

Review

SEPTEMBER 5, 1993

KEEP!

ASSASSINATION, REVISITED

GERALD POSNER
EXPLORES THE
ENDURING RIDDLE
OF JFK'S DEATH

CASE CLOSED

Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK
By Gerald Posner
Random House; 607 pages; \$25

REVIEWED BY PATRICIA HOLT

This exhaustive account of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy assassination appears at first to be an honest and painstaking effort to sort through mountains of material and establish, once and for all, who shot JFK and why.

That Gerald Posner, the critically praised author of "Mengele" and "Warlords of Crime," concludes that the Warren Commission, for all its mistakes, was right — Lee Harvey Oswald killed JFK and acted as a "lone assassin" — may sound absurd in the face of questions raised by other honest and painstaking accounts.

That Posner's very title, "Case Closed," arrogantly dismisses every other work on the subject may further alienate some readers. But in his 600-plus pages of investigation, including new interviews and studies involving computer enhancements, sonic digitizers and neutron activation, Posner does at times present a convincing argument.

But then, they all do. The problem for readers is which authors to believe about which details. For example, one of the earliest critics of the Warren Commission, Bolinas private detective Josiah Thompson, wrote in "Six Seconds in Dallas" that 52 percent of the

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Wharton scholar Marion Mainwaring, does not have the richness and depth of such classics as "The Age of Innocence" or "The House of Mirth," it is mostly pure pleasure.

The pirates of the title are five attractive American girls whose nouveaux-riches mothers, despairing of marrying them successfully in New York, bring them

The story has a second heroine, the governess Laura Testvalley, who has been brought up in England but is descended from an Italian patriot. It is Laura who surveys the American scene and realizes that her charges, Virginia and Nan, will never succeed in such a stratified society. In England, however, with help from their fathers' fortunes, they can embody

ers," soon achieve the brilliant marriages expected for them.

Nan, in the best tradition of high-minded American girls of the period, falls in love with a house before she meets her man. At her first sight of Honourlove, Guy Thwarte's ancestral home, she feels summoned by destiny. Guy isn't without attraction for her, either. In his absence

S
Girls

by Marion

ty much the same way. "I don't know how I got to be so lucky. The only thing I can say in my defense is that at least I appreciate it. I've got the ball and I'm running with it."

Nevertheless, mixed in with the accounts of wonderful parties, entertaining and being entertained by aristocratic and wealthy French winemakers, and

ware store and Red's Recovery Room are "on the fringes of Seabrook," although both are about eight miles away, the first in Santa Rosa and the second in Robnett Park. Candlestick Park to her is "a rickety old place," although, whatever its faults, it is solid, reinforced concrete. She writes, in her starchy-eyed style, "Our lives are completely inter-

ing wine in his glasses they went to lunch, and Sterling apologized for not using Riedel glassware."

"No need to apologize, Joy," he said. "Baccarat is very expensive. Not the best, but very expensive."

Seabrook writer James Benet is a former *Chronicle* reporter.

JFK
Continued From Page 1
witnesses at Dealey Plaza said they heard shots coming from the grassy knoll rather than from the Texas School Book Depository where Oswald allegedly had his "sniper's nest."

Posner accuses Thompson of putting some witnesses in the "grassy knoll" category who "actually," he writes, "described the shots as coming from the vicinity of the Book Depository." So Posner, eminently fairer, quotes other sources showing that only 12 percent of the witnesses "pinpointed the grassy knoll."

In this and hundreds of other cases, he favorably compares his version to others, then dismisses any and all of what he calls "the conspiracy critics," ranging from the most recent, Oliver Stone of "JFK" fame, to the earliest, Mark Lane, author of "Push to Judgment," 1967.

But in almost every case, Posner discovers an abyss of complicated details and contradictions. For example, as to the number and direction of shots that killed JFK, the truth is that nobody will ever know because Dealey Plaza constitutes one big echo chamber, as Posner notes, in which witnesses reported "reverberation" of sounds that "bounced off the buildings," especially near the grassy knoll.

