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Magazine C. Oswald

# Woman behind the gun

By Marya Mannes

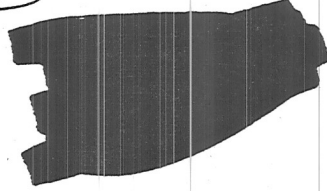
A MOTHER IN HISTORY. By Jean Stafford. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 121 pp. \$3.95.

Some months ago the major portion of Miss Stafford's interview with the mother of Lee Oswald appeared in McCall's Magazine. The compelling interest of this self-portrait—for the writer let Mrs. Oswald speak for herself—was equaled only by the nature of the reader reaction to the piece. Letter after letter poured in repeating words like "disgusted," "shocked," "outraged." A Congressman wrote a long diatribe in which he accused both the magazine and Miss Stafford of "cheap, sensational journalism," expressing shock and disgust at exposing the "almost incoherent rambling of this obviously emotionally distraught mother" to the public. A widely distributed editorial in the St. Paul Pioneer Press called the article "tasteless and obscene," and charged McCall's with giving Mrs. Oswald a "platform from which she spouts a sick theory that her son was involved with the Secret Service in a 'mercy killing' conspiracy" to remove an incurably sick President from office.

None were more surprised at this storm of protest than Miss Stafford herself and the editors of the magazine. For what she had done was—and is—a most valuable analysis of a woman sick with a spiritual and emotional malignancy. Like a good analyst, Miss Stafford hardly speaks at all, letting the wild, enter-

*Bea Will*

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 The Washington Daily News \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Evening Star \_\_\_\_\_  
 New York Herald Tribune \_\_\_\_\_  
 New York Journal-American \_\_\_\_\_  
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 The New York Times \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Baltimore Sun \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Worker \_\_\_\_\_  
 The New Leader \_\_\_\_\_  
 The Wall Street Journal \_\_\_\_\_  
 The National Observer \_\_\_\_\_  
 People's World \_\_\_\_\_  
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minable flow, alternately deluded and canny, outraged and cosy, spill from the woman's lips into a tape recorder as she exonerates herself and her son from all blame, points condemning fingers at a shifting host of "Theys" and heaps scorn on the official establishment and the gullible public alike. Those, mostly from other lands, who still persist in claiming that the assassination of President Kennedy was a conspiracy, can find it in the pages of this small book. For Lee Oswald was indeed the victim and product of that conspiracy of genes and circumstance joined in the person of his mother. One need look no further for the making of a destroyer.

Where Jean Stafford's great skill is manifest is in the brief interpolations, between Mrs. Oswald's copious stream, in which she describes the meticulously neat little house filled with small "decorative" objects the owner "just picked up" but empty of all roots; observes the owner's mannerisms and idioms, her bustling profers of coffee and collaboration; tells of her own hideously hilarious struggles with the tape-recorder, of the harrowing visit with the mother to the son's grave; manages to convey the trauma of her own involvement with this woman without ever raising her voice.

Not only is she far too good a writer to have done so, but her subject did it for her. Matching Mrs. Oswald's parade of incredible statements and comments was a copper scroll hanging in her living room on which these words were engraved: "MY SON—LEE HARVEY OSWALD EVEN AFTER HIS DEATH HAS DONE MORE FOR HIS COUNTRY THAN ANY OTHER LIVING HUMAN BEING—MARGUERITE C. OSWALD." Matching this was Mrs. Oswald's suggestion that "On Mother's Day, let's come out and say that he died in the service of his country."

Certainly, *A Mother in History* could be nothing less than a shocking account; an aversion to Marguerite Oswald on the basis of her past behavior and continuing greediness for attention is understandable. What is disturbing is that so many readers should have construed this report as a tasteless "expose," as an exploitation of Mrs. Oswald and an affront to Jacqueline Kennedy's feelings, as a gross invasion of privacy for the sake of publicity and profit, as a desecration of a beloved young President's memory.

Obviously it hit a raw public nerve, obscuring reason and comprehension. For nobody reading Miss Stafford's closing chapter, reliving that November day in 1963, could doubt for a moment that her nerve was as raw as theirs, her wound as easily opened. This small book is a triumph of control not only over material but over the writer's emotions. Those who misconstrue it are apparently unable, or unwilling, to face the reality of Marguerite C. Oswald, mother of Lee.

