

# A Festschrift for a Kennedy

By HERBERT MITGANG

**AMERICAN JOURNEY: The Times of Robert Kennedy. Interviews by Jean Stein. Edited by George Plimpton. 372 pages. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich. \$8.95.**

A nice idea in theory—telling a man's life through the voices of his friends on a funeral train—goes off the rails in "American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy." The book is billed as a new genre in publishing—"the use of oral history as a form of communication"—but pull the plug on the tape recorder and what emerges in print is an old-fashioned Festschrift by friends. Technique usually is unimportant to the reader (stubby pencils or electric ball keys, standup writing table or feather quills—who cares?) but here it goes to the substance as well as the style of the book. The gang's all here—Boston pols, Hickory Hill athletes, camp followers and campaigners, true believers in the journalistic fraternity, black and white civil rights activists, Government deserters from the Johnson Administration, the entertainers and over-achievers whose dreams were also killed by an assassin. Certainly Jean Stein, who conducted the interviews, and George Plimpton, who edited them, knew where to go and who counted in the Kennedy circle for they were part of the inner ring. To their credit, once the research got under way, it was recognized that those invited aboard the train could tell only a part of the Kennedy saga; they reached out and conducted several hundred interviews across two years. Many are indispensable to understand what makes Kennedys run.



Jill Kremenitz

Robert F. Kennedy

## Reporting in Retrospect

The total *olla-podrida* is a mixture of warm recollections and relaxed reporting in retrospect, served up to show Senator Kennedy's development from tough egg in the days he worked for Joe McCarthy through his astonishing growth as a sympathetic observer of the underlife in America. One of the astute remarks in the book is made by Alice Roosevelt Longworth, comparing John and Robert Kennedy: "I see Jack in older years as the nice little rosy-faced old Irishman with the clay pipe in his mouth, a rather nice broth of a boy. Not Bobby. Bobby could have been a revolutionary priest."

Whenever "American Journey" stays within its restricted format, the trivia overpowers the history. Carter Burden, a

campaign aide, relates how his mother-in-law, Babe Paley, brought a big picnic basket full of paté de foie gras (leftovers from The Ground Floor?) sandwiches to Kennedy campaign headquarters—and someone there said, "That's the best liverwurst I've ever tasted!" It's the kind of story that deserves a demerit in the limo ride to Bedford-Stuyvestant, chauffeured by a talented paper lion.

Whenever the professional politicians are transcribed to the printed page, the book gains weight. Forget Ethel Kennedy trying to get Andy Williams to sing "Ave Maria" over Leonard Bernstein's objections, or Ruth Berle, family friend, recalling how mad Milton was because the press stood on the pews, or Pierre Salinger telling a woman TV producer she had to go along for the funeral ride to Washington because otherwise she would "miss the most emotional and the most impressive experience of your whole life." Forget, if possible, the desire revealed here of so many Kennedy intimates to be "with it" as starshine men and ladies-in-waiting.

## Problems Posed by Riders

Instead, look for the nougats and avoid the cream-filled centers. Kenneth O'Donnell relating how he got Bobby to tell Joseph Kennedy to stay out of Jack's Senatorial campaign because he really didn't know Massachusetts politics. Ramsey Clark telling about the problems posed by the Freedom Riders to the Department of Justice, and of Attorney General Kennedy's commitment and wisdom in the use of Federal marshals to defend black rights in the schools. Charles Evers talking about poverty in Mississippi and telling of Bobby's saying of a child with a swollen stomach, "My God, I didn't know this kind of thing existed! How can a country like this allow it?" César Chavez remembering Bobby's support of the grape strike and his speech: "Well, you can imagine Spanish with a Boston accent!"

And one of the few critical observations in the book, by Robert Scheer of Ramparts, which could not help coming out half-favorably: "It was very clear that Kennedy had an admiration for the revolutionaries around the world, although he lacked the guts and commitment to be one. He'd been raised in a traditional, political bag, and he was fundamentally a hack, but he could be awed by radicals."

"American Journey" is essential research on the hard road to independent biography. Robert Kennedy keeps growing in the book from politician to person. But even when reconstructed narratively, and the kind words of friends are discounted, taped impressions alone cannot assure the full and side views of men or events.