But if that key point hardly constitutes a "closed case," Posner is ready with 1992 computer enhancements of Abraham Zapruder's famous home movie to show that Oswald took not 4.8 to 5.6 seconds, as earlier studies suggest, but as many as 8.4 seconds to fire three shots—more evidence that he was acting alone. Posner also says that

rifle experts shooting Mannlicher Carcanos like the one Oswald allegedly used have demonstrated that after Oswald missed the JFK limousine with the first shot, "he had at least 3 seconds to reload, aim and fire the second shot, which hit both Kennedy and [Texas governor John] Connally. He then had another 5 seconds—ample time—for the third shot, which killed the President."

Really? What about the "badly misaligned" telescopic gun sight that Jim Garrison mentions in "On the Trail of the Assassins"? Again, it depends on whom you believe. Posner says it's not a "badly misaligned" but a "very slight misalignment" on the scope and that it "may actually have aided him in hitting Kennedy." That's strange—how could a misalignment help the shooter? Posner doesn't explain. In a footnote, Posner refers us to Warren Commission volumes but doesn't explain, and in this key area of conflict, we need a lot of explanation.

Then there's the "magic bullet" that the movie "JFK" demonstrated had to turn and twist in midair to account for no less than seven entry and exit wounds. Posner says the Zapruder film enhancements now show that Connally was turning his body in such a way that the bullet made a straight path through five of the wounds, "tumbled" rather than twisted and changed direction only after hitting Connally's rib.

Thank you, new technology. With Posner's interpretation, it does help to explain how the "magic bullet" turned into the "pristine" bullet (relatively undamaged, how the notorious "backyard photos" of Oswald holding his rifle may not have been phony; how Oswald's palm print on the rifle might not have been planted by the FBI.

diplomat, Annie and Will both have theatrical backgrounds. She sings opera, he is a playwright.

Both live with other people in relationships that long have had nothing to do with love. And both have been marked by tragedy: Will by the death of his beloved younger brother, and Annie by an auto accident that she caused and that resulted in her hus-

There are some nice things about this book: Annie's children, in particular, are convincing. But mostly "The Train Home" is full of theatrics and noise and little substance.

San Francisco writer Penelope Rowlands has contributed to *Cande Carroll*, *People* and *Working Woman* magazines.

But they don't explain why the driver of the limousine slowed the JFK/Connally car to a stop rather than accelerated after the first shot; why FBI agents deliberately destroyed notes written by Oswald or by themselves about Oswald; why Dallas police never taped or took notes of their interrogation of Oswald (insistence that they didn't have a tape recorder is not a reason); why Dallas Police Department files identifying the "three tramps" (suspects found in the railroad yard near Dealey Plaza) were not found until 1992; or why the military autopsy of JFK's body was indeed one of the "worst and most botched autopsies ever," as one medical examiner put it. (Robert and Jacqueline Kennedy making decisions and hurrying the autopsy along is again not a reason.)

Though Posner's book doesn't really settle very much, it might be worth reading if he hadn't suggested that the whole conspiracy notion is really our fault—we Americans—for caring too much that a boob like Oswald murdered our Camelot hero.

"You want to add something weightier to Oswald," Posner quotes William Manchester, author of "Death of a President." "It would invest the President's death with meaning.... A conspiracy would, of course, do the job nicely. Unfortunately, there is no evidence whatever that there was one."

You can't say that by Posner's account, surely, in fact, the only reason "Case Closed" works as a title is that readers may be so sick of JFK assassination books they couldn't possibly stomach another one.

Patricia Holt is book editor for *The Chronicle*.

