



Books

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LITERARY HORIZONS

Mother of the Accused

LAST May one of our better writers of fiction, Jean Stafford, went to Dallas to spend three days interviewing Mrs. Marguerite Oswald, mother of the man accused of shooting President Kennedy. Her report, parts of which appeared in *McCall's* magazine, is now published in book form, entitled *A Mother in History* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$3.95). The name comes from a phrase Mrs. Oswald was fond of using.

The first question one asks is why Miss Stafford undertook this task, and the answer becomes clear only in the epilogue. On November 23, 1963, alone in her New York City apartment, she by chance turned on the radio, to hear the first reports of the assassination. Immediately she tried to reach her husband, A. J. Liebling, at *The New Yorker*, but the lines were jammed. Within half an hour, she says, the streets were deserted. When she finally reached Liebling, his voice was despairing. "I think I had counted on him," she writes, "to tell me that the news I'd heard on the radio wasn't true, that it was some monstrous hoax, and that a whole world of possibility still lay open to Kennedy." But there was no such relief for her—or for anyone else.

No disaster in my lifetime has dismayed so many people. To millions of Americans the death of Franklin Roosevelt was a stunning blow, much like the death of one's father; but Roosevelt had lived his life, rendered his service, and established as secure a place in history as anyone is likely to have. What was so tragic about Kennedy's death was, as Miss Stafford says, that for him there was still "a whole world of possibility." What I said to myself again and again, as one who had voted for him but had watched his career with a mixture of admiration and apprehension, was, "Now we'll never know whether or not he would have made a Great President." It was the sense of possible but as yet

unproven greatness that made his death so distressing.

Because of her feeling about Kennedy's death, I gather, Miss Stafford was interested in Mrs. Oswald. She writes: "If we accept (as I do) the premise that her son had something to do with the assassination and accept the further premise that the child is father to the man: we need to know the influences and accidents and loves and antipathies and idiosyncrasies that were the ingredients making up the final compound." So far as facts are concerned, she learned very little; but she saw Mrs. Oswald, and she makes us see her.

The search for facts was hopeless, for Mrs. Oswald not only refused to answer but never even heard questions; she made speeches. "Her voice," Miss Stafford reports, "had a considerable histrionic range; in a moment's time, she could shift her tone from resignation to irony, from sonorous patriotism to personal indignation, but at all times a central intelligence was at the controls, regulating the pitch and volume as she entered the successive roles of mother, citizen, widow, public figure. There was a suggestion of elocution lessons, nearly forgotten but learned well, long ago; and there was more than a suggestion of rehearsal and past performance—she spoke almost always in complete sentences, she was never visibly caught off guard."

Whatever else concerned Mrs. Oswald, consistency did not. "I can absolutely prove my son innocent," she said again and again. But if Lee Harvey Oswald did kill the President, she went on, that did not "make him a louse." "As we all know, President Kennedy was a dying man. So I say it is possible that my son was chosen to shoot him in a mercy killing for the security of the country. And if this is true, it was a fine thing to do and my son is a hero." To this idea, that

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Oswald may have been an agent of the secret service, doing what he did under official direction, Mrs. Oswald reverted again and again. But just as often and just as vehemently she insisted that he had nothing to do with the murder.

Miss Stafford interviewed Mrs. Oswald in the latter's modest but well-kept home in Dallas. Mrs. Oswald was not merely agreeable but hospitable, interrupting her opening tirade to offer her guest a cup of coffee. ("The drinking of coffee in Texas," Miss Stafford observes parenthetically, "is almost as involuntary as respiration.") While she made the coffee Mrs. Oswald continued her lecture, pausing to add, "with her sociable smile," "Do you take cream and sugar, sweetheart?" By the third day she was suggesting that Miss Stafford should rent the unoccupied half of her house, so that they could collaborate on various projected books about the assassination and make a lot of money.

These three interviews were an extraordinary experience for Miss Stafford, and, though she rightly lets Mrs. Oswald stand in the middle of the stage and

she does not conceal from the reader her own states of mind, her bewilderment, amusement, and helplessness. She could, it is clear, have written a very funny book, but she had too acute a sense of the seriousness of the issues involved to do it. Fortunately, however, she does not bury all the humor but gently underlines some of Mrs. Oswald's absurdities. Perhaps the biggest joke of all is the fact that the interviewer was so completely at the mercy of the interviewed: "My brains were scrambled eggs," Miss Stