

Joey, We Hardly Interviewed Ye

Editor's Note: This week, "The Last Brother," a biography of Ted Kennedy, was published to raucously unfavorable reviews, which criticized author Joe McGinniss for making up the thoughts of his subjects and for sloppy research. We were going to interview McGinniss for his views on the subject, but then we figured, what the hell, why bother?

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As the small plane jounced through the darkness, Joe McGinniss, with increasing impatience, kept glancing at his watch. It wasn't the time he was worried about; it was the date. His Rolex, purchased with the advance of "Blind Faith" (or was it "Fatal Vision"? No matter) showed the date and there it was. He was a day late and several hundred thousand dollars short. He'd just been sued by Jeffrey MacDonald (or was it Janet Malcolm?) whose trial he had written about in either a book or an article for Vanity Fair, he couldn't remember which, and they'd settled out of court for a sum that made him pale.

He was already pale enough. The Irish are often pale and McGinniss is the sort of tousle-headed Irish that wears his shamrock on his sleeve, as if to emphasize the pallor. He has the eyes of an Irish wolfhound, with just enough irregularity in his canine incisors to hint at rabies. He's been emotionally rabid since childhood. He was born in Bemidji, Minn. (or was it New York City?) of a father whose middle name was Aloysius, for which he'd been shunned and ridiculed by the Italian boys in the neighborhood. He'd never gotten over it.

But now he needed another book. He'd written "The Selling of the President" in 1968, which had launched him to best

See MCGINNISS, C6, Col. 1

If You Say So, Joe

McGINNISS, From C1

sellerdom from the obituary desk of the Port Chester, N.Y., Daily Item, but now he didn't have Richard Nixon to kick around anymore, and he was supporting not only MacDonald and his lawyers but his own lawyer/agent Morton Janklow, who drank royalties like Dracula drank blood. Those remaindered copies of his 1972 effort "The Dream Team" weren't nourishing Janklow, who was threatening to open a bigger vein. McGinniss looked at his watch again and cursed silently in Celtic. Crime novels were barely paying the alimony. He needed something bigger. He thought of all the books he could, the sort of knee-jerk books that made New York publishers excrete in their Calvin Kleins and vomit large advances. Diet books. Holocaust books. Hitler books. How-to books. Madonna books. Mafia books. Men-Who-Won't-Commit-and-the-Women-Who-Love-Them books. Kennedy books. How about "How to Diet Your Way Through the Next Holocaust With Hitler and Madonna, as Told to Ted Kennedy by the Ma-

fia"? It was a good title, but he wasn't committed to it.

Kennedy books. McGinniss had always had a thing about the Kennedys. He was Irish like the Kennedys. He'd been born in New York City like Jack Kennedy. He'd beaten up on Nixon like a Kennedy. He'd even moved to Massachusetts like the Kennedys. But he wasn't a Kennedy. It's hard to be if your father's middle name is Aloysius.

The book would need controversy. The one thing Simon & Schuster had always impressed on him was that good books don't sell. Controversial books sell. He'd need something in it beyond the ordinary Camelot-bashing of the era, something to make the press gabble and the talk shows babble. Something to make Janet Malcolm write about him without suing him. (Or had he sued her? Or maybe he had sued Jeffrey Masson? Or . . . ? No matter.)

Teddy wouldn't talk. He could write it anyway, putting words in Teddy's mouth. But that wouldn't work. Everybody did that.

He could put words in Teddy's head. That was better. Bob Woodward and

Carl Bernstein had put words in Nixon's head in "The Final Days," based on dozens of interviews. That had been controversial. Their book had sold even more than his own.

But that seemed, well, *passee*. Teddy would just deny the thoughts, and Teddy had denied so much over the years that it was no longer news. He needed to put thoughts somewhere no writer had put them before.

Wait a minute. The Kennedy father! He had been mute with a stroke when Jack (or was it Bobby?) was killed: silent but thinking! He could never deny anything! And you wouldn't need all those tiresome interviews, which took too long anyway. Why check things out? He'd done that in Port Chester. That was journalism. This was art.

The Kennedy father. He loved it. It even had the mob connection, the Italian put-down that always sold! He would write a biography of Teddy that included Teddy's father's thoughts! It was perfect. That was one father whose middle name wasn't Aloysius. He was a Kennedy named Joe.