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Going to extremes with Kennedy?

By Janet Sawyer
Times Staff Writer
NEW YORK—The book is not the TV mini-series. It's the fully flap-created new ground in a book that rises his career

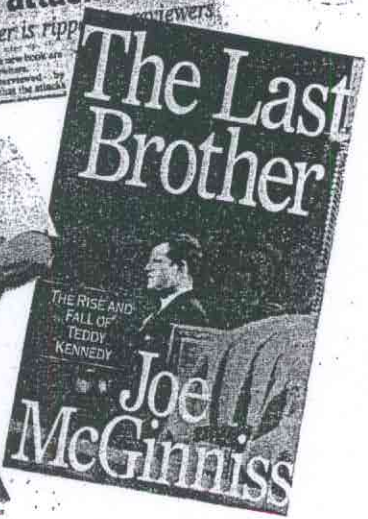
A Genuinely Unrehearsed Rotten Book

Kennedy Quotes in New Book Are Invented

By SARAH LYALL
Joe McGinniss's furber about Senator Edward M "The Last Brother," includ ing description of Mr. Kenn

Kennedys behind attack: author McGinniss's The Last Brother is ripped

The publication of Joe McGinniss's biography of Sen. Edward Kennedy was preceded by a number of damaging reports, as headlines attest. The writer, shown outside his Massachusetts home, says he's troubled by "the sheer level of venom and spite and anger."



THE MCGINNISS MASSACRE

How a 'Blockbuster' Biography Became a Literary Lightning Rod

By David Streitfeld
Washington Post Staff Writer

He's been called a worthless, money-grubbing, no-talent, fraudulent, lying, cheating, sickening, disingenuous sleaze in every major newspaper and magazine in America, but you've got to admit: Joe McGinniss still has his good manners. There's an astonishing lack of bitterness in his voice as he talks about how "The Last Brother: The Rise and Fall of Teddy Kennedy" was destroyed in the media over the last three months. How you feeling, Joe?
"It's no fun being a voodoo doll, having all these pins stuck in you every day," he says. "I'd rather be respected than reviled. But if that has to be part of the price for writing this book, which I still believe deeply in, so be it."
He's been ridiculed for making things up, and condemned for stealing from others. He's been denounced for wallowing in the old sudge, and dismissed for not having any new dirt. He's been told that his technique of stating what Kennedy was thinking was so appalling as to be unpardonable, yet so boring it's unreadable.
In retrospect, it seems sure to have been incendiary: a controversial writer on a controversial senator. Yet that—plus an angry Kennedy family biographer, not to mention the media's overwhelming wish to issue summary judgment—wasn't quite enough to make McGinniss the most despised literary figure since Clifford Irving, who attempted 21 years ago

to hoax the world with bogus Howard Hughes memoirs. You need help to get this unlucky.
McGinniss's real misfortune was to become a symbol of the excesses of contemporary nonfiction. As the first-person approach developed by the practitioners of the New Journalism evolved over the last decade into a godlike ability to flawlessly re-create events and conversations based solely on the memory of one or more participants, an inevitable backlash has been brewing.
In pushing this omniscience to the ultimate, McGinniss—who had neither been present during the events of Kennedy's life nor interviewed those who had, although he wrote as if he had done both—was a natural candidate for trouble.
How much, no one could have predicted. As recently as May, Simon and Schuster was actually eager for "The Last Brother"—which is principally about Kennedy in the '60s, a period in which he moved unwillingly to center stage—to be a sensation. The book was described in its catalogue as "shocking and newsworthy."
That turned out to be exactly correct. It just didn't happen the way the publisher was hoping.
Over one hot summer, McGinniss has become a doormat for all of literary America. "This didn't become a controversial book," he notes.
See MCGINNISS, D2, Col. 1

McGINNISS, From D1

"Controversies have two sides. In this case, the other side never developed. What I said didn't matter."

So what would he call it?

"A massacre."

Moreover, the stain is likely to linger. Asked if McGinniss would be permanently tainted by this episode, Simon and Schuster President Carolyn Reidy says candidly: "I would hope not, but I don't know, to be perfectly honest."

