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LIFE BOOK REVIEW

Anatomizing an assassination

SPECIAL UNIT SENATOR
by ROBERT A. HOUGHTON
(Random House) \$5.95

One thing we Americans have learned to do, in our sorrow and travail, is to investigate an assassination. We've become so accomplished at this aspect of law enforcement that it could probably be taught at the police academy: compilation of background data on suspect; proper security measures for suspect (isolation, bulletproof glass, 24-hour guard); dealing with conspiracy theories left, right and nonpartisan, or Mafia, how to spot the "witness" who merely wants attention; checking rifle ranges in the vicinity, etc. This book, a careful and fascinating account of the investigation of the assassination of Robert Kennedy, could serve as a text.

Robert Houghton is chief of detectives for the Los Angeles Police Department. He conceived the special unit set up to check every aspect of the Kennedy case. He is, of course, a cop, and he thinks pretty much like a cop, which means that he thinks in terms of facts, witnesses, statements, evidence—the stuff of reports ("Officer observed suspect proceeding in a westerly direction along Vasso da Gama Boulevard in a blue 1963 Ford" etc.). And while I would ordinarily cross several state lines to stay clear of a book written by a cop, I have to say that this is a fine book in every way: cleanly written in a low-voiced narrative, unmythical, full of intriguing new information, and positively invaluable in its potential for keeping a lid on the free-lance conspiracy dispensers who spin their webs in the smoke of every assassination. No doubt they will lurch into print on this one, too.

Houghton had the good sense to collaborate with Writer Theodore Taylor. The book is full of good observation and detail (also one sentence that I can't get out of my head: "Adel played the *oud* at an Arab restaurant"); the glimpses of Sirhan refusing to identify himself ("I think I shall remain incognito," he said; how many cops have heard a prisoner say, "I think I shall remain incognito?"), asking his guards how much money they make (getting no answer) or whether they believe in the death penalty (no answer there either), enjoying being mysterious with his captors; the tedious, sweaty chore of tracking the murder weapon to Sirhan's house—at about the same time his brothers see a newspaper photograph, realize that Sirhan is the assassin and report to the police; the matter of the girl in the polka-dot dress, finally exposed as a pathetic myth, the witness breaking down under a lie detector test and admitting that the police questioning had led her to believe she should have, must have seen polka dots; the \$409 in cash Sirhan was carrying (the cops think: aha, conspiracy) finally accounted for—an insurance settlement, and he apparently just liked to carry the cash. One by one the conspiracy rumors bubble up, the cops beat them down with doggedness and shoe leather, the pitiful misfit behind the rumor is uncovered, and the matter-of-fact police move on to the next one.

Sirhan never quite emerges as a full-dimensional character. The cops pick up a lot of hints and suggestions ("He's a stubborn type," says one brother. "He goes into tantrums"), but they're not really interested in motivation—they'll settle for establishing that he did it and that he's legally sane. Houghton notes at the end that he's convinced "Sirhan is more politically oriented than he would appear to be for his age; that he did, in fact, kill Kennedy because of the Israel-Arab situation, and that he probably has some kind of martyr complex." That's as close as he gets to personality analysis, which is all right, too—maybe the analysis ought to be made by someone else (with Jim Garrison, Mark Lane and William Bradford Huie declared ineligible).

The book's replay of how Sirhan spent the day before the murder is particularly dramatic: he practices on the pistol range in the afternoon, helps a girl with her shooting, meets some Arab friends, tries to get a pool game going and, in the same casual, aimless way, drifts over to the Ambassador Hotel, his pistol tucked in his denim. He didn't even know which way Kennedy would leave the stage after his speech, any more than Oswald knew the presidential motorcade route when he took a job at the Texas School Book Depository. This book shows again how incredibly random, coincidental and banal a crime can be—even the greatest, saddest, most monumental crime. The grubby, ordinary facts of the crime never match the enormity of our sense of loss and tragedy, and conspiracy rushes into the gap.

Donald Jackson
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