

# A Beautifully Written Novel

Reviewed by  
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Illuminating familiar stories, events and legends with new insights and magnifications is the supreme challenge of literary invention but American literature hasn't rooted itself very deeply in the seminal events of our history. The traumas are there. But American literature hasn't chosen to break open the traumas and extract transcendent meanings from them.

The assassination of John F. Kennedy may be the exception. Richard Condon used it as the basis for his assault on American values in "Winter Kills." Now Charles McCarry has appeared with "The Tears Of Autumn," a novel whose hero relives the idealism gone berserk of the last two decades. In McCarry's masterful treatment, the stark fact of the assassination is converted into a metaphysical event.

McCarry peers at the haunted pageantry of John F. Kennedy's intentions and his death from the perspective of one of government's more obscure corners—its

human hope, suffering and chicanery—here are Africans saturated with the supposedly civilized nations' political theories, a veteran Soviet spy who wants to defect because he is too weary to continue (thereby scoring a triumph for human peace by the superpowers), a dwarf who once climbed down chimneys in the intelligence war against Hitler and does it again to aid Christopher's search for a contemporary evil.

The chapters that take place in Vietnam are miraculous. Those who did time in that theater of tragedy assumed the impenetrability of the screen that stood between Westerners and the Vietnamese. McCarry tears the screen aside, displaying the roots of belief from which Vietnamese logic flowers. He persuades us to accept that logic on its own terms.

McCarry writes beautifully. He brings his people alive with strokes of prose as deft as calligraphy. Christopher's Australian mistress, Molly, is one of the more endearing heroines of the contemporary novel. The American ops, spy-masters and doubles who help Christopher after he resigns from the CIA are utterly convincing. So are the bankers of Europe, terrorists, a

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*THE TEARS OF AUTUMN.* By Charles McCarry  
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intelligence services. Paul Christopher is a senior operative (presumably of the CIA) possessed of a theory about who ordered Kennedy's murder and why. Christopher is no conspiracy-drenched kook. He has operated on almost every continent; he has his own networks of agents, informers and one-use allies.

The survivors of Kennedy's White House—personified by Dennis Foley, a caricature of The Best and The

Brightest that is almost cruel—want no part of Christopher and his theory. If what the veteran spy believes is true, the Kennedy administration would be implicated in an event as ghastly in its own context as the murder of an American President in Dallas.

The voyage of Paul Christopher toward the truth he suspects is the Homeric saga of "The Tears of Autumn." It seizes the headlines of the last 15 years and converts them into vivid tableaux of

Greek torturer, the failed heroes and clinging followers who people Christopher's journey.

The book is studded with descriptions such as this on the way Asians age: "... one year they were fresh with youth, and the next their skulls came through their flesh as if their corpses were eager to escape into the grave."

Can literature instruct us in the real events it takes for its departure points? It is, perhaps, the ultimate instruction because literature assumes the infinite complexity of human existence as its field of speculation. Politics and political science are cages of supposition about institutions and their use. Literary imaginations like McCarry's fill the cages with people, reminding us that people and the consequences they endure are what the political institutions are supposed to be all about.

In the rendering of his dark version of John F. Kennedy's assassination, Charles McCarry turns the event into a double trauma. We contaminated the world with our dreams and the murder of a President was one result of the ensuing rot. That, in the McCarry version, is the pity of the thing. And the horror.