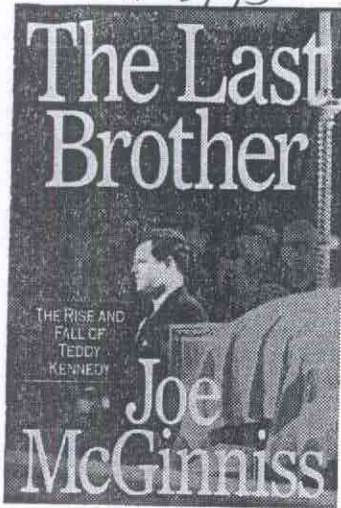


Post 7/28/93



Book World

Invented Biography, Steeped In Slime

THE LAST BROTHER
**The Rise and Fall of Teddy
Kennedy**

By Joe McGinniss
Simon and Schuster. 626 pp. \$25

By Jonathan Yardley

The conventional wisdom had settled into place long before "The Last Brother" lurched into the bookstores early this week. It concluded that Joe McGinniss's unauthorized biography of Edward Moore Kennedy was a mixture of unattributed fact and unsubstantiated fiction; that McGinniss had borrowed liberally from, if not actually plagiarized, earlier books by William Manchester, Doris Kearns Goodwin and other keepers of the Kennedy flame; that McGinniss and his publisher were more interested in quick profits than responsible publishing.

All of which turns out to be

true—to put it mildly—out all of which was based more on rumor and hearsay than on actual acquaintance with the book itself, of which few copies have been available until very recently. Now that it is possible to read "The Last Brother," judgment must be even more damning than advance speculation had suggested. Not merely is "The Last Brother" a textbook example of shoddy journalistic and publishing ethics; it is also a genuinely, unrelievedly rotten book, one without a single redeeming virtue, an embarrassment that should bring nothing except shame to everyone associated with it.

It turns out that opinions of "The Last Brother" have not a thing to do with opinions of its subject. Only those so steeped in hatred of Ted Kennedy and his family as to be beyond the bounds of reason are likely

See BOOK WORLD, C2, Col. 1

BOOK WORLD, From C1

to be blinded to the central reality that "The Last Brother" is slimy, meretricious and cynical. It is, by a wide margin, the worst book I have reviewed in nearly three decades; quite simply, there is not an honest page in it.

Much ado was stirred in advance of the book's publication by the liberties McGinniss takes in fictionalizing not merely the remarks but also the thoughts of the senator from Massachusetts. This McGinniss attempts to shrug off by claiming that he merely is operating within the bounds of "biographer's license"—a claim that is a slap in the face of every person who has ever attempted to write biography scrupulously and fairly.

In an "Author's Note" hastily tacked on at the end of the finished book—five pages of self-serving humbug—McGinniss claims that he has chosen "an approach that transcends that of traditional journalism or even, perhaps, of conventional biography" and that "I never intended that [the book] be viewed as a formal biography."

That's a relief, because it certainly doesn't qualify as one. Whether formal or informal, conventional or unconventional, biography must meet certain minimal criteria. The facts it presents as such must be, to the best knowledge of the author, true facts; such speculations and interpretations as it engages in must be, to the best knowledge of the author, founded in those same facts.

In "The Last Brother" McGinniss vi-

olates these fundamental requirements of biography not because he is somehow stretching the genre into new dimensions but because they are inconvenient to the purpose at hand, which is to cash in on the public's bottomless appetite for gossip about the Kennedys, an appetite roughly equivalent to (and as elevated as) its appetite for similar material about Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe. Like Kitty Kelley feeding the gossip mills with her biographies of the likes of Elizabeth Taylor and Frank Sinatra, McGinniss is a purveyor of red meat; the difference is that Kelley, whatever her shortcomings, does her own legwork and supplies documentary apparatus.

McGinniss has done none of the latter and precious little of the former. Apart from a brief bibliography, he provides not a scintilla of evidence to substantiate the wild assertions and speculations with which "The Last Brother" is riddled. On page after page he presents what we are to accept as the innermost thoughts and private remarks of Edward Kennedy, yet he offers no proof beyond the stupendously lame declaration that "the story I have told here is one I believe to be true" and that quotations therein "represent in substance what I believe to have been spoken."

Claims such as these would be laughed out of sophomore English class, not to mention laughed out of court, which is where McGinniss may well find himself once other writers off whose books he feeds have had a chance to peruse these pages at leisure. McGinniss displays not the slightest reluctance to draw "from published sources that I believe to be reliable," only occasionally crediting them in the process.

Perhaps some of his sources are people with whom McGinniss says he "conducted many dozens of interviews," but only in the rarest instances is there any evidence of this. When we

are told, as we often are, that one person or another said or thought something "later," it is entirely up to the reader to decide whether this was reported directly to McGinniss or borrowed by him from unattributed sources.

In other instances the book gives off the stink of cheap and unsubstantiated invention. "He wished that he could be with Bobby," McGinniss writes. "He wished that Jack were still alive." Oh? How do we know that? "He knew the time was not right, but he knew also that for him, the time would never be right." Says who? "Teddy pulled open the heavy, leather-covered door that led from the Senate chamber to the private lobby behind the rostrum. He was growing irritated with this fellow." On what evidence is that scene constructed?

Well, as it happens, none. "Teddy did not say any of this," McGinniss writes a couple of sentences later. Fifty pages further on, postulating that Kennedy might have longed to kill himself after his brother Jack's assassination, McGinniss writes: "Suppose—not that there is any evidence he considered this—he suddenly just veered left, away from his sister, and plunged, fully clothed, into the roiling, frigid waters of Nantucket Bay?" That smarmy interjection—"not that there is any evidence he considered this"—suggests a lawyerly hand, trying to shield McGinniss and his publisher from having to account for what gives every evidence of being unaccountable.

The actual content of "The Last Brother" is as suspect and as distasteful as its methodology. Its theme—to the extent it can be dignified with claims to any—is that Ted Kennedy has been "cut off from the center, out on the fringe, as he had been his whole life"; that within the Kennedy family he has been a figure of contempt and fun, an unwelcome runt: "Having given birth to eight children in fourteen years, the last thing the forty-year-old Rose wanted was another."

Kennedy, McGinniss writes, "grew to maturity both in the sadness of his father's twilight and, before long, in the shadows cast by the glow of Joe Junior's and Jack's heroism." As a boy he was "wounded in spirit and garner[ed] little respect, affection or attention either inside or outside the family." As a young man he was a failure: "Jack's

new status as war hero served also to cast into even sharper relief the difference between what a Kennedy was expected to be and what the youngest member of the family was." As an adult, even as a U.S. senator, he was an irrelevance, never more so than after Jack's assassination:

"Upon arriving in Washington, [the Kennedys] went directly to the White House. Teddy needed so badly to contribute. He needed so badly to feel that he belonged. But by the time he arrived, all the decisions had been made."

McGinniss may assert, presumably in the interests of damage control, that Kennedy's life "seemed less the stuff of traditional biography than the libretto for a tragic and uniquely American opera," but he has managed to reduce the stuff of tragedy to the level of soap opera. In soap opera, though, the central characters usually are, if flawed, sympathetic; by contrast McGinniss at every turn denigrates Kennedy, whether by declaration or, more often, by innuendo.

It's difficult to imagine a more mean-spirited or small-minded book than this one. Heaven knows there is ample reason to criticize Ted Kennedy, the public and the private person alike, but fair criticism is not McGinniss's purpose here. He wants to mock and deride, and is not in the least hesitant about employing the facile clichés of pop psychology as tools to that end.

Thus: "the plight of racial minorities was something to which [Kennedy] could respond strongly, having lived his whole life at the bottom of the only society that really mattered to him psychologically—his own family." Thus: "It was one thing to lose an older brother, especially if that brother was the President. It was worse to lose the last of what you might have still been

struggling to believe in and, at this same time of psychological crisis, perhaps even the very capacity for belief." Thus: "Even as America and the world yearned to see in him the best of Jack and Bobby, Teddy seemed to need to prove, first to himself and then to the nation, that he was unworthy to carry the torch, unworthy even to bear the family name."

The nastiness of this is exceeded only by the rank hypocrisy of it. Even as he cloaks his parlor psychologizing in sympathetic language, McGinniss thrusts in the dagger and mercilessly twists it. Though it might be amusing to speculate about his own "psychological need" (as McGinniss might put it) to do this, let that be left to others more qualified. Suffice it to say that the pervasive hatefulfulness of this book eventually reaches spectacular dimensions.