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TO SUNDAY EXAMINER AND CHRONICLE PUBLISHING CO. 1993

BETWEEN THE LINES Patricia Holt

Assassination Enigma Endures

That was quite an ad from Random House in a recent issue of the New York Times for Gerald Posner's "Case Closed" (see review on cover). Above mug shots and selected quotations (Jim Garrison: "The JFK assassination was a homosexual thrill-killing") by five authors and a film maker (Oliver Stone), the headline announced, "GUILTY / Of Misleading the American Public." The ad smacks of playing dirty and sounds a little lame. If Posner's book should be judged on its own merits, why stoop to the "Most-Wanted" poster approach?

Of course, using selective information to prove one's case is common practice among JFK assassination authors. But Posner wants to distance himself from all others; he wants his book to be regarded as so fair and complete that after reading it, we'll all say, OK, that's the end of it — "case closed."

But take the case of Failure Analysis Associates, the Menlo Park firm that used computer enhancements to reconstruct the JFK assassination for a 1992 study. Posner refers to that study repeatedly but does not explain that Failure Analysis was commissioned by the American Bar Association to create its reconstruction for the ABA's mock trial of Lee Harvey Oswald in San Francisco last year. The trial ended with a hung jury.

According to Angela Meyer of Failure Analysis, "Our job for the ABA was to provide evidence and expert witnesses for both the defense and the prosecution." Posner appears to draw from testimony for the prosecution's case, not the defense's case.

Although Failure Analysis was not asked to provide its own opinion of Oswald's guilt or innocence, the company's CEO, Roger McCarthy (who testified for the defense at the mock trial), offered what host Brian Banmiller called "a startling conclusion" during the TV program "On the Money" on July 31.

Failure Analysis, announced Banmiller, "made a compelling argument that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone." According to McCarthy, the gunman

"gave up some awfully good shots to take some awfully bad shots" to "(drive) the quarry into a second shooting" by other assassins.

Banmiller then remarked, "Few sharpshooters, much less Oswald, could hit a moving target taking shots as rapidly as Oswald supposedly did." He asked McCarthy, "Can it be done?" McCarthy responded, "I can't. I'm the best shot I know. I can't do that."

Banmiller concluded, "Thirty years later, no one, not even Failure Analysis, is ready to say conclusively who killed President Kennedy." Case open.

Patricia Holt is book editor for The Chronicle.

T.O. SYLVESTER



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- lowing an open mike. 8 p.m., LaVal's, 1834 Euclid Ave., Berkeley. (510) 849-3979.
 CAROL SEVERANCE: Reading — from her work. 2 p.m., The Other Change of Hobbit, 2020 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. (510) 848-0413.
 WILLIAM F. WU: Signing copies of his books. 4 p.m., The Other Change of Hobbit, 2020 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. (510) 848-0413.
 ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE: Discussing "The Thunder Tree: Lessons From an Urban Wildland." 7:30 p.m., Black Oak Books, 1491 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. (510) 486-0698.
 KAREN ELIZABETH GORDON: Discussing "The Well-Tempered Sentence." 8 p.m., Printers Inc. Bookstore, 301 Castro St., Mountain View. 961-8500.
 JORGE ARGUETA & ALEJANDRO MURGUIA: A selection of poetry and prose readings. 8 p.m., Intersection for the Arts, 446 Valencia St., S.F. 626-ARTS.
 EILEEN MYLES & ANNETTE WEATHERS: Reading from their work. 7:30 p.m., A Different Light Bookstore, 483 Castro St., S.F. 431-0891.
 SANDRA BERNHARD: Reading from "Love, Love." 7 p.m., Cody's Books, 2454 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley. (510) 845-7852.
 SOGYAL RINPOCHE: Discussing "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying." 7:30 p.m., A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, 2417 Larkspur Landing Circle, Larkspur. 461-

- SOGYAL RINPOCHE: Discussing "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying." 7:30 p.m., A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, 601 Van Ness Ave., S.F. 441-6670.
 GARY SOTO: Reading his poetry. 7 p.m., Cody's Books, 2454 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley. (510) 845-7852.
 VIRGINIA BEANE BUTTER: Discussing "Woman Changing Woman." 8 p.m., The Depot Bookstore, 87 Throckmorton Ave., Mill Valley. 383-2665.
 ROBERT MICHAEL PYLE: Reading from "The Thunder Tree: Lessons From an Urban Wildland." 7:30 p.m., A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, 2417 Larkspur Landing Circle, Larkspur. 461-0171.

