
The Book of the Century

The most widely discussed and sought-after book of our time, *The Death of a President*, is about to be published. It was originally conceived by the Kennedy family (the bereaved widow in particular) who now wish they'd never started it.

—A *This Week Inside Story* BY GEORGE SHERMAN



THE LATE PRESIDENT'S brother and wife took Caroline and John, Jr., skiing in Sun Valley a year ago — never suspecting the literary storm that was brewing

This year's most eagerly awaited book — William Manchester's inside story of the Kennedy assassination, *The Death of a President*, which will be published in March — was originally Jacqueline Kennedy's own idea. Now she wishes she had never thought of it.

Although Manchester wrote the book at Mrs. Kennedy's request, many things about it, from her viewpoint, have turned out wrong. She tried to stop the serialization of excerpts from it in "Look" Magazine, which starts this week, and she is unhappy because the book itself is being published this year. She had wanted to withhold publication until five years after her husband's death, or even longer.

Disagreements over the contents of the book between its author and its sponsors — Mrs. Kennedy and Senator Robert F. Kennedy — and their advisers have centered on two sore spots. The Kennedys are disturbed by some of Mrs. Kennedy's personal recollections of the tragedy which Manchester has insisted on putting into the book. They are also uneasy about the author's treatment of President Johnson, which may aggravate the already sensitive feelings between LBJ and Bobby.

Mrs. Kennedy talked freely to the author

"Jackie talked freely for ten hours to Manchester about what went on in Dallas and afterwards," a friend of the Kennedys says.

"She was emotional, and she said things that she now regrets having said, but she assumed that Manchester would be more discreet about using what she told him."

With the Kennedy family's stamp of approval on his tape recorder, Manchester was able to pick up from JFK's White House aides a wealth of intimate detail, described by one editor as the kind that "doesn't usually find its way into print."

"Much of it is rough on Johnson," the editor adds. "Perhaps too rough."

One such sequence in the original manuscript, which the Kennedys' advisers and the publisher's editors have tried to tone down, deals with the scene in the Air Force One plane at the airport in Dallas when Johnson was making arrangements to have himself sworn in as President while the Kennedy party was chafing at the delay in getting JFK's body back to Washington. Manchester described Mrs. Kennedy, wandering into the plane's bedroom cabin in search of a place to rest, and finding Johnson talking with a lawyer on the telephone about the proper form of the Presidential oath.

Did Kennedy try to avoid the fatal trip?

Another item of contention is an account of a meeting in the White House between the President and the Vice-President before the fatal trip to Texas.

Kennedy, according to Manchester's report, did not want to go and complained because Johnson could not accomplish, without his help, the aim of the mission — patching up a quarrel between two factions of Texas Democrats. Johnson argued that Kennedy had to make an appearance for the welfare of the party, like it or not.

The book is said to contain so many hitherto untold revelations about the events of the assassination and the Presidential changeover that one editor who has read it predicts it will produce "200 page-one news stories." "Look" has paid a reported \$650,000 for its magazine rights and

the London "Sunday Times" gave \$100,000 for the British newspaper serialization. The Book-of-the-Month Club has paid one of its biggest prices ever for the book club rights, reportedly over \$250,000.

When Mrs. Kennedy invited Manchester to write *The Death of a President* in February, 1964, ten weeks after the assassination, she neither expected nor wanted the book to be such a sensation. Nor did she realize that she might not be able to maintain full control over the book after it was written.

"If I decide the book should never be published — then Mr. Manchester will be reimbursed for his time," she wrote in 1964 to one newspaper columnist when he sought her permission to do a similar history. "Or if I decide it should be known — I will decide when it should be published. . . ."

Much to Jacqueline Kennedy's chagrin and frustration, it has not turned out that way at all.

Mrs. Kennedy first decided to have an authorized account of the events of the assassination written by an author of her choice, with her help and co-operation, because she felt that such a privileged book would discourage undesirable writers who were then seeking to explore the story of her husband's death. One reputable, nationally known reporter-historian she especially wanted to discourage. The thought of a book coming out with one of his dramatic-type titles horrified her.

"The idea of it is so distressing to me," Mrs. Kennedy wrote the newsman, "I can't bear to think of seeing — or of seeing advertised — a book with that name and subject — one that my children might see or someone might mention it to them."

