

RICHARD COHEN

Ted Kennedy didn't deserve the trashy exploitation

When Jonathan Yardley, the Washington Post's book critic, calls Joe McGinniss' new biography of Ted Kennedy the worst thing he's read in "nearly three decades," he's saying something. Yardley, like all reviewers, has read books so bad, so trashy, so without literary or journalistic merit, that to single out one as the worst means that it has a quality that sets it apart. In the case of the McGinniss book, it's dishonesty.

The Last Brother is really in a league of its own. It not only purports to know what Ted Kennedy was thinking at this or that moment, but it also has the speechless Joseph P. Kennedy, a stroke victim, impart his earnest desire to attend the Washington funeral of his son, the slain president: "He'd seen enough of Jack's casket on television, enough of Bobby's and Jacqueline's somber but resolute expressions. He wanted to be there, even in a wheelchair, seated by the side of his fallen son."

But there's more. Joe Kennedy knew it was "unlikely that Jack had been assassinated by a crazed, lone Communist gunman." Why? Be-

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cause Joe Kennedy "knew that years earlier he'd made promises that he hadn't kept. And that quite possibly, Jack had paid for these unkept promises with his life." This is — there is no other word for it — obscene. McGinniss uses the mute Joseph P. Kennedy, now dead, to buttress a vague conspiracy theory. This is not biography; it is pornography.

My purpose here is not only to give McGinniss, his publisher and everyone involved in this meretricious enterprise yet another kick, nor to underscore that the boundary

between truth and fiction is both real and worth maintaining. It is also to extricate Edward Moore Kennedy (D., Mass.) from the bog of fable and irrelevance into which he has been deposited — or, if you will, into which he drove when he missed the bridge at Chappaquiddick.

Here, after all, is a United States senator, a public man, a real person with a record of yea and nay votes, who has nevertheless been transformed into a virtually mythical creature. Although he is very much alive and functioning, his body and his mind have been exploited in a way that brings to mind that much-abused word "abuse." In his own lifetime, Teddy Kennedy has become a quasi-fictional character, a libel-proof concoction like Princess Di or the Eternal Elvis.

That's not right. It's undoubtedly true, as McGinniss says over and over again, that Teddy is neither John nor Robert. If that's meant to diminish him, then so be it. It's true, also, that Ted Kennedy has not conducted himself privately — if, in fact, he can do anything privately — as you or I might want. From Chappaquiddick to the more recent mess

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involved in Joe McGinniss' book

in Palm Beach involving his nephew, William Kennedy Smith, he has failed to be the perfect "widow," a sedate figure perpetually draped in metaphorical black for his two brothers. He has acted out, cut up and — at Chappaquiddick — cut out. Most of his wounds were inflicted by fate. Some, though, he inflicted himself.

But it is also true that he has been a more-than-competent senator. Even his arch-ideological enemies — Orrin Hatch (R., Utah), for instance — will testify to the industriousness and effectiveness with which Kennedy does his job. Roll Call, the Hill's authoritative newspapers, named him Legislator of the Year in 1990 — a Republican year at that. This is a dull tale of hard work and networking. It makes for bad TV, bad press of any kind: Boring.

And so it is somewhat understandable that most Americans would not know that Kennedy has been the appropriate legatee of his brothers, particularly Robert. The causes of Robert Kennedy, particularly as a champion of the poor, have been taken up by Teddy and implemented into law. Kennedy has had a hand in everything from the Family and Medical Leave Act to the raising of the mini-

mum wage to the Ryan White Comprehensive AIDS Care Act. Even health care reform, so associated now with Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton, has been a Kennedy cause for quite some time.

I confess to having taken a pot shot or two at Kennedy myself — most recently for reportedly going out drinking with Willie Smith that fateful night in Palm Beach. I wrote then that he was "good for nothing," but now that the event itself has faded but Kennedy's accomplishments have not, I am sorry for those words. He has been good for the poor and good for blacks and good for other minorities as well. He rises every morning with the fear that some nut is going to try for a macabre trifecta — kill the last of the brothers — and now he has had his mind burglarized by a literary thief carrying a tool bag of clichés.

Teddy Kennedy didn't deserve Joe McGinniss, but McGinniss sure deserved Jonathan Yardley.

Richard Cohen's column originates at the Washington Post, where he began working in 1968.

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