

Bookmakers: The Ford Family Books

by Christopher Dickey

THE FORD MEMOIRS—both Jerry's and Betty's—are about to be sold to Harper & Row and Reader's Digest for around \$1 million. That's notably higher than many expected, despite today's inflated market.

Several political names have created veritable bidding frenzies recently, generating astronomical advances: Warner bought the rights to Richard Nixon's memoirs for a reported \$2.3 million in 1974 (but didn't find a hardcover publisher for the book until last week, with Grosset & Dunlap). William Safire, a former Nixon speechwriter, sold the paperback rights to his *novel* last month, for \$1.375 million. And just the idea of Henry Kissinger's memoirs has spawned contracts with Little, Brown and NBC, plus bids from overseas, that will probably amount to \$5 million.

But the name Gerald Ford simply does not spark that kind of dollars and cents enthusiasm. In fact, in the weeks after the election it was almost

immediately clear that publishers would be as interested in the memoirs of the first lady as they would be in the president's.

Betty, after all, could write about her days dancing with Martha Graham; she could write about romance, motherhood, first-lady-hood, and her fight against cancer. She's widely admired; well-known for her candor and independent mind.

Her husband, on the other hand, might be expected to write a quintessentially political memoir with no more candor than is customary in the genre—even, or perhaps especially, if he writes about his encounter with the presidency. If he is intent on a chronicle of his years in the House of Representatives, sales expectations are low indeed. (New York freelancer Chris Chase is expected to help Mrs. Ford with her book, while Trevor Armbrister will help the former president with his.)

So the Fords' agents, Norman Brown and Owen Laster of the William Morris Agency (which handles the

media marketing of the whole Ford family, as well as Armbrister and Chase), offered publishers a package deal: both books for one big price.

Several houses made bids over \$100,000. Executives at Simon & Schuster said that their house made "a good bid of six figures" (S&S published Ford's only previous book in 1965, *Portrait of the Assassin*, about Lee Harvey Oswald). An executive at Doubleday said his company also bid six figures. "Then Laster came back to us and said he had something much higher"—about \$1 million—much more than seemed justified by market projections.

That bid has been offered by Harper & Row in association with Reader's Digest.

Executives at those companies will not comment except to say that negotiations are in progress and no contract has been signed. Agent Owen Laster, while refusing to discuss the matter, said an announcement would be made this week.

Melvin Laird—former secretary of

defense and long-time friend, confident backer and booster of Gerald Ford—has been the senior counselor for national and international affairs at Reader's Digest since he left the Ford Administration in 1974. Laird could not be reached for comment.

In the last few weeks Harper's has sold the paperback rights to the novel *Olivier's Story* for \$1.5 million, and the epic romance *The Thorn Birds* for a record \$1.9 million, heady successes which also may have influenced the bid on the Fords' memoirs.

Correction

THE LITERARY CALENDAR last week mistakenly announced that Philip Levine and Beth Joeslow would read their poetry at Bookworks, 1800 M Street, on March 13. Levine and Joeslow will read on the 20th. Ed Dorn and Carlo Parcelli will read on the 13th, at 8 pm. Admission is \$2.