

Behind the cover

Thirteen years with Marina and Lee

By Priscilla Johnson McMillan

Why is it that after finishing a book the writer is so often unhappy? I recently spent more than a decade writing a sad book, an effort to understand why Lee Harvey Oswald killed President Kennedy, and in the year since my book appeared, I have found it difficult to put myself together again. For 13 years my thoughts have been in one place, and they are buried there still.

I came by my subject inevitably, for I had, by chance, known both the President and his assassin. In 1953, I worked briefly as a researcher in Kennedy's Senate office and afterward we became friends. And, in 1959, as a reporter in Moscow, I interviewed a boy who wanted to give up his U.S. citizenship and live in the U.S.S.R. His name was Lee Harvey Oswald.

Four years later I was incredulous when news came that President Kennedy had been shot — and by Lee Harvey Oswald. By what metamorphosis had the forlorn, quiet boy I met in Moscow become an assassin capable of killing the President? I did not understand why it happened and I do not accept it to this day.

Seven months after the assassination, in an effort to understand, I came to an agreement with Marina Oswald to collaborate on a biography of her and her husband. Neither of us found it easy, and at first I found Marina's world bizarre. Sometimes we walked to a neighborhood drugstore where Marina gazed, without much interest, at magazines that showed Oswald clutching his stomach just after he had been shot by Jack Ruby. But she stared with fascination at movie maga-

zines that featured President or Mrs. Kennedy on the cover. Back at Marina's house, I asked her about Oswald; she asked me about Kennedy. It was as if there were equals signs between the two, assassin and President, black and white as I thought of them then, and I found this hard to accept. Yet before long I, too, was speaking about "Lee" as a member of the household and a human being. Thus I joined Marina in what I had at first considered to be the upside-downness of her world.

During our interviews, which were in Russian, I found it hard to get Marina to speak about Oswald. Thus I often learned intriguing things about him quite by chance, as when the theme song of the movie "High Noon" came over the radio and Marina exclaimed, "Oh, Lee used to sing that while he was writing his diary!" It turned out that Lee loved the movie "High Noon" and sang the song again and again. In the song, the sheriff of a Western town begs his wife not to leave him — "Although you're grievin', don't think of leavin', until I shoot Frank Miller dead!"

I knew that the quality of the book would depend greatly on Marina's memory and her capacity to be self-critical. Marina had, indeed, a 20-20 memory, going back to her birth in Archangel, Russia, in 1941. Being illegitimate and ill-treated at home, she had been a rebel from a very early age. From the time she was 7, her actions showed that she felt politics was the root of all evil, a stance that turned out in her case to be prophetic.

As for her capacity to be self-critical, here, too, I was rewarded, but in ways I had not foreseen. I was 36 and Marina 23, and, before I knew it, she looked on me as a judge. In hopes of shocking me and getting my condem-

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nation over with, she deluged me with recollections of everything "wicked" she had ever done, especially everything sexual. And the more unshockable I pretended to be, the more Marina regaled me with her sexual adventures. Thus, just as I had difficulty prying anything about Oswald from her, so I also had difficulty learning anything about her outside her sex life.

As for our work habits, it took much scowling and emotional blackmail on my part to get Marina to do any work at all, and we seldom started before 5 in the afternoon. We worked until midnight or later, and then Marina went out on a date. I stayed at home, having pretty much moved in as baby sitter, cook, and greeter of boyfriends and of the FBI men who came almost daily to ask Marina questions for the Warren Commission.

Occasionally we went to secluded places in the Southwest. Wherever we went, the neighbors were solicitous, offering us a lift to buy groceries and allowing us to use their telephones. In only one place did we hear a rumble of unpleasantness, Sedona, Ariz., where we were told that the townspeople were going to march on our hotel as an act of patriotic protest. Nothing happened.



Marina Oswald and Priscilla McMillan

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however.

From Christmas, 1964, until the book was finished nearly 13 years later, Marina and I saw each other only once (we telephoned and corresponded, of course). Having been so much a part of Marina's life, I wanted perspective. I wanted, moreover, to describe Marina as she had been, not as she was becoming (she remarried in 1965). Not only that, Marina was a vivid personality and I felt that she might easily run away with a book that should be balanced between her and her husband. Finally, I had no idea whether my portrayal of her was favorable, and I worried that the book might hurt her and her children. Marina, meanwhile, had waived her right to approve the book, giving me a free hand to portray her as unfavorably as I liked.

The writing went easily so long as Marina was the protagonist. But when, at 19, she met Oswald at a dance in Minsk, the focus shifted. To my surprise I found that, with Oswald, not one but two characters had walked into my book. First there was the Oswald Marina knew. Then there was the Oswald who wrote letters, a diary, and an essay on life in Russia. I saw that Oswald had a complex inner life and kept as much of it as he could from Marina. Even so, she was an invaluable observer. She might have noticed that during a particular week Oswald had nightmares and shook convulsively in his sleep. I matched this up against documents and was sometimes able to trace not only what he had been planning but also what it cost him emotionally. I tried to triangulate, put sources together and make him a living person. For as I saw that Oswald, too, suffered and had doubts, I took it as my task, no matter who he was, to give him his humanity.