The publisher itself need have no such worries. While S&S has been slapped around by a few commentators in recent weeks, the grand tradition in these cases is for all blame to accrue to the author. Essentially, he's an independent contractor for whom the publisher bears minimal responsibility.

Aside from avoiding lawsuits, a publisher's primary concern is making money. "The Last Brother" hasn't been doing too well at this: It limped onto the New York Times bestseller list for two weeks, fell off again Sunday, and will reenter it this Sunday at No. 15. For a book with 265,000 copies in print, this is effectively a disaster. As McGinniss himself points out, "The bottom half of the list in August is frankly not a hotbed of competition."

Barring dramatic and unprecedented improvement, the lackluster sales mark a publishing first: the first time such a high-profile book by a high-profile author has been so cleanly shot down.

"I used to believe the only bad publicity an author could get is being charged with rape," says Steven Schragis, the head of Carol Publishing. "Now, after McGinniss, I'm not so sure."

In casting about for someone to blame, McGinniss has suggested in interviews that the senator's operatives are out to destroy him. "If I were working for Kennedy and wanted to discredit this book ahead of time," he says, "this is exactly the approach I would have taken."

It's true that, as was the case last year with a potentially damaging book by former Kennedy aide Rick Burke, the family's friends are eager to give journalists documents that undermine their opponents. And Sen. Kennedy did call William Manchester, author of "The Death of a President," to make sure he had seen an article that said McGinniss had plagiarized him.

But McGinniss suggests more. After a television interview with Larry King, he says King told him privately about "the pressure I've had to cancel you. I've never seen it worse. They didn't

want you here."

Who? asked McGinniss.

"I don't have to spell out the names," King said.

Censorship and intimidation! The only problem is, King denies having any such conversation.

"I never got one call from anyone representing the Kennedys, and I never said anything to McGinniss about being pressured," King says. About his longtime friend, he comments: "I think he's getting a little paranoid."

At this point, who could blame him?

The Writer

McGinniss, 50, was in a uniquely unfortunate position with "The Last Brother." Those who admired his previous work were disappointed it wasn't the fully researched, heavily footnoted, ground-breaking biography of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) they expected from the No. 1 best-selling author of "The Selling of the President, 1968." Those who don't like him personally—a particularly large crew, it seems—found further evidence to confirm their distaste.

The writer says he's troubled by "the sheer level of venom and spite and anger." That includes Jack Newfield in the New York Post saying McGinniss "must feel like the Sirhan of the pen, as he peddles his character assassinations," as well as the eminent publisher Roger Straus telling the Chicago Tribune the book is "a hoax."

"What is it I've done over 25 years," McGinniss asks, "to have this many people act almost like a lynch mob?"

A fair question. Most famously, he wrote suck-up letters to Jeffrey MacDonald, the military surgeon who was convicted of murdering his wife and children. In the course of his research,

McGinniss had decided his subject was guilty, yet that didn't stop him from writing, for years, letters to MacDonald stating there had been an obvious miscarriage of justice and wasn't it all a shame.

MacDonald felt understandably betrayed when "Fatal Vision" finally appeared with a coldblooded description of him as a murderer. He sued, collecting \$325,000.

The real punishment for McGinniss, however, came in Janet Malcolm's much-talked-about New Yorker series on MacDonald's lawsuit, which not only served to publicize the letters but made a case that journalists in general and McGinniss in particular are "a kind of confidence man," seducing their subjects and then be-

traying them.

They're united for all eternity now, Joe and Janet, which makes it weirdly appropriate that Malcolm published in *The New Yorker* two weeks ago a piece that used the poet Sylvia Plath to demonstrate the murkiness of contemporary biography.

"Every now and then," she wrote, "a biography comes along that strangely displeases the public. . . . The biography-loving public does not want to hear that biography is a flawed genre. It prefers to believe that certain biographers are bad guys." It is a passage that seems to be speaking directly to McGinniss, and not unsympathetically.

McGinniss hasn't always needed Malcolm to be his own worst publicist. For instance, he reminds readers of his 1976 book "Heroes" that a profile he had written of George McGovern shortly after the '72 presidential campaign was called by the candidate "full of inaccurate and fabricated quotations. . . . I have seldom encountered a more disreputable and shoddy piece of journalism." Most reporters are not so unwise as to repeat past denunciations, whether deserved or not.

