

Beleaguered Author

William Raymond Manchester



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"I won't reach for the crying towel"

"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

Man
in the
News

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 F. 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.

Censoring Chore

Senator Kennedy's suggestion in a legal brief filed yesterday that "Manchester was becoming ill from an obsession with the thought that the book might never be published" was belittled yesterday 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."

Beside having qualms about enriching himself as a result of the book, Mr. Manchester imposed upon himself the chore of censoring 10 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, Mr. 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.

No one else deleted the tapes, Mr. Manchester said, and he stressed that no member of the Kennedy family had ever asked to look at the manuscript.

But under the terms of the agreement, a panel of five ex-New Frontiersmen were permitted to read the manuscript. Portions of the book to which this panel objected were censored.

Objections of the panel were based on taste, violation of the national interest, or possible bias toward President Johnson. Mr. 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.

What won the assignment for Mr. 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.

Book Found Flattering

This was "Portrait of a President," a study of John F. Kennedy that some critics found too relentlessly flattering. Mrs. Kennedy, recalling that the President had praised Mr. Manchester's prose style, suggested Mr. Manchester for the assassination book.

She did this, she explained in a handwritten letter to the author, Jim Bishop, to "protect President Kennedy and the truth." She had heard that Mr. Bishop intended to write "The Day Kennedy was Shot" and she asked him to halt the project.

In a subsequent letter, she told Mr. Bishop that "none of the people connected with Nov. 22 will speak to anyone but Mr. Manchester—that is my wish and it is theirs also."

If Mr. Kennedy feared vivid writing, she was apparently not too conversant with the whole range of Mr. 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 becomes a college president.

Born in Attleboro, Mass., on April 1, 1922, Mr. 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).

Wounded in Okinawa

He was with the Marines in the Southwest Pacific and was wounded in the Okinawa invasion.

His thesis on Mencken was later developed into his first book — "Disturber of the Peace, the Life of H. L. Mencken." Subsequently, he wrote "The City of Anger," a novel based on the policy racket in Baltimore; "Beard the Lion," a suspense novel, and "A Rockefeller Family Portrait."

In 1955, after eight years on the Baltimore Sun, Mr. 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. His sketch in "Who's Who in the East" describes him as "official historian of assassination of U.S. President John F. Kennedy (designated by Mrs. Kennedy)."

Mr. Manchester married Julia Brown Marshall of Baltimore in 1948. They have three children—a son, John Kennerly, and two daughters, Julie Thompson and Laurie. The Manchesters are building a new house in Middletown.