THURSDAY

- CYDNEY CHADWICK: Reading from her work. 8 p.m., The Depot Bookstore, 87 Throckmorton Ave., Mill Valley. 383-2665.
 STORYTIME: Stories for children ages 2-5. 9:15 a.m., Charlotte's Web Bookstore, 2278 Union St., S.F. 441-4700.
 MICHAEL KIMMEL & TERRY KUPERS: Leading a discussion on gender issues as experienced by pro-feminist men. 7:30 p.m., GAIA Bookstore, 1400 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. (510) 486-0698.
 DEMONSTRATION: Information on CD-ROM. 7:30 p.m., Kepler's Books, 1010 El Camino Real, Menlo Park. 924-4321.

Vista Blvd., Corte Madera. 927-0960.

- ROBERT HASS & BRENDA HILLMAN: Reading from and discussing their work. 7:30 p.m., Eye Gallery, 1151 Mission St., S.F. 338-2227.
 LOUIE GARCIA ROBINSON: Reading from "The Devil, Delfina and the Used Chevy." 7:30 p.m., A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, 2417 Larkspur Landing Circle, Larkspur. 461-0171.
 BILL EANE: An exhibit of his work. A Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books, 2417 Larkspur Landing Circle, Larkspur. 461-0171.
 SOGYAL RINPOCHE: Reading from "The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying." 7 p.m., Copperfield's Books, 138 North Main St., Sebastopol. (707) 823-0677.
 JOAN CHATFIELD-TAYLOR: A visual tour based on "Visiting Eden: The Public Gardens of Northern California." 7:30 p.m., Easing Going Travel, 1385 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. (510) 843-3533.
 PAT CALIFIA: Reading from her published and unpublished work. 7:30 p.m., Modern Times Bookstore, 888 Valencia St., S.F. 282-9246.
 FRIDAY
 JOSE BARREIRO: Reading from "The Indian Chronicles." 7:30 p.m., Modern Times Bookstore, 888 Valencia St., S.F. 282-9246.
 DAVID WATMOUGH: Reading from "Thy

THOMAS TREBITSCH PARKER: Reading from "Anna, Ann, Annie." 7:30 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 2352 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley. (510) 844-0861.

- ANN NEWMAN: A story hour for children. 6:30 p.m., The Depot Bookstore, 87 Throckmorton Ave., Mill Valley. 383-7012.
 HILARY MULLINS: Reading from "The Cat Came Back." 7:30 p.m., Walden Pond Books, 3316 Grand Ave., Oakland. (510) 832-4438.
 GREG SARRIS: Discussing "Keeping Slugs Womankind Alive: A Holistic Approach to American Indian Texts." 7 p.m., Copperfield's Books, 138 North Main St., Sebastopol. (707) 823-0677.

SATURDAY

- STORYTIME: Stories for children ages 2-6. 11 a.m., Barnes & Noble, 2020 Redwood Hwy., Larkspur. 924-1096.
 CATHARINE A. MACKINNON: Discussing "Only Words." 7 p.m., Cody's Books, 2454 Telegraph Ave., Berkeley. (510) 845-7852.
 PETER ARMOUR & ANDREW SCHACHAT: Signing copies of "Stop That Pickle!" 10 a.m., Charlotte's Web Children's Bookstore, 2278 Union St., S.F. 441-4700.
 ANDREA BROWN: A luncheon discussion of her work as a literary agent. 11:30 a.m., The Velvet Turtle Restaurant, 100 Chipmunking,