This time around, the literary crimes McGinniss has been charged with involve forms of laziness: He indulged in lurid suppositions without research to back them up, didn't bother to disguise his appropriations from others or even add footnotes. Although he says he talked to "dozens" of people, the book is written in such a way that you can find no trace of them.

This, believes Milton Gwirtzman, a longtime Kennedy associate who was a key player in the book's downfall, is why other journalists beat up on him. "They were offended he took his million dollars and didn't do the work. They have to work for their quotes. He didn't." In other words, it was personal, which might also explain why it was so bloody.

"Certain books require legwork," McGinniss responds. "What I wanted

"What is it I've done over 25 years to have this many people act almost like a lynch mob?"

—Joe McGinniss

to do with this book required me to think and write about Teddy in a way that hadn't been done before."

Still, McGinniss is particularly vulnerable on the laziness charge. A side-by-side examination of "Heroes" and "The Last Brother" reveals that much of the Kennedy material in the first, adding up to several pages, is reprinted either verbatim or almost verbatim in the second.

Furthermore, McGinniss reprints in "Heroes" a newspaper column he had written eight years earlier about a visit Sen. Robert Kennedy had made to Philadelphia. In "The Last Brother," he quotes some of these sentences verbatim and without attribution. There's nothing hugely immoral about recalling a 1968 sentence to duty in 1976 and then again in 1993, but it probably won't win you any admirers either.

"Maybe," McGinniss suggests after a discussion of some of these points, "I've become the journalistic equivalent of what Teddy Kennedy used to be—someone who can't get away with anything because whatever he

does, there's always something from his past that can be used against him."

In that sense, he adds, maybe he was the perfect biographer for Ted Kennedy after all.

The Press

From the beginning, Simon and Schuster had a problem with "The Last Brother." As recently as last fall there had been both a scandalous book on Teddy Kennedy and the first volume of a highly critical life of President Kennedy. Booksellers feared Kennedy overload. "We got negative feedback," says S&S President Reidy.

A decision was made to distribute in May an excerpt of several chapters of McGinniss's book. In the more limited sense, the sampler worked; the booksellers responded favorably. But it was on the very first page, in a letter from Editor in Chief Michael Korda, that S&S made its first mistake.

"It's not often that I have the pleasure of bringing your attention to a major work of biography—not, in fact, since David McCullough's 'Truman,'" Korda wrote, making it sound as if "Truman" had been published decades ago rather than 11 months before.

This, McGinniss knew when he saw the letter, was the wrong signal. "We should not be comparing this to David McCullough," he says. "The two books have nothing in common." But at the time he didn't complain; he didn't

think it would matter that his ruminations were being billed as a standard biography.

When the Boston Globe's book editor got a copy of the excerpt, it ended up with political correspondent Curtis Wilkie, who was asked to check it out for new revelations.

"Friends of the senator are questioning McGinniss' credibility," Wilkie wrote in a June 2 story, adding: "Milton Gwirtzman, who was with Ted Kennedy on the afternoon of Nov. 22, 1963, the day of President Kennedy's assassination, said in a telephone interview yesterday that some of McGinniss' account was 'totally made up.' He said other details appeared to be based on William Manchester's 1966 book, 'Death of a President.'"

In essence, that describes the whole story to date—Wilkie even wrote presciently about "speculation in publishing circles that the book may create a new controversy for McGinniss"—yet neither the Globe nor anyone else followed up on it. No one cared, no one was shocked.

More than three weeks later, on June 25, *The Washington Post* published a story that focused on the disclaimer on the copyright page of the excerpt. The note said: "Some thoughts and dialogue attributed to figures in this narrative were created by the author, based on such research and his knowledge of the relevant people, places and events."

The biggest problem was the word "created." That's something *novelists* do. When the *New York Times* said William Manchester "created dialogue in his book, too," it was forced to run a retraction a week later. "Mr. Manchester," the correction said, "says he recreated dialogue."

