

'Fiction, falsehood'

By JOHN SEIGENTHALER

After a recent appearance on the "Today" show during which I sharply criticized a new book about Sen. Edward Kennedy, I received a recorded telephone message from an angry caller: "You are a friend of the Kennedy family," she said. "You are biased in their favor. You have no business going on television defending them." She gave neither her name nor phone number. This article, which includes my personal opinion and reminiscences, is a response.

FOR 30 YEARS, many millions of Americans have felt a magnetic and sometimes morbid fascination with what the nation's media have come to call "the Kennedy mystique."

A steady and unending stream of books, films and articles — some solidly factual, some gushingly fanciful, some grossly fictional — have fed a gnawing public appetite for information and titillation about any and every member of the Kennedy family, living and dead.

There are moments when members of that family ask themselves: "Will it ever end?"

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The answer:
Not soon.

Maybe never.

A new book about Edward Kennedy, out last week, and a television movie about Robert Kennedy, shown last week, make that inescapably clear.

The book about Edward Kennedy, *The Last Brother*, is written by Joe McGinniss and published by Simon and

about the Kennedys

Schuster.

The film about Robert Kennedy, "Marilyn and Bobby: Her Final Affair," was shown on the USA Network last week, with Melody Anderson and James Kelly playing Miss Monroe and Kennedy.

Both the movie and the book, as their titles indicate, use the names of real people. Both cite historical fact. Both are fictional. Events and conversations depicted in both never occurred. They were made up. Invented.

The book is not worth reading; the movie was not worth watching. My views on this, as my anonymous telephone caller said, are "biased." I am, indeed, a friend of the Kennedy family. I was administrative assistant to Robert Kennedy when he was U. S. Attorney General. I was his friend for most of his political life. I am a friend of Edward Kennedy, the U. S. senator from Massachusetts.

I also know a good deal about them both — far more, I am certain, than either the book's author or the film's writers, producers and actors.

But the negative views I express here about both the book and the film are shared by many who are not friends of the Kennedys. Readers of this article,



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who share the attitude of my unknown telephone caller, may find the criticisms of other writers and reviewers have more validity than my own.

FIRST, the film. The number of books and articles that have evolved about Robert Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe now are transmitted onto the screen in living color. The promoters of the film blatantly proclaim that "Marilyn and Bobby" is "a blend of fiction and speculative journalism."

That is a cute way of describing an outrageous falsehood. There are scenes of Robert Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe in passionate embrace. They are in bed together. At one point, he tells her he will leave his wife and children to marry her.

None of that ever happened. I state it categorically as one who was close to Robert Kennedy. Other of his close associates and intimate friends have reviewed all we know and agreed that it could not have occurred. That does not change the nutball rumors and crackpot theories that go so far as to suggest that Kennedy actually had a hand in Monroe's death and was in her home at the time she died.

Such outrageous slanders are now part of film docudrama.

Again, my conviction about this will be considered biased to some. There are, however, once again those with no ties to the Kennedy family who share my

view.

A couple of weeks ago, California journalist Mark Schwed called me for a comment on this upcoming movie. He had talked with those responsible for creating and promoting it.

"I can't believe it, but they say they don't have facts to prove any of this stuff about Marilyn and Bobby," he said. "But they think they are entitled to speculate about what might have happened. What has happened to truth in the media?"

It was clear to me that Schwed was as offended as I by the attitude of the film's architects.

