

The Heart Of the Story



MARINA AND LEE

By Priscilla Johnson
McMillan

New York:
Illustrated, 327 pp.
Harper & Row, \$15.

THE OSWALD FILE

By Michael Eddowes
Illustrated, 242 pp.

New York:
Clarkson N. Potter, \$10.

By THOMAS POWERS

Things began to go wrong when John F. Kennedy was murdered in November 1963, but not in the way you might think. We recovered from Kennedy's loss quickly enough, but we're still suffering from the questions left open by his death. Everybody has his own theory about the murder, some of them, baroque in their conspiratorial complexity, some pugnaciously dismissive. My own theory is that Kennedy's murder marked the moment when we stopped thinking about what we might become as a nation, and start looking for whom to blame.

It is not just easy, but almost irresistible, to make fun of the Kennedy assassination skeptics, with their Oswald doubles and triples, the ectoplasmic gunmen on the grassy knoll, the phantom C.I.A. agents hovering over Oswald's shoulder, the logical proof that Oswald, the so-so Marine sharpshooter, could not have fired the fatal shots. They remind me of those arguments that Marlowe or Bacon must have written "Hamlet," for no better reason than you got down to it, than that writing "Hamlet" must have been beyond a bumpkin of no breeding from Stratford-on-Avon. But conspiracy-spinning isn't amusing, because it isn't a game. Doubt has become the last frontier of the American dissidents, the point they will not yield. Once upon a time they believed America might transcend racism, poverty, injustice and war; now they are hunting villains among the ectoplasm. If that strikes you as funny, well, it doesn't me.

I realize this is a long preamble for another book about the Kennedy assassination, but I wish it were longer still. If I had four or five issues of The Times Book Review to work with, I might lightly skim the evidence for conspiracy and give you a taste of the desert where the skeptics live. There is no water or life there, just the odd "fact" surrounded by thorns. If I could take you into that wilderness for a week or two, you might appreciate more readily what a miraculous book Priscilla Johnson McMillan has written, miraculous because McMillan had the wit, courage and perseverance to go back to the heart of the story, and the art to give it life.

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The Oswald who emerges in McMillan's book was a young man badly put together—erratic, lonely, proud, impatient, and violent. His ambitions were soaring, his abilities uncertain, his education limited to what he had picked up in public libraries despite a reading disability called dyslexia. From the age of 15 he considered himself a Marxist-Leninist. His "ideas" were unsophisticated, bits and pieces of naïve leftism, but he treasured them the way a lonely boy might treasure his collection of baseball cards.

Often unemployed, fired from the only job he ever liked and bored to distraction with the rest, Oswald spent hundreds of hours working on his "ideas," drawing up manifestoes and political programs, analyzing the failures of Soviet society as he saw them, working in a radio factory in Minak after his defection to Russia in 1959. His dyslexia forced him to copy and recopy everything he wrote, and even then his letters and half-finished essays were riddled with what appear to be the spelling errors of a near-illiterate.

In Russia Oswald had married Marina Prusakova. She was pretty enough, but it was her thinness that appears to have captured Oswald's heart. Fat women reminded him of his mother, a grasping, self-centered, at times hysterical woman, all jowl and self-pitying complaint, who placed Oswald and his two brothers in an orphanage for reasons of convenience. Marina liked Oswald because he was neat and polite, because he was an American, and made her girlfriends envious and because he was the only man she had ever known with an apartment of his own. This was no small matter in overcrowded Russia. Marina's uncle, a colonel in the M.V.D. (Ministry of Internal Affairs), had already rejected one of Marina's suitors out of hand because he had no apartment; the colonel resented Marina's presence in his home and made it clear that he certainly didn't want a nephew-in-law moving in as well.

Looked at from the outside, the marriage was a disaster from the beginning. Oswald was secretive, overbearing and short-tempered. After he returned to the United States with his wife and young daughter in the summer of 1962, a streak of physical cruelty emerged. He horrified the Russian community of Dallas, where they moved, by the ferocity with which he sometimes beat his wife, by his cruel refusal to let Marina learn English or make friends of her own, and later, in 1963, by his threat to send her back to Russia alone.

