

Author in a Dilemma Man Behind the Kennedy Book

New York

"SELF PITY IS an occupational disease among writers," William Raymond Manchester observed one day last August as he discussed the amount of money he might receive as author of "Death of a President," his version of the assassination of President Kennedy. "I won't reach for the crying towel," he went on. "Nobody asked me to become a writer."

Caught in a moral dilemma that rarely confronts an author, the 44-year-old ex-Marine was known to have been "queasy" about putting a price tag on two years of intense and emotionally painful research into the death of a man he had regarded with adoration.

He never wanted to make much money from the book, he insisted. He took on the project at the request of Mrs. John Kennedy and he regarded it as "a special trust," he said.

He never dreamed that Look magazine would pay \$665,000 for first serial rights, he said. First serial rights payments usually go to the author.

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BESIDES having qualms about enriching himself as a result of the book, Manchester imposed upon himself the chore of censoring ten hours of taped interviews with Mrs. Kennedy.

Because Mrs. Kennedy poured out her recollections of the assassination and her reactions to it in intimate and searing detail, Manchester said he had decided not to use much of the taped material — "it would be an unwarranted invasion of privacy" — but to

turn it over to the John F. Kennedy Library in Boston, where it would be kept under seal.

But under the terms of the agreement, a panel of five ex-New Frontiersmen were permitted to read the manuscript of his book. Portions of the book to which this panel objected were censored on the basis of taste, violation of the national interest, or possible bias toward President Johnson. Manchester contends that he is not prejudiced against either Mr. Johnson or anyone else.

His book is certainly no "Macbird," according to those who have seen it, but there are portions which, wrenched from context, might conceivably put President Johnson in a bad light.

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SENATOR Kennedy's suggestion in the legal brief filed this month that "Manchester was becoming ill from an obsession with the thought that the book might never be published" was belittled by close friends of the writer.

"Bill Manchester just plain got tired," one of them said. "How would you feel if you had to watch the film of the assassination of the President 75 times? He was absolutely absorbed on this project and it wore him to a frazzle. For a time last spring he was suffering from nervous exhaustion. But to say he was 'obsessed' is baloney."

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WHAT WON the assignment for Manchester? He was not a writer of wide repute; none of his works had approached the best-seller list. But the Kennedys had liked one of his books.

This was "Portrait of a President," a study of John F. Kennedy that some critics found too relentlessly flat-

tering. Mrs. Kennedy, recalling that the President had praised Manchester's prose style, suggested Manchester for the assassination book.

She did this, she explained in a handwritten letter to Jim Bishop, who was working on his own assassination book, to "protect President Kennedy and the truth."

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IF MRS. KENNEDY feared vivid writing, she was apparently not too conversant with the whole range of Manchester's work. Except for the Kennedy portrait, which was tame and adulatory, his prose was free-swinging and, in his novels, even gamy.

He crammed quite a bit of sex in his novel about India, "Shadow of the Monsoon," and in "The Long Gainer," a novel about a football coach who became a college president.

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BORN IN Attleboro, Mass., on April 1, 1922, Manchester attended the University of Massachusetts and the University of Missouri School of Journalism. For his master's thesis at the university of Missouri, he chose the life and works of H. L. Mencken, a chore that led him to Baltimore and eventually to a job on the staff of the Baltimore Sun, which he served as a local general assignment reporter and as a foreign correspondent (in India and Southeast Asia).

In World War II he was with the Marines in the southwest Pacific and was wounded in the Okinawa invasion.

In 1955, after eight years on the Baltimore Sun, Manchester became managing editor of news periodicals for high schools of American Education Publications, Middletown, Conn.

He left this job in 1964 to devote his full time to the Kennedy assassination book.

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