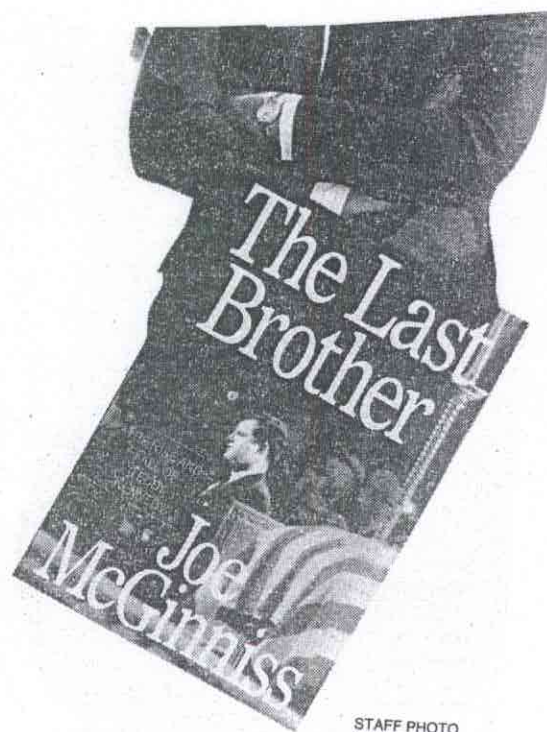
In this last week's *TV Guide*, Donald Spoto, the author of 11 books whose recent biography of Marilyn Monroe is an international best seller, writes:

"'Marilyn and Bobby' is all mere conjecture without a grain of truth.

"The producers of the film, like a recent crop of biographers 'imagine' what people might have thought. Or might have done. The more shocking the possibilities, the better. Never mind that reality gets bent out of shape and is unrecognizable. . . . This kind of thing sells."

SPOTO'S exhaustive research of Marilyn Monroe's life provides the best evidence yet published that there was no affair. He has documented, after researching their day-to-day schedules, that they met on only four occa-





STAFF PHOTO
ILLUSTRATION
BY ROB KING

sions — all innocent social events. He records the dates: Oct. 2 or 3, 1961; Feb. 1, May 19 and June 22, 1962.

I was present at two of those meetings — in February and May 1962. The first was at a dinner party at the Santa Monica home of Kennedy's sister, Patricia Lawford. It was on the eve of our departure for a trip to Asia. Some 50 guests were present. Yes, Robert Kennedy danced with Marilyn Monroe. So what? I danced with Janet Leigh. Ethel Kennedy danced with Tony Curtis, and Bobby danced with Ethel.

It was dinner, dancing, conversation — and that was it.

The May meeting was a celebration of President Kennedy's 45th birthday at Madison Square Garden in New York. Monroe sang "Happy Birthday" to the President in front of thousands of well-wishers. Yes, there was a party afterwards, but it was crowded, with drinks, food, conversation — and nothing more.

I was not present at the other two events, both dinner parties at the Lawford home, as well attended as the evening I was there.

From these events, which Spoto described and I insist were "innocent," has evolved a bizarre myth that Kennedy had a hand in Monroe's death and was present in her home on the day she died.

That is false.

On that day and night, Robert and Ethel Kennedy, with four of their children, were guests at a ranch in Northern California 400 miles from Marilyn Monroe's home. When the false rumor about Kennedy and Monroe began to circulate several years ago, I interviewed their host at the mountain ranch.

He was John Bates, a San Francisco lawyer, and he was blunt about it all:

"It isn't a rumor," he said. "It's a lie."

He recalled:

The Kennedy family played touch

football and went horseback riding in the day. In the evening, Kennedy parents joined their children for an early dinner for the youngsters, then enjoyed a late evening meal with Bates. Next morning, the Kennedys journeyed to San Francisco, where he made a bar association speech.

It was his oldest son, Joe, now a congressman, who first heard the news that Monroe had died the day before. He broke the news to his parents.

Spoto also interviewed Bates. He writes in *TV Guide*: "There is not a thread of evidence to support such a defamation."

BOOKS and movies containing such material are protected by the First Amendment. The publishers and producers take special care with disclaimers to protect themselves against lawsuits for defamation. With the exception of a rare mention of Ethel, only the names of the dead are negatively uttered in this production.

Where could such a nasty story have had its genesis? An answer is to be found in the files of the FBI.

A memo dated Aug. 11, 1962, which was handled by two assistants of J. Edgar Hoover, reported on a bugged

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See THE KENNEDYS
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conversation at the home of the notorious racketeer, Meyer Lansky. The mobster told his wife that Kennedy "is carrying on an affair" with a woman in El Paso, Texas.

