

Ladies Home Club April 67



The Real Villains of the William Manchester Book

By Judith Crist, Critic-at-Large

With the publication of the Manchester book (and who outside the remotest igloo or jungle tree-house would have to be told that it's William Manchester's *Death of a President?*), there is further fuel for the fire of controversy, for the continuing debate on just who has been the villain in the case. Arguments and evidence and confidential information will fill the air:

Was the righteous author undone by the rich and powerful clansmen? Were the honorable noblemen victimized by a money-minded writer whom they trusted? Was the lovely lady, the grieving wife, betrayed in her deepest emotional confidences—or did she, regally and ruthlessly, gainsay herself? Has history been cheated? And, perhaps above all, has society—have *we*—been deprived of a single tear or sigh, a soupçon of sorrow, a moment of lost self-control or pressure-propelled self-revelation, a glimpse of blood from a scarce-healed wound re-opened? Have we, in effect, been cheated of our money's worth? And whodunit? Who is the villain in the case?

The answer to the last question has—or should have—been obvious from the beginning, as any aficionado of the mystery drama knows, simply because it must turn out to be the proverbial butler, the least-suspect character on the scene, the one outside the limelight but ever present.

We are the guilty. We, the public, are the villains. For there would have been no Manchester case, no ugly controversy, were we not always present with our demand for "instant history"—at any price.

"Price" seems to me the key word. Of course we have always had the right to know not only the fact of history but its coloration by the personality and character of the men and women who create these facts. But we are in an era of acceleration,

where our demand for "fact" is immediate, and the demand, made with all the salivating impatience of the voyeur, is backed up with hard cash—to the tune of millions of dollars. The era of acceleration is also the era of inflation.

This impatience is a hallmark of our time, a time of super-communication media, of literacy supplemented by every imaginable audio-visual aid, a time unmatched in history in mass communication. Above all, and it is not easy to tell whether communication has fostered this or vice versa or whether they are concomitants, it is a time of voyeurism, when our appetite for the intimate detail has reached new heights—or, perhaps, new depths. We will no longer wait

for the general or statesman, long in retirement, to ponder the old documents and write his memoir in perspective; we cannot let the historian think and re-think and write in objectivity, his judgments uninfluenced by the presence of flesh-and-blood characters with public reputations and private personalities that do not always match. We want "instant" history and if, say, the historian demands at very least a little breathing time, we'll lure the king's brother's butler's sister-in-law into writing an intimate view of the royal household (as viewed from the butler's pantry on alternate Thursdays).

Consider our creation of the Manchester case, which has been aptly described as one of the "monumental" controversies of literature. Minutes, literally, after and since the assassination of President Kennedy on Nov. 22, 1963, trillions of words have been published on the events preceding, during and immediately following the tragedy. Certainly there was need for an "authentic" history of this world-shaking event, one that would, of course, require the cooperation of those most deeply and personally involved. Within three months of the event, the Kennedys were deluged by requests for such cooperation; the family decided to have "a single, authorized and authentic" version; William Manchester, an established reporter and author, was chosen. And one would have thought that in five—or more—years we would have had as "authentic" a history as a man can construct within his own time; that the manuscript would be read and pondered, the perspective current events require would grow, the definitive truth would emerge.

But the public appetite must be served. Suddenly the inevitable and understandable private controversy erupted into the open—because suddenly millions of dollars were involved, the "any price" the public will pay for "instant" history. And so private and public images and idols teeter and/or topple; personal anguish is unlimited; characters are destroyed and suspicions created; questions are raised that cannot be answered to everyone's satisfaction.

One question can be answered, however, hopefully to our complete dissatisfaction with ourselves. The villains? Time to plead guilty, I suspect. **END**

