

Book Notes

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■ A Hispanic press gets money and attention ■ A miniskirt for Michelangelo's David ■ Three assassination books on the best-seller list.

A Change of Fortune

It is raining gold at Arte Público Press in Houston. A year ago, the small, independent publishing house dedicated to Hispanic literature was not sure it had enough money or manpower to market a hard-cover book. This month, the Rockefeller Foundation announced that it would give the press \$2.7 million over the next 10 years to help finance a project to restore the Hispanic literary heritage of the United States.

In addition to that commitment, the people at the Rockefeller Foundation have promised to help Arte Público raise additional money for the \$20 million project to find, catalogue, research and publish Hispanic literature, fiction and nonfiction, from the territory that is now North America from before the Colonial period through 1960.

"There are thousands of documents, both literary and historical, that would otherwise be lost," said Nicholas Kanellos, a professor of Spanish at the University of Houston and Arte Público's founder and publisher. "We will collect the conventional as well as the unconventional. Newspapers, diaries, testimonials, court testimonies, stories. It is an amazing part of American history that has basically been ignored because Latino Americans are a marginalized, stigmatized class in this country."

The project, Mr. Kanellos said, will be carried out by a consortium of scholars in Hispanic literature from around the country and university and small presses in the United States, including Puerto Rico, and Mexico and Spain.

This is the second unexpected burst of money and attention recently for Arte Público. Last year, the press published its first hard-cover book, "Rain of Gold," by Victor Villaseñor, a sweeping, true saga of the author's family and its migration from Mexico to the United States. The book came to Arte Público only when Mr. Villaseñor bought it from Putnam, which had paid him a \$75,000 advance, after a dispute with the publisher over what kind of book he had written.

Phyllis Grann, the president and

chief executive officer of the Putnam Berkley Group, said she thought the book was going to be fiction based on a true story and was surprised when Mr. Villaseñor switched gears as the book was in galleys and pleaded that the book be published as nonfiction or sold back to him. Mr. Villaseñor says Putnam knew from the start that this was a "Mexican 'Roots'" but changed strategy when it couldn't sell the paperback rights for a high sum and tried to repackage it as a novel called "Rio Grande."

The publisher and the author ultimately parted amicably, and Mr. Villaseñor went to Arte Público and persuaded Mr. Kanellos to publish "Rain of Gold" as its first hard cover. Although the press had no experience with the production or marketing of a hard cover, its improvised strategy

worked respectably. The book made it onto The San Francisco Chronicle's best-seller list, and Dell bought the paperback rights for \$250,000.

Mr. Kanellos, who is of Puerto Rican and Greek descent, and Mr. Villaseñor said that there was a prejudice among New York publishers against publishing Hispanic American literature because of a fear that Hispanic people don't buy books and the general audience won't read books about them.

"Since the dime-store novel, publishers have been selling stereotypes of Hispanics as gangsters and drug types," Mr. Kanellos said. "What we have done with this book and what we are going to do with the new center is to change that pattern."

Modesty for David

Viking has been hit with a touch of prudishness. When people at the publishing house were first planning a cover for the new Faye Weldon novel, "Life Force," they decided they wanted to be provocative and chose to wrap the book in a close-up of Michelangelo's statue of David, from his belly button to his thighs in front, with the back of the book showing the anatomically coordinating body parts.

The cover was deemed appropriate because the book is about marriage and infidelity and the apparently generously endowed body of a man named Leslie Beck, who has a notorious penchant for engaging in both marriage and infidelities.

But when the books go on sale soon, key parts of David will be hidden by a paper band printed with the title of the book and the author's name.

"We were afraid we'd shock bookstores too much," said Debbie Kwan, a spokeswoman for Viking. "So we decided on the belly band for modesty's sake."

The band, she noted, is removable.

Assassination Sales

Just when it looked like the American book-reading public was set to ignore the hoopla about John F. Kennedy's assassination that was set off by the Oliver Stone movie "J. F. K.," three books about assassination conspiracy theories have jumped onto the New York Times best-seller list.

"On the Trail of the Assassin" (Warner), by Jim Garrison, the New Orleans prosecutor who tried to prove that Lee Harvey Oswald did not act alone and who is depicted in Mr. Stone's movie, moves into the No. 1 spot for trade paperback nonfiction on Sunday, Jan. 19, after spending four weeks on the list. The book was first published in hard cover in 1988 and was brought out this year as a paperback. No. 11 on the same list will be "High Treason" (Berkley), by Robert J. Gooden and Harrison Edward Livingstone. And on the hard-cover nonfiction list, "Plausible Denials" (Thunders Month Press) by Mark Lane will debut at No. 7.