

Books of The Times

At Last, the Whole Book—And Worth Having

By ELIOT FREMONT-SMITH

THE DEATH OF A PRESIDENT: November 20—November 25, 1963. By William Manchester. 710 pages. Harper & Row. \$10.

THE first thing to say about William Manchester's long-awaited book, "The Death of a President" (although it is not officially published until April 7, the book has been available in New York since last Friday), is that it is an extraordinarily impressive, fascinating and absorbing piece of work—far better in nearly every respect

than many of us have probably expected, either from the serialization in *Look* or from Mr. Manchester's previous writings or from the unprecedented public debate, acrimonious attacks and self-righteous defenses that have accompanied its unveiling. If the public brawling has reflected badly on all the principals involved—the Kennedys, their advisers, the author,



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William Manchester

the publishers—the book itself reflects well on all of them. This is not to say that the book is without flaws of fact, emphasis and taste; it is to say that these are not lethal, that the book is worth having and that, given both the traumatic nature of its subject and the circumstances of its writing, it is a remarkably clear, detailed, penetrating and empathetic account of the assassination and virtually every conceivably relevant event connected with it, from the preparations for the President's trip to Texas to the burial at Arlington.

As a historical document, the value of "The Death of a President" cannot seriously be challenged. Never before has the family of a slain leader been so willing to serve history as the Kennedys have. One may fault them on many counts—for their choice of author, for their attitude toward him, for their naïveté (in thinking, for instance, that the book would excite little interest), for their confusion (shared by all of us) as to what is properly private and what is public, for their imperiousness, for their lapses in taste (and no one, not even Mrs. Kennedy, has a corner on good taste or should be expected always and without exception to act as if he or she did), for their perhaps oversensitive concern about the book's possible

political consequences, et cetera.

History Is Served

But the fact is that this book—nothing like it—would have been possible without the Kennedys' active cooperation. They could have ignored history and kept their thoughts and memories entirely to themselves. Or, they could have recorded their memories in totally controlled (meaning fully censorable by them) circumstances for completely safe (meaning future—far future) release. They chose to do neither; they chose, at considerable, if inadequately perceived, personal and political risk, not to mention pain, to serve both history and our present knowledge by submitting to an objective recording of their memories, and helping to provide access to other important memories, for the preparation of a general historical account by an "outsider" to be published now.

Whatever one's opinion about "The Death of a President" and the battle that eventually all but engulfed it (engulfed our thoughts at any rate; and it is still probably too early for most of us to separate the book from the battle—or from our own memories and still raw feelings about the assassination, the emotional personal property of each of us who experienced that incredible weekend), no fair appraisal should forgo these facts. It is a shame that Mr. Manchester, perhaps in his bitterness, perhaps out of an understandable urge to assert his own responsibility for the work, gives them exceedingly short shrift in his introduction. Mrs. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy have specifically disowned "The Death of a President," yet without them there would have been no comparable book.

If the Kennedys deserve strong acknowledgment, so does Mr. Manchester. He has asked that the book be judged on its own

merits, and one can see why: in toto, it is a far more impressive work than it seemed in partial serialization. Although the portions that appeared in *Look* included the major highlights of the full account, they also emphasized its weakness.

The book itself is a massive, articulately organized and utterly compelling compilation of the most extraordinary amount of data. Some of it—too much—is so trivial as to seem ludicrous, but no one can argue that Mr. Manchester hasn't been diligent. Whatever the problems of emotional identification with the late President, this is by far Mr. Manchester's best book. Since his previous work has consisted of four rather crassly commercial novels and four interesting and rather sensitive, but also somewhat ob-

sequious and slick profile-biographies — of H. L. Mencken, the Rockefellers, John F. Kennedy (the “adoring” “Profile of a President,” shortly to be reissued with a new epilogue) and the Krupp family (the project that was interrupted by “The Death of a President”); it has been published in serial form only—it seems fair to say that his present book is an achievement of unexpected dimensions.

It also contains at least the beginnings of a scholarly apparatus. Unfortunately, Mr. Manchester is chary about annotation and has chosen not to provide in the book needed commentary on all sorts of details that have been challenged during the last few months. It is possible that such commentary would have delayed publication — one must stop somewhere. But the book is important enough, and good enough, to deserve such further commentary, and one hopes—especially since Mr. Manchester is himself so giving to invoking the demands of history—that it may be included in future editions or in a supplementary volume.

There are further complaints that should be noted about “The Death of a President.” Mr. Manchester’s style verges on the lush-flowery-exotic: and to read him one must sometimes hack one’s way through a jungle of unnecessary, overly dramatic adjectives. The style, which is at the same time super smooth, tends to novelize reality — as if heightening effects were needed for this reality. (Why, for instance, the sleekly portentous, impersonal title? Why not be specific? Making John F. Kennedy pretend-anonymous doesn’t really enhance our memory of him, or our sense of ourselves, or our confidence in the accuracy of this book.)

Rights of Privacy

The passages dealing with Mrs. Kennedy and her children are perhaps the most assaultive. They are of course the most intrinsically affecting — and the most complicated to think about in terms of rights of privacy (though we might be concerned, too, about the Oswalds’ rights of privacy). Here Mr. Manchester’s invading pen drips admiration and sympathy and turns some of the pages of this book to pulp. The prose is, oddly, at once aggressive and supine; so the reverse face of obsequiousness may be arrogance.

On the other hand, the frequently heard charge that the book is unfair to President Johnson is not supported, at least in this reading. Mr. Johnson comes through as a complex and sometimes difficult man (not as difficult as some Kennedy aides, however) who acted with necessary forthrightness and great—though not God-like, but then he isn’t God — sensitivity in the most harrowing circumstances imaginable. In fact, there are no villains in this history—excepting the city of Dallas and perhaps Marina Oswald—just people driven by inner needs and outside events, making quick decisions on little information, doing what they must, and most of them acting with as much courage and understanding as one could reasonably expect.

“The Death of a President” cannot be a definitive work. It is too close to the event and, whether or not one approves, parts of it are still continuing (e.g., the bizarre investigation being conducted in New Orleans) — a possibility about which Mr. Manchester might have been more cautious. But about the book’s importance as a historical document, a compelling account, an invaluable compilation of source material on one of the century’s central events — information that might otherwise have been lost — there is no question. It was worth the effort; it may even have been worth the pain.