Often I suffered for both of them. During one period he beat Marina. After describing one of these scenes, I sometimes behaved at home as if I were Marina and my husband were Lee Harvey Oswald. Yet a visitor to our house had only to criticize Oswald for me to come quickly to his defense. And I suffered for Oswald when I described his unsuccessful attempt to shoot Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker on April 10, 1963. Oswald had doubts about the attempt — twice he backed away from it and once he nearly strangled Marina instead. I found it so painful living inside his head that after describing the Walker attempt I did not go to the typewriter again for six months.

I was deterred not only by the unconsummated act of violence that lay behind but by the more terrible act of violence that lay ahead, and I put off writing about the Kennedy assassination just as long as I could. When at last I did come to Nov. 22, 1963, I forgot to say the President was in Dallas. At the moment of the shooting, I omitted to say who pulled the trigger. If the reader did not know by now, I said to myself, then he could surely guess. Afterward I left out what happened to Oswald — his shooting of Dallas Patrolman J.D. Tippit 40 minutes after the assassination; and his own shooting by Jack Ruby two days later. Oswald was, in a way, my creation, and I was loath to finish him off. When my editors noted my omissions, I groaned, "There's been too much violence already," but of course I put in the murders that I had unconsciously left out.

Other lone-assassin writers (but not the conspiracy theorists) seem to have had the same trouble. Edward Jay Epstein, author of "Legend: The Secret World of Lee Harvey Oswald," is as vague about the Kennedy shooting in his book as I was in my original manuscript. Arthur Schlesinger, in his current biography of Robert Kennedy, fails to mention Robert Kennedy's assassination or the name of the assassin. And I have heard that one writer on the John F. Kennedy assassination had to be hospitalized twice while he was writing his book.

Meanwhile, a change of mood in the country created a new problem. When I started back in 1964, I had no idea

that my book might be controversial. Everyone thought Oswald killed Kennedy and on its appearance late that year the Warren Report was accepted almost without criticism. Viet Nam and Watergate changed that, as a new generation came of age that had never trusted the government anyhow. The Warren Report, being a government document, was retroactively discredited and in some circles it became bad form to think Oswald had had anything to do with the assassination. In the university town where I live I heard students discussing the assassination over lunch and refraining from any mention of Oswald's name. I would return to my office, stare at my notes and ask for the hundredth time: Is it possible that this man had nothing to do with it? But there it was in my notes, and I resumed piecing together my archeological vase, Lee Oswald. By now it had become a real challenge to stick to my book as I had conceived it, a biography of a man and a woman, and not veer off into answering conspiracy theories.

When I finished in 1977 and saw Marina again, it was as if my writing the book, and her being a major character, had altered the chemistry between us. The age difference of 13 years had melted — we now were sisters and allies bound together by what we had created. It seems to me that both of us had grown: Marina, perhaps, by seeing herself from the outside; I, perhaps, by trying to understand Marina and Lee from the inside and look out on the world as they saw it.

On the road promoting the book I recalled our 1964 visit to Arizona, for I encountered a little of the hostility that Marina, as the assassin's widow, encounters daily. In Chicago, a book buyer in a major department store

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scolded me. Why had I spent 13 years "hanging around with such terrible people?" Yet I thought it was "hanging around" with those very people that had caused me to grow.

Now it is my dreams that give me trouble. All through the book I had dreams of shooting. I once dreamt that one of them was dead, but which it was, Kennedy or Oswald, I cannot say. But both have bounced back since I finished, and in my dreams both are very much alive. I dream about one or the other of them often.

Perhaps my difficulty writing the book and the difficulty others have accepting it, are part of the same phenomenon. If I, who spent 13 years trying to understand Oswald so that others could understand him, still have not fully accepted the fact that he did kill Kennedy, why expect others to accept it? It is hard to bear the meaninglessness of history, hard to bear the idea that a small gloomy runt of a man can cut down a large and blithe and promising one and alter the lives of us all. It is hard to accept what I suspect may also be true, that there is a little of Lee Oswald in every one of us; even though we are in no way to blame for what he did. No wonder conspiracy theories abound — they project onto the outside world that which is within us all. In some odd way they comfort us by suggesting that the universe can be made tidier than it is and that a similar event might not happen again.

There are books that are hard to read and books that are hard to write, and they are hard for the same reason — the world is a difficult place. We come into it and go out of it alone, as Kennedy and Oswald did, we face the truths of it alone, as the writer must, and there is little comfort for any of us in the end.