When the FBI reported the bugged conversation to Attorney General Kennedy, he responded as follows, according to the memoranda: He had never been to El Paso, Texas, was not acquainted with any woman from there, and there was no basis in fact for the allegation. "But gossip-mongers just have to talk," Kennedy said, adding that he had heard rumors that he had been "involved with Marilyn Monroe. At least," he said, "I have met Marilyn Monroe, a good friend of my sister, Pat Lawford."

That was the first time his name showed up in FBI files linked to Monroe.

Two years later, July 1964, the FBI files record this:

"Frank A. Capell is about to publish a 70-page paperback book dealing with the suicide of Marilyn Monroe. He advised the FBI that he will indicate that Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Monroe were intimate and that Kennedy was in Monroe's apartment at the time of her death. . . . He will attempt to show that some Communists were working behind the scenes, inasmuch as a physician who was a Communist signed the death certificate."

On July 14, 1964, an FBI memo recorded that Capell's book had been forwarded to the bureau. Capell, who published a regular anti-Communist newsletter called *The Herald of Freedom*, wrote in his book that he had learned from Hollywood sources that Kennedy and Monroe were intimate. He claimed there were "living witnesses, tape recordings and writings" documenting the friendship.

When Monroe "threatened to expose their relationship" Capell wrote, "Kennedy decided to take drastic action." According to Capell, Kennedy used the Communist Party to kill her. "The Communist conspiracy is expert in the scientific elimination of its enemies," Capell wrote. "The Communists disposed of Monroe and made her murder appear a suicide."

"This could have been achieved without great difficulty," according to Capell, "because her personal physician, Dr. Hyman Engelberg, was a Communist."

Those memos, blatantly leaked by the FBI to the media, are the genesis of the defamatory accounts about Kennedy and Monroe.

Now, for the book:

While my caller feels I am biased in my assessment of the McGinniss book, she might consider what other reviewers have said.

Jonathan Yardley, in a *Washington Post* review, wrote: "Not merely is *The Last Brother* a textbook example of shoddy journalistic and publishing ethics; it is a genuinely, unrelievedly rotten book."

Strong words. There were more to come. The book, said Yardley, is "without a single redeeming virtue, an embarrassment that should

bring shame to everyone associated with it."

He used these words: "slimy, meretricious and cynical" to describe McGinniss' hatching of Senator Kennedy. For readers who don't have a dictionary handy, Webster defines "meretricious" as "characteristic of a prostitute."

Yardley added: "It is, by a wide margin, the worst book I have reviewed in nearly three decades. . . . There is not an honest page in it."

A day later, *The New York Times* said of *The Last Brother*: "It isn't bad, it's awful." That review described McGinniss as "a mind reader" and said much of what he had written was "invented and fabricated."

Other critics, equally unattached to the Kennedy family, have been scathing in their criticisms.

Even before the book was in print, it stirred a firestorm of controversy when Simon and Schuster, which is reported to have given McGinniss a \$1 million advance, announced that the book would include a publisher's disclaimer acknowledging that the author had invented thoughts and dialogue.

That upset McGinniss. The disclaimer would have indicated that the publisher was less than enthusiastic about his work. McGinniss groused and two months ago, Simon and Schuster agreed to withdraw the disclaimer.

And so, in an "author's note" in the back of the book, McGinniss acknowledges that he has "written certain scenes and described certain events from what I have inferred to be his (Edward Kennedy's) point of view." Again, he says that he has "quite consciously written portions as if from inside his (Edward Kennedy's) mind."

He contends that "conscientious reconstruction of thought and dialogue" is an acceptable practice for biographers and historians, and asserts that other authors have used the technique.

McGinniss insists that he did not "create conversations" in the book. In our "Today" show confrontation, I disagreed with that and gave two examples of created conversations.