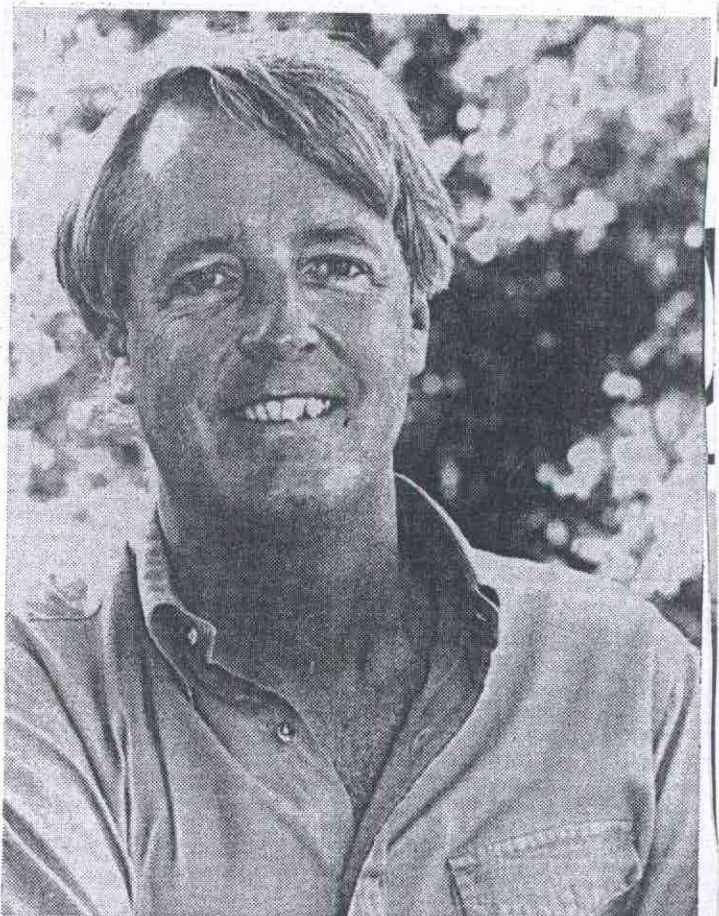
So too does McGinniss's susceptibility to the most wacky conspiracy theories about the assassinations of Ted Kennedy's two elder brothers. Extrapolating from the well-documented connection between Jack Kennedy and the notorious mob leader Sam Giancana—a connection sealed by the sexual favors of Judith Exner—McGinniss spins off into the ether, arguing not merely that this gave the Mafia "the power to destroy the Kennedy family" but that in fact it did so: that the assassinations of both brothers were not the isolated acts of lone individuals but coordinated Mafia hits.

Oddly enough, this wild conjecture is about as far as McGinniss goes into the rancid waters of tabloid gossip. Readers tempted to rush out and buy "The Last Brother" should be advised that it contains nothing not already known about Ted Kennedy's private life; the dirt in this book is of McGinniss's own manufacture rather than dug up from Kennedy's escapades, about which McGinniss is oddly, uncharacteristically circumspect.

Indeed, there is nothing in "The Last Brother" about Kennedy's involvement in the activities that led to his nephew Willie Smith's trial and acquittal on charges of rape—nothing, that is, beyond the melodramatic statement that "he would have worse nights in Palm Beach." That statement is made on Page 203 but never followed up. The book ends in the "disgrace" of Chappaquiddick, passing up not merely the Palm Beach trial two decades later

but also the attendant disclosures about Kennedy's boozy behavior (another subject McGinniss only lightly touches upon) and his eventual remarriage, to Victoria Reggie.

The book's abrupt conclusion and the absence of even a perfunctory index suggest that a decision was made to rush it into print, even if in an incomplete state. It is unclear whether this was done to capitalize on the intense chatter the book had stirred or to get it into the bookstores before legal objections halted its progress, though either explanation is plausible. But even if Simon and Schuster had waited until McGinniss had finished the job, retelling every secondhand Kennedy story already in circulation, "The Last Brother" would have been what it is now: a reprehensible exercise in character assassination, a mockery of even the most minimal standards by which biography is written, a cynical and avaricious sloop in the trough of cheap profit. Anyone foolish enough to buy it deserves the excruciating experience of reading it.



BY NANCY DOHERTY

Kennedy biographer Joe McGinniss provides no evidence to substantiate the wild assertions and speculations with which "The Last Brother" is riddled.