
The Magazine Reader

A Taste of McGinniss On Kennedy

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Vanity Fair has gone ahead and published in its September issue an excerpt from Joe McGinniss's Ted Kennedy book, despite the critics' ecstatic denunciations of it. Or maybe *because* of them, scandal being the magazine's sine qua non.

If the McGinniss affair has aroused your curiosity about the actual contents of "The Last Brother," but you are reluctant to lay out the \$25 price of admission, you can get a taste here for a mere three bucks.

And if you do, you will notice that Vanity Fair does not exactly embrace the literary leper. In his customary letter to readers, editor Graydon Carter notes, with laughable delicacy, that the book "has already been called many things, not all of them favorable."

Carter goes on: "The excerpt we present here on the tragic events at Chappaquiddick . . . is, if nothing else, the most compelling account of a seismic occurrence, a seamless pulling together of the circumstances surrounding one of the most picked-apart and examined 24-hour periods in American political history." Translation: Call it fiction, call it plagiarism, but hey, at least it's a good read.

"Has McGinniss succeeded in his at times unorthodox effort to convey the full drama of that story?" Carter asks, and then shrinks from an answer: "You must judge for yourselves."

But before you judge the piece, you must read McGinniss's extraordinarily long introduction to it, in which he credits an "especially helpful" Chappaquiddick book by another author, Leo Damore.

The excerpt is not exactly transporting, mainly because it is such an oft-told story and McGinniss is such an average prose stylist. If you come to it looking for some of the imagined Kennedy thoughts that the critics have ridiculed, you will be disappointed. There are few of them here (which may explain why the magazine chose this excerpt), and only one that is truly hilarious.

It comes as Kennedy is flying from Washington to Boston at the start of the Chappaquiddick weekend, which was also the weekend of the Apollo moon landing. Noting that the moon mission fulfilled a promise made years before by John Kennedy, McGinniss writes: "To Teddy, the gap between himself and his most heroic, legendary, mythic broth-

er, Jack, must have seemed as vast as the space that separated his lowly shuttle to Boston from the three moon-bound astronauts."