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BOOK REVIEW

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Following the Trail of Lee Harvey Oswald 33 years after JFK's slaying, three books offer new clues

REVIEWED BY
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You think you're having a bad day? Imagine being the FBI agent responsible for tracking Lee Harvey Oswald before the assassination of John F. Kennedy, when Oswald's arrest hit the news on Nov. 22, 1963.

In hundreds of books on the case, much speculation has been made about that agent, James P. Hosty Jr., who received a hostile (but unsigned) note from Oswald 10 days before the assassination, did nothing about it and flushed it down the toilet afterward.

Now Hosty has written **ASSIGNMENT: OSWALD** (Arcade, 328 pages; \$25.95), an engrossing memoir that describes his sketchy but routine check on Oswald before the assassination and shows why he saw no reason to suspect Oswald of violent intent or hatred of the president. Oswald, who had previously defected to the Soviet Union, was of interest to the government for counterintelligence rather than as a criminal suspect, he writes.

Hosty says he visited Oswald's wife twice before the assassination to establish where he was liv-

ing and working, before interviewing Oswald — an interview he never got around to conducting. The note Oswald wrote later was a warning to Hosty and other FBI agents to leave his wife alone.

Hosty says, quite credibly, that the head of the FBI's Dallas office ordered him after the assassination to destroy the note so bureau Director J. Edgar Hoover would not find out about it and throw a temper tantrum. As Hosty says, "One of our jobs was to protect the Bureau's image at all costs, even if it ran roughshod over individuals or principles."

The book exposes the bureaucratic infighting and whitewashing endemic to the investigation and confirms Hoover's ugly reputation as a myth-maker and a tyrant — so petty he wouldn't let agents drink coffee in the office.

Hosty portrays his agony, humiliation and anger after the assassination when he received two reprimands, a one-month unpaid suspension and a transfer to Kansas City for allegedly failing to investigate Oswald properly. However, it was clear, needed a scapegoat, and Hosty was convicted. The agent sought absolution in a private meeting with



FROM 'THE SEARCH FOR LEE HARVEY OSWALD'

Oswald and his wife, Marine, on a train out of Minsk, bound for America, in 1962; FBI agents suspected that she was a KGB plant

Hoover in 1984. But the FBI director only rambled on about how much he hated Attorney General Robert Kennedy, despised members of the Warren Commission and enjoyed being pals with a right-wing Texas oil millionaire. Hosty notes in passing that on the morning of the assassination

But according to authors Ray and Mary LaFontaine, that meeting had everything to do with the assassination. In **OSWALD TALK-ED: The New Evidence in the JFK Assassination** (Pelican, 454 pages; \$25), the LaFontaines unearth intriguing evidence that both Oswald and his killer, Jack Ruby, were connected to the gunrunning case — and that Oswald may even have been an informant who helped them identify some of the right-wing extremists.

The LaFontaines stumbled across the complex story while identifying the famous "three tramps" who were arrested near Dallas' Dealey Plaza after the assassination. They discovered long-lost Dallas police records naming the tramps, who proved to be true hoboes, contrary to suspicions of conspiracy buffs that they were disguised assassins.

But with help from a San Jose researcher, Bill Adams, the authors learned that one vagrant arrested then, John Elrod, later told the FBI about a jailhouse conversation with a cellmate who the authors believe was Lee Harvey Oswald. This celmate revealed personal knowledge of the weapons conspiracy and connected it with a name Elrod would soon hear again: Jack Ruby.

The FBI dismissed the story
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on the ground that Elrod wasn't in the Dallas jail on Nov. 22. But the LaFontaines conclusively prove otherwise from police records. They also produce substantial independent evidence that Ruby was involved in gunrunning with right-wing groups and that Oswald's path crossed frequently into the same milieu.

The FBI later suppressed the name of the government's informant in the gunrunning case at a court hearing and has since refused to release at least one document on Elrod, maintaining that "public disclosure would be so harmful that it outweighs the public interest."

The LaFontaine book, soberly argued and filled with intriguing

revelations, doesn't prove that a conspiracy killed Kennedy. But it makes a strong case for continuing the release of classified government documents relating to the assassination. Even after 33 years of revelations about the case, there are plenty of surprises in store.

Another book no buff should miss is Robert Grodin's **THE SEARCH FOR LEE HARVEY OSWALD: A Comprehensive Photographic Record** (Penguin; 262 pages; \$29.95). Grodin, who has spent his adult life consumed by the case, has compiled an astonishing collection of more than 600 photographs relating to Oswald, going back to his infancy. In 1993, he published a related collection, "The Killing of a President."

Grodin, a conspiracy theorist, reproduces in his latest volume some of the famous "backyard photos" showing Oswald holding a gun (which Grodin believes are fakes) as well as documents appearing to show discrepancies in Oswald's height and signature. These suggest that someone was impersonating Oswald, perhaps for some mysterious intelligence mission, before the assassination.

Your own signature probably varies as much as Oswald's ever did, so you may not be persuaded. But even if you buy the official story that Oswald did it alone, you'll be captivated by this visual history of his strange career. ■

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