In explaining that cryptic author's note, McGinniss says: "I had a desire to tell readers ahead of time, upfront, this is not a traditional biography. . . . I don't change the events of Teddy's life, but my interpretations are subjective, and very much my own."

He wasn't, he insists, trying to pull a fast one. Otherwise, why would he have put the note there? "I was trying to pull a slow one—to make sure everyone could see the stitches on the baseball."

McGinniss would have been better off pulling a fast one. The next day, a Saturday, the *New York Times* picked up the story. "Kennedy Quotes in New Book Are Invented," said the headline.

You couldn't blame the paper for saying that—after all, it's what the

note in the excerpt said. The only problem is, it's not true. While some thoughts are inferred in the book, all the quotations (except for one minor one) come from published sources. Adding the word "dialogue" to the note, McGinniss says, was simply a mistake.

It was a fatal one. The Times' editors considered the story significant enough to put on the front page—and that, in what was to come, made all the difference.

"Many, many, many biographies, published by virtually every publisher in the country, are done in flawed ways," says Schragis of Carol Publishing. "The issue of this book being so questionable and flawed was not a particularly big deal until it was on the front page of the Times."

Schragis had a very recent experience that provides a direct illustration of the power of the Times' front page. This summer Carol brought out a novel that was written with the help of a computer. Booksellers ordered only 7,000 copies. Then the Times ran a front-page feature. By noon that day, the publisher had received orders for 30,000 more copies. Carol also received "hundreds" of requests for interviews.

In McGinniss's case, one of the publications influenced by the Times' front page was the Boston Globe. An editor there called Wilkie at home and asked him to chase the story. "No, I wrote it three weeks ago," the reporter said, and went to a ballgame at Fenway Park.

At the time, Wilkie was annoyed. Now, he's more philosophical. "There are all sorts of trees falling in forests around the country that don't get followed up until the Post or the Times does it. They're the only two papers that have that kind of impact."

The Historian

Every tale that features a villain needs a hero as well, someone to underline just how nefarious the bad guy is. William Manchester, 71, filled this role admirably. His multi-volume biography of Winston Churchill is particularly popular and highly regarded. But it's "The Death of a President" that really sets Manchester apart from the typical writer of nonfiction.

It was one of the best-selling nonfiction books of the 1960s—1.3 million copies in hardcover alone, perhaps a

hundred times the sale of the average title. The Kennedys talked in a way they never have since, a fact that makes the book a definitive source of information about the family's activities and emotions during those four days. As Manchester wrote in his foreword: "In time I myself shall merely become a source for future historians as yet unborn."

Despite repeated references in news stories to how heavily McGinniss leaned on Manchester, it wasn't until the July 12 issue of New York magazine that the texts of "The Last Brother" and "The Death of a President" were compared. John Taylor gave a number of examples where he believed McGinniss had leaned too heavily on Manchester, charging: "Moralists might go so far as to call it plagiarism."

Oddly, no other publication followed up. So two weeks later, Taylor revisited the story. This time he quoted Manchester. "I'm going to sue," the historian said.

Taylor concluded: "If Manchester proceeds with a lawsuit, he could put Simon and Schuster in a difficult position. Its executives could side with McGinniss against Manchester. Or they could conceivably turn against McGinniss. . . . They may try to negotiate a compromise, delaying publication of the book until McGinniss can draft an acknowledgment that satisfies Manchester."

All of this was purely hypothetical—the kind of "conditional" and "speculative" suppositions that Taylor and everyone else had denounced in McGinniss. It's an easy form to criticize, but rather tempting to do yourself.

A press release was sent out in advance of this issue of New York, which enabled a Washington Post story to appear the same day. Other publications followed up; the chase was on again.

One curious element of the stories is the way Manchester was instantly mythologized. Take something as simple as money. McGinniss has been repeatedly criticized for making so much off "The Last Brother," maybe as much as \$2 million. But Manchester, said the Washington Post article, felt so strongly about his book that "he declined all profits, turning them over to the Kennedy Library. . . . 'I didn't want to become rich because of the death of a friend,' he said."

Alas—as he confirms when questioned—he did.

