

Robert C. Maynard

Pat 1/31/74

# Agnew's Novel And Other Whodunits

Imagine this as a minor mystery of the sort being revived on radio: the cast of characters would include a former Vice President of a rich and powerful nation, two well-known women columnists on the two newspapers in the nation's capital, a friend of the former VP and the head of one of the largest and most successful book publishing houses in the world.

The *corpus delicti*, although no one is certain death has occurred, is not a person, but a thing, the first chapter and the outline of a novel by the said Vice President.

Until Thursday, Jan. 24, no one in the capital, which seethes in intrigue year 'round, knew that the former Vice

## The News Business

President was a literary man. At least not that kind of literary man. We had all heard of "nattering nabobs of negativism" and "tomentose" radicals, but nobody ever thought of a whole volume made up of such phrases.

Yet, on Thursday morning, The Washington Post broke the news:

**SPIRO AGNEW: ANOTHER REJECTION SLIP** said the headline. Beneath, Maxine Cheshire, who has been known to unearth some unearthly gems about her fellow men and women, announced that the former Vice President's efforts had been dismissed by a major publisher "on its merits," if that's the right term.

"I'm not sure," the unnamed publisher told Ms. Cheshire, "I'd want to publish Agnew unless he wrote 'Ulysses.'" Well even though that doesn't sound as if his efforts were rejected on their merits, it did sound as if the unnamed publisher had a definite idea of his likes and dislikes in books and former Vice Presidents.

It also sounded as if that was the end of Mr. Agnew's budding literary career, but the demise turned out to last only as long as it took for the Washington Star-News to hit the streets.

There was Ms. Cheshire's opposite number, Betty Beale, reporting that:

"Former Vice President Spiro T. Agnew has written a novel which will be published soon by Random House."

She added that Agnew broke this news "last night to his former aide, Peter Malatesta, when he and Mrs. Agnew came out of their seclusion to give a party in their Kenwood house." The former Vice President, furthermore, was reported to be "very tickled" at writing a novel, even though he hadn't known before that he had it in him "until I sat down and wrote one."

Well, it looked as if one of two things had happened between the last edition of The Post and the first of the Star-News. Either more than one publisher had seen the manuscript—one obviously taking a dislike to it and the former Vice President—or Ms. Cheshire and Ms. Beale had vastly different sources.

The plot thickened at noon. The next edition of the Star-News hit the street and all references to Random House had been expunged, but the story was otherwise intact.

Naturally, all eyes turned to Random House. The excision of its name was the first firm clue that only one publisher was involved in the plot about a "spy novel."

Robert L. Bernstein broke cover. He admitted that he, the head of Random House, was the publisher quoted in The Post story, that he had rejected the Agnew book and that the Star-News story was wrong in saying he would publish it. "Absolutely and totally untrue," he said of the Star-News story.

So much for what was then known. The question was raised as to whether the Star-News reporter had checked with Random House before naming it

as the publisher of the Agnew novel. The answer was that the Star-News had checked, but at 9:15 that Thursday morning. By then, 85,000 newspapers, the Star-News Capital Special edition, were spinning off the press announcing a non-event.

"We should have checked first," a Star-News editor admitted. "It was inexcusable."

But another Star-News editor wasn't so sure about that:

"We had what we thought was a good source," he explained. "Agnew told it to a whole group of people at a party. He was on Cloud 9. He couldn't have known it was rejected. They (Random House) didn't tell him before they leaked it to the press."

Not so, countered Random House.

"He was told the book was rejected at 3:15 p.m. on the previous Monday by a Random House representative," said a Random House spokesman.

So, there is the mystery that only one person can explain. If author Agnew had been informed on Jan. 21, a Monday, that his creative efforts had been rejected, then why did he say to his gathered friends on the evening of Wednesday, Jan. 23, that he had a contract with Random House?

Part of the answer appears to rest with the manner in which Agnew apparently was told by Random House editor Joseph Fox that Random House would not accept the novel.

Fox, according to several sources, told Agnew that his work was publishable, that it had potential as a salable novel, but that it was not right for the Random House list. At least one Random House official said that if his firm published Agnew's book, it might appear that it had commercial motives apart from the literary merit of the former vice president's work.

Apparently, then, there was room for misunderstanding on the part of Agnew, a misunderstanding that led one of his friends to pass the word to a

*"The next edition of the Star-News hit the street and all references to Random House had been expunged."*

reporter, who, in turn, passed it along to the public before double checking.

Items reporters learn at cocktail parties sometimes are not given the kind of scrutiny they might get under other circumstances. The fact that parties are held at night when it is hard to reach confirming sources is surely part of the problem, as Ms. Beale pointed out in a post-mortem telephone conversation.

The Star-News of Jan. 25, carried a correction of the Random House error only in its first edition, the Capital Special, which accounts for a fifth of its press run.

A Star-News editor explained that the paper carried the correction only in the edition in which the error occurred because, "it would have been confusing otherwise."

As a result, the information the newspaper had carried an error is in danger of not catching up with those persons who saw the Capital Special on Thursday and a later edition on Friday.

And the wire services didn't help either. The UPI story that was moved on the flap never identified the Star-News as the source of the Random House error, thus making yet other errors possible.

Somewhere in America, then, it is possible there are people waiting for Random House to bring forth the spy thriller it never agreed to publish, by a former Vice President in search of a literary career.