsement of the deal, Sen. Kennedy had also told Manchester, as the Madison Avenue version goes: "If you go with Look you don't have to check back with me. But if you want to go with Life call me back."

None of this appeared in Sen. Kennedy's affidavit supporting the now abandoned lawsuit of Mrs. Kennedy to prevent the publication by Look of the story of the assassination and Lyndon B. Johnson's behavior thereafter. But Madison Avenue's version has so many facets and so many of its people who dealt with Bobby that it is hard to refute.

THE avenue also titters over the fact that Life's editors, on the critical week-end when

the deal was struck, were out emulating the message of their magazine by recreating while Look's editors were still grubbing away at their jobs.

So the truth of it seems to be that Look snatched the serialization from Life, which bid \$150,000 higher in the first instance, by dint of maintaining its contacts, a little more cash, and judging the situation better.

All the verisimilitude of the Madison Avenue version seems to lay at rest the supposition that Manchester tricked the Kennedys and took advantage of a lady's tragic sorrows. He merely refused to be a hack writing for a patron and got himself sufficiently released so that he could look at himself in the mirror as an independent, creative writer who had turned out a remarkable book with literary as well as historic value.

The question of Manchester's release is important. What the courts would have found in this respect is not known, but any judge after hearing the Madison Avenue version would have been hard-pressed to find that Sen. Kennedy's behavior, words and telegram — when taken all in context — did not in fact release Manchester to go ahead and sell the serial rights to his book. Manchester thought so. Look thought so. Harper and Row thought so. And, at least on the critical Saturday afternoon when he praised the final deal, Sen. Kennedy seemed to think so.

IN ANY case, a kind of rough justice emerges from Madison Avenue's madness. The serialization is going to be published and so is the book. The historian of the future will not care if Mrs. Kennedy cried, or if Lyndon Johnson was misjudged, nor will many of the readers of Look next month. They only will want to know what happened, who said what to who.

When a book as good as Manchester's is written, it is bound to be published. No agreements, legally enforceable or otherwise, are likely to stop it, nor prevent its publication at the peak of public interest. The Kennedys could well relax now and let as much of the truth as possible come out, including episodes they still object to. They need neither confirm nor deny but could well follow the pleading of Manchester, and let the book speak for itself.