

## Ruminating with Joe

Imagine my surprise when the phone rang and Joe McGinniss came on the line. "Hello, John," he blurted out. "You must be wondering about my new Teddy Kennedy book. . . ."

Uncanny how he can get into other people's minds, I thought. Actually, I had just finished reading "The Last Brother." And I was wondering about it. Many people were. Doubts lingered in the air. Everywhere.

"Joe," I pointed out. "Some people say your book is a cut-and-paste job written from clippings and William Manchester's book 'The Death of a President.' Other people say you shouldn't have made up a bunch of Teddy Kennedy's thoughts and feelings and stuffed them into his brain. Teddy's nonfictional, Joe. He's not a character in a novel."

At this point, I paused. There was an awkward moment of silence. The fat was in the fire, he must have thought. Years from now, he would look back on this pause and wonder about its fateful connection to the Kennedy legend and the Kennedy secrets. Too many secrets. Too much legend. Too many pages. Too little editing.

But that was in the future. For the moment, he had to be thinking that nothing could be done except to keep talking. He could hardly have failed to realize that Teddy Kennedy might have said (though there was no evidence that he actually did), "It's good to talk things over." Our conversation would continue. It would have to. There was nothing to do but go on.

With surprising readiness, McGinniss acknowledged that Teddy is nonfictional. But he insisted that his book was legit. "It's true that most biographers don't make up quotes and thoughts," he explained. "But I'm not just a biographer. I'm a ruminator. We ruminators go for inner truths that transcend journalism. Check my author's note."

Sure enough, there in the back was the author's note, right where nonruminating biographers usually put the sources, index and footnotes. It said plainly that "The Last Brother" is "at least as much a 'ruminator' as a biography."

**Psychic immersion.** What are the rules for writing ruminatively? I wondered. How do you know which thoughts to make up? Simple, Joe said. All you had to do was immerse yourself in the life and thought patterns of your subject. Then you get to infer thoughts at key moments. That was how he could present so many of Ted's innermost feelings, feelings that Ted may not even have known he had.

"So on Page 231," I said, "I notice you have Teddy thinking that Jack's aides—Larry O'Brien, Pierre Salinger and others—were such hotshots that 'it was as if they were not just of a different generation but of a more

evolved species, possessing a brilliance and an utter nervelessness that he knew—however much he might try to pretend otherwise—would always be beyond him.'"

Joe nodded. Under the new rumination rules, I asked, can you actually have Teddy think of Pierre Salinger as a more evolved species? Is it really ethical to insert a thought like that into a living brain?

McGinniss shifted in his seat and glanced fleetingly at his watch. "That's the inference I get," he said with quiet confidence. "Of course, other immersion specialists may infer differently. Let them write their own books."

Something was bothering me, and I wanted to put it politely. "Joe," I asked, "if you really have access to Ted-

dy's brain, while you're rooting around inside there, why don't you haul out something brand new, instead of the same old stuff from clippings and books?" I must have said this wrong, because McGinniss took it amiss. Somewhat tartly, he asked how many of my columns have been turned into major miniseries.

"Joe," I said, "let's talk about the semierased inferences. You suggest that Teddy could have thought of drowning himself, but erase it with 'not that there's any evidence that he considered this.' Same thing when you raise the question of whether J. Edgar Hoover ordered the killing of Martin Luther King Jr., which you

sort of take back with 'The answer is unclear.' I didn't bring up all the unerased inferences—that Rose Kennedy thought her dead daughter Kathleen deserved to die, that Joe Kennedy might have arranged for Sam Giancana and the mob to tip the West Virginia primary toward Jack.

McGinniss ran his fingers through his graying hair and scratched his left armpit thoughtfully. "Ruminators have to go where their informed imagination takes them," he said. "And by the way, how do you know when I'm scratching or looking at my watch? This is a phone conversation."

Joe was a bit testy now. He thought about getting a beer. Yes, he would really love a beer right now. Did this anxiety go back to a stormy relationship with his father? I couldn't possibly miss comprehending that. . . .

"Leo, stop that," he shouted. "You have no way of knowing whether I want a beer or whether my sled was named Rosebud. What kind of journalist are you anyway?" Yes, I thought sheepishly. I couldn't have failed to understand that he was right. ■



**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** The author is not entirely sure whether the above interview actually took place. No matter. He thinks it's true, and that's the important thing.