The first example grows from his fictional claim that Joseph P. Kennedy, the family patriarch, entered into a deal with the mob during the 1960 presidential primaries. The corrupt bargain, McGinniss claims, was this: The crime syndicate would pour money into West Virginia to bribe local politicians to help elect John Kennedy. In return, Kennedy, as president, would overthrow Fidel Castro and give the mob back the gambling casinos in Havana.

Then, McGinniss creates the fictional post-election conversation in Miami between the President and his father. The elder Kennedy tells his son that he has failed to live up to the deal they cut with the mob. He must go back to Washington and get rid of Castro.

Nowhere in the history of the Bay of Pigs invasion is there any record or remote reference that Joseph Kennedy played any part, had any role or knew in advance of the invasion of Cuba. McGinniss cites no source and makes no claim of having secret information. Like so much of the rest of the book, this is invention.

A second contrived conversation is one that

McGinniss claims must have occurred: Robert Kennedy, he suggests, knew that his brother the President was assassinated by the mob. He is tortured by this. Finally, he discloses it to his brother, Edward.

The news shatters Edward Kennedy, who simply was not strong enough to deal with it, McGinniss said.

Those of us who knew Robert Kennedy intimately and all the historians who wrote authentic histories on the subject refute McGinniss's suggestion that the mob killed John Kennedy, that Robert Kennedy knew it, and that he told his brother or anyone else such a thing. It is pure McGinniss make-believe.

Repeatedly during our "Today" show confrontation, I labeled the book pure fiction, and terrible fiction at that. Unlike Yardley, it was not the worst book I had read in 30 years. It was, I told McGinniss, the worst book I'd ever read. And for the last 22 years, I have read at least a book a week to prepare for my weekly public television program, "A Word on Words."

McGinniss, who broke into the best-seller list in 1968 with his first book, *The Selling of the President*, claimed the Kennedy book was a legitimate biography. It is illegitimate in that it is devoid of footnotes to document his facts and sources, and without an index to aid readers.

The book portrays Edward Kennedy as a product of a damaged childhood, the last and forgotten child of Joe and Rose Kennedy, bereft of affection and emotional support from his parents and family.

Thus, McGinniss claims, "the last brother" as an adult was torn between accepting political challenges or self-destructing as a public servant by unconscionable conduct, the most flagrant example being the Chappaquiddick tragedy, which took the life of Mary Jo Kopechne, a Kennedy campaign worker.

This is a biography, however, that virtually ignores Kennedy's leadership in the Senate in the fields of health care, civil rights, human rights and voting rights. There is no acknowledgment that Edward Kennedy, far more effective in the Senate than either of his brothers, has earned the respect of his Democratic and Republican colleagues and constituents who consistently re-elect him.

But there is another major problem with the book. The ugly specter of plagiarism has shadowed the book's release. Three other authors — William Manchester, Doris Kearns Goodwin, and Leo Damore — all of whom have written books about the Kennedys, complained in press reports that McGinniss improperly lifted material from their works without giving them the credit they were due.

Manchester issued a 36-page memo asserting that McGinniss had plagiarized his 1967 book, *The Death of the President*.

"The last thing I wanted to do was to go to court over this thing," said Manchester. "But I feel I've been raped. . . . I'm going to fight him."

Goodwin was quoted as saying: "This whole past week, I was reading what William Manchester was going through and feeling enor-



STAFF PHOTO

1968: An affectionate moment in Indianapolis between Ethel and Bob Kennedy.

mous empathy for him."

It isn't clear whether Goodwin, the author of *The Fitzgeralds and the Kennedys*, or Damore, who wrote *Senatorial Privilege*, also might sue.

The answer to the question the Kennedy family asks itself, "Will it ever end?" is rooted in the public's tolerance for titillation.

This remarkable family, beset for three generations by triumph and tragedy, has produced

a president of the United States, an attorney general, three U.S. senators, two congressmen, two war heroes and three ambassadors. The events of their lives — their elections, their votes, their marriages, divorces, victories and defeats — will continue to be chronicled by the media, and that is as it should be.

Those facts should be reported. But the fiction and falsehood should end.

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