He's going ahead with his book, but he has found that many of the doors which Mrs. Kennedy opened for Manchester are closed to him.

Mrs. Kennedy, with Bobby's approval, picked Manchester as the writer of the authorized book because she admired a biography of President Kennedy that he wrote in 1962. He was not a well-known author at that time but his book on JFK pleased the Kennedys — who are notoriously sensitive about anything printed about them — because it was warm and pleasant, and also mild and reverent. For the same reasons, it was not a big best seller.

When Manchester took on the assignment, both Mrs. Kennedy and Bobby Kennedy agreed to give him a free hand in writing the book. He received no money from the Kennedys during the two years that he spent on research and writing and he stipulated that neither Jacqueline nor Bobby would see the manuscript until after it was published.

However, the contents of *The Death of a President* were not really hidden from Mrs. Kennedy or her

WILLIAM MANCHESTER, an unknown author, suddenly becomes the most controversial literary figure of our times



brother-in-law, even though they didn't read its pages. Manchester agreed to submit the book to a panel of their close friends and to consider any changes suggested by the panel. The reviewers recommended many changes (some of which Manchester accepted) and several important revisions and cuts (which he strongly resisted).

"The Kennedys were surprised to find that Manchester was much harder to reason with after the book was written than they expected him to be," one of their friends says. "He took a firm stand

against diluting or cutting many things that they found objectionable. He said it was vital historical data which couldn't be tampered with. They had asked him to write a complete account of the assassination but what he wrote was much more complete than what they had bargained for."

Jacqueline Kennedy was also astonished when she returned to New York last July from a vacation in Hawaii to learn that the book, without her okay, had been set for publication in 1967 and that the \$650,000 deal had been made with "Look" for magazine serialization. During her absence, the publishers

JACQUELINE KENNEDY: "I am shocked that Mr. Manchester would exploit the emotional state in which I recounted my recollections to him early in 1964; and I am equally shocked that reputable publishers would take commercial advantage of his failure to keep his word. To the author and publishers this book will be only another transient chapter in their work; but my children and I will have to live with it for the rest of our lives."

and a few of the Kennedy advisers had convinced Bobby Kennedy that the book was too valuable a property to be kept under wraps and had urged earlier publication than previously planned.

Who gave the O.K. to publish it this year?

Although there is now some disagreement about who gave the go-ahead signal, the arrangement to give the book to "Look" and let Harper & Row publish it this year was made without Mrs. Kennedy's knowledge. When she heard about it, turmoil ensued.

Mrs. Kennedy declared that she had never wanted the book serialized in a magazine — the publicity arising from such wide-spread exposure of its material would be disturbing to herself and her children. Furthermore, she wasn't sure she wanted the book itself to appear at this time, or at all — and had the book publishers served with a summons.

But it was too late, though "Look" had made a concession in an attempt to pacify her. Instead of running excerpts from the book in seven issues of the magazine, as they originally planned, the editors agreed to limit the serialization to four issues.

The book will be one of the biggest money-makers of modern times, but both Manchester and Harper & Row agreed to turn most of the profits over to the John F. Kennedy Library and political studies center at Harvard. The author is keeping only 25 per cent of magazine and book club proceeds.

Despite the success of his painstaking and probing work, a definite coolness now prevails between Manchester and his once admiring patroness.

"At this point, I think Jackie and Bobby would like to disown all responsibility for the book," a friend of theirs said a few weeks ago. "But she asked Manchester to write it in the first place and, without their help, it wouldn't have turned out to be as powerful as it is. This was one Kennedy project that got out of the Kennedys' control. That's something that doesn't happen often." (THE END)

In all that was written of the book in advance of any publication there was persistent inaccuracy. For example, writing in This Week Sunday Supplement January 8, 1967, well after he should have known much better, George Sherman said, "he (Manchester) stipulated that neither Jacqueline nor Bobby would see the manuscript until after it was published". This was a widespread, prepublication myth.

Sherman also said, "The author is keeping only 25 percent of ~~the~~ magazine and book club proceeds".

The Sherman-This Week editorial judgement is reflected in the modest title of his article, "The Book of the Century".

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