Manchester gave up royalties from the Harper & Row edition, which came to more than \$1 million. On the other hand, he kept both the serializa-

tion rights—which went for \$665,000, a record at the time and quite a bit of money in 1967—as well as the royalties from the 314,000 copies of the book sold in other countries. "A project from which I had not expected to make much money would . . . make me financially independent," he wrote in his essay "Controversy."

It also would have been worth noting for its irony alone that Manchester has run into some of the same challenges of his literary ethics as McGinniss. Edward Jay Epstein, for instance,

wrote in *Commentary* in 1967 that Manchester created "fictitious episodes for the purpose of heightening the melodrama" in the Kennedy book, an allegation the historian denied. And just last month, Manchester had to confront new charges involving failure to attribute material properly in his World War II memoir "Goodbye, Darkness."

That last story was detailed in the *Boston Globe*. No one else picked it up, however—proving once again that, when it comes to influencing other journalists, the *Globe* doesn't.

For a time in late July, it seemed just about anyone who had written a Kennedy book could get in print merely by threatening to sue McGinniss. HarperCollins, Manchester's publisher, was reported to be "assessing the situation." Biographer Doris Kearns Goodwin told the *Boston Globe* she was mighty peeved at McGinniss, but uncertain what to do. Leo Damore, author of a book on Chappaquiddick, was said to be furious.

Number of lawsuits filed to date:

None.

Manchester denies saying he would "definitely" sue, and now says he won't make a final decision "for at least a month. [The book] doesn't seem to be selling very well. I'd like to forget it."

Afterword

Gore Vidal is writing a memoir. The novelist has always wondered, he told an audience here this spring, how other memoirists had such precise recollections of conversations they had had decades ago. Now, Vidal said, he had figured it out: "You make it all up."

In his typically blunt way, Vidal cut to the heart of the issue. Many people have a hard time remembering what they had for lunch yesterday. How, it's reasonable to ask, could anyone, whether a president or serial killer or insurance salesman, recall with any-



BY DAVID ROGOWSKI FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

McGinniss at home in Massachusetts: "It's no fun being a voodoo doll, having all these pins stuck in you every day."

thing approaching fidelity utterances made years ago?

Most writers are safe from trouble beyond a reviewer's kvetching. That's especially true for those writing about such tabloid figures as Elvis or Madonna, or someone the public doesn't know, which is the case with most true-crime books. Best of all is if the subject is dead. Marilyn Monroe isn't around to complain about the travesties issued in her name.

McGinniss had the misfortune of writing a biography about someone in a position to challenge it. He thus became a lightning rod for discomfort over nonfiction that has the authority of history but the thrills of fiction.

"A lot of people have been annoyed by this kind of book, and they were waiting for one to attack," says Howard Kaminsky, chief of William Morrow. "So when McGinniss goes after a public figure whom he hasn't spoken to, and puts himself both in his head and in the head of his stroke-ridden father, it passed the point of no return."

Carol Publishing's Schragis adds an-

other contributing factor: an increasing disgust with so-called "pathographies," books that seem to glorify in their subject's misdeeds and weaknesses.

"Two years ago, the thought was: 'It's a big biography—what's the dirt in it?' I think there's less emphasis on that now. The Mick Jagger book—a well-publicized bio by Christopher Andersen that appeared this spring—'was a flop, and I was pretty sure it would sell. I think there's been enough trashing.'"

There's another reason why it was a particularly bad idea to attack Kennedy now. It's one thing to kick someone while he's down, which writers did to the senator for years. It's another to kick him when he's finally, slowly, painfully trying to stand back up, which is what McGinniss was perceived as doing.

All these reasons have added up to commercial disaster for "The Last Brother," a fact that publishers have been quick to appreciate and maybe

even react to.

"In the near term," says Kaminsky, "everyone will be looking at the underpinnings, the methodology, of contemporary biography. For instance, this book, which was supposed to be a serious dissection of an important public figure, was published without an index."

It's a hopeful thought that standards will rise as a result of McGinniss. Too hopeful, says Publishers Weekly editor Sybil Steinberg.

"If any industry has a short-term memory," she says, "it's publishing."

McGinniss is counting on it.

"As Teddy has been resurrected as St. Edward of Hyannis Port," he says, "I would hope that as time passes the same kind of transformation can take place for me."