Life with Oswald was so bad Marina frequently threatened to leave him for good, but at the same time she loved him, blamed herself for their arguments, pitied his loneliness, forgave his violence, hoped Oswald would outgrow the "ideas" that no one but he took seriously. Once, in the summer of 1963, when their relationship was strained to the snapping point, Marina found Oswald in the kitchen, sobbing inconsolably. Life defeated him at every turn; he didn't know what to do. She took him in her arms, comforted him, told him it would be all right, they would find a way. Twisted and painful as it was, Oswald's relationship with Marina was the closest to being normal of any throughout his life.

Marina was familiar with Oswald's "ideas" but she did not grasp his desperate readiness to act on them until April 1963. Earlier that year Oswald had ordered a pistol by mail, and later a rifle and four-power telescopic sight, in the name of "A. J. Hidell," apparently chosen because it rhymed with Fidel, the name he wanted to give the son he expected.

On Wednesday, April 10, 1963, Oswald confessed to

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Marina with tears in his eyes that he had lost his job in a photo studio, the only one he had ever liked. That night he failed to come home at the usual time. Marina found a note in Russian on his desk, giving meticulous instructions about how she was to live in his absence. "If I am alive and taken prisoner," the note concluded, "the city jail is at the end of the bridge we always used to cross when we went to town. . . ."

"At 11:30," McMillan writes, "Lee walked in, white, covered with sweat, his eyes glittering."

"What's happened?" Marina asked.

"I shot Walker. He was out of breath and could hardly get out the words."

"Did you kill him?"

"I don't know."

The next day—half relieved, half disappointed — Oswald learned he had missed. Typically, he blamed his target. At the last moment, he told Marina, Maj. Gen. Edwin A. Walker, U.S.A. (Ret.), a champion of the John Birch Society, had moved his head. There was a flurry of notices in the press, but no evidence turned up to implicate Oswald. Later he showed Marina the elaborate plan he'd drawn up for Walker's murder, complete with maps and photographs and a statement of Oswald's political "ideas." Marina made him burn the incriminating documents, but she kept his note of instructions and made him swear never to do such a thing again.

McMillan's description of this episode is characteristic of her book, rich in brilliant detail, passionate and compelling. Oswald's desperate, personal unhappiness before his attempt, the emotional aftershock (for one whole night he was literally in convulsions); the calm that followed, are all of a piece. They describe a man with a capacity — not reasons — for murder. McMillan's painstaking, intimate account of Oswald's last months prove one simple, important point: he was no phantom, but a man with an hour-by-hour existence like any other. If she does not know exactly why he wanted to kill Walker or Kennedy—how is



Marina, Lee and June Oswald, Dallas, November 1962.

one to extract a reason from the irrational?—she nevertheless demonstrates that nothing he is said to have done contradicts what we know he was. McMillan's portrait is very dense indeed. If the skeptics are to preserve their conspiracies, they will have to squeeze them into the corners of Oswald's life. McMillan achieves, with art what the Warren Commission failed to do with its report and 26 volumes of lawfully analysis, testimony and supporting evidence. She makes us see.

Or made me see, at any rate. The skeptics, I suspect, are in no mood to be convinced. The word is already out on McMillan in buff circles: Her book can be dismissed. She is unreliable, not to be trusted. She may have been working for the "State Department"—or worse—when she had an interview with Oswald in Moscow back in October 1959. On top of that, McMillan's principal source was Marina Oswald, who was the niece of a colonel in the M.V.D. (Marina believes he was in charge of convict labor working on timber projects in Belorussia.) How can you trust the work of someone working for the "State Department," based on information from the niece of a colonel in the M.V.D.? At best, the buffs say, "Marina and Lee" is a fantasy; at worst,

part of the cover-up.

The people who are taking this position ought to be ashamed of themselves; they are accusing McMillan of the same failings—either secret motives or ad hominem arguments—so often brought against themselves. The argument is confusingly circular: you can't trust the book because you can't trust McMillan, and you can't trust McMillan because you can't trust Marina. That follows only if you assume Marina was a witting party to a conspiracy to kill Kennedy. If you don't believe that—and very few assassination buffs do; they look for the villains elsewhere—then her testimony is as good as anyone's else.

One skeptic who does include Marina in the conspiracy is the British solicitor Michael Eddowes, whose book, "The Oswald File," is typical in that it depends heavily on existing documents (admittedly voluminous) and offers a tortured and intricate rationale for what might be explained more simply. Eddowes believes that Oswald was actually "Oswald"—a Russian agent who impersonated Oswald in order to kill Kennedy. He offers exactly one piece of evidence for this bold conjecture, the fact that Oswald's height is given as 5 feet 9 inches on some documents, and 5 feet 11 inches on others. That's it. For the rest, he

simply marches his straw "Oswald" through the familiar story, occasionally pausing to reinterpret the known facts in light of his theory. (E.g., Marina and "Oswald" only pretended to fight in order to discourage suspicion they were really in cahoots.)

Eddowes is untroubled by the fact that Oswald's mother, brothers and other relatives never doubted that Oswald was Oswald, and even copes with the fact that Oswald's fingerprints taken while he was in the Marines in 1956 match those of "Oswald" after Kennedy's murder in 1963. A Russian agent, he says, switched files in the F.B.I. The only reason Eddowes thinks "Oswald" was a Russian, so far as I can tell, is that logic demands the imposture take place after the real Oswald left his family for Russia in 1959, and before the phony "Oswald" married Marina. It would be too much to ask us to believe that the switch took place without Marina having noticed.

One might raise any number of objections to this theory. Why would "Oswald's" wife and co-conspirator tell the Warren Commission about the attempt on Walker's life? Why would "Oswald" deliver a threatening letter to the F.B.I. only days before Kennedy's murder? Why did "Oswald" and Marina both write to the Soviet embassy, when the K.G.B. surely knew their letters would be routinely intercepted by the F.B.I.? Why would the Russians go to such trouble to have "Oswald" spend two years hanging around Texas in a succession of blue collar jobs? And so on ad infinitum. But there is only one question that really matters: why would the Russians deliberately choose to impersonate a man with a known Russian connection, who was bound to attract the attention of American intelligence services? The idea behind imposture is to hide connections, not reveal them.

Eddowes's book is so breath-takingly bad—woodenly written, implausible, contradictory, lacking in evidence—that a real conspiracy theorist might darkly suspect it was intended to discredit the genre. The quality of their work is generally a lot higher than that.

But are the skeptics right? Most of them now seem to believe that Oswald was at least involved in Kennedy's murder—a quantum jump in credence—but that others must have put him up to it. These

reasons for thinking so are severely particular, and any book dealing with the whole body of evidence and conjecture in a sober, analytical way will necessarily include more footnotes than there are stars in the heavens.

Priscilla McMillan approached her subject in quite a different spirit. From the moment she heard of Oswald's arrest—"My God!" she told a friend, "I know that boy!"—McMillan wanted to know why Oswald had killed Kennedy. Beginning in August 1964, she spent seven months talking to Marina, then wrote her book in fits and starts over the following 13 years. It is very much Marina's story—there was apparently nothing she was unwilling to discuss—but McMillan also conducted numerous interviews with people who had known both of them.

McMillan never seems ever to have doubted for a moment that Oswald did it, or that he did it for reasons of his own. He had his "ideas"—he seems to have rationalized the assassination as a salutary shock for a complacent public—but his real motive emerges as a desperate desire to transcend the

obscurity and impotence to which fate was inexorably confining him. A failure in every job he held, in danger of driving away his wife and child, ignored or condescended to, whenever he brought up his "ideas," reluctantly accepted by the Russians in 1959 and rejected by the Cubans in 1963, Oswald refused to slip under with only a whimper. He killed Kennedy for the same reason he fired a shot at Walker: to prove he was there, and counted.

It is not at all easy to describe the power of "Marina and Lee." Its texture is rich and convincing, as painful as the events it describes. It is far better than any book about Kennedy, with the unsettling result that the assassination is experienced from the wrong end. McMillan follows Oswald's life with such fidelity and perception that it is his death which hurts in her final pages, not Kennedy's. Other books about the Kennedy assassination are all smoke and no fire. "Marina and Lee" burns. If you can find the heart to read it, you may finally begin to forget the phantom gunmen on the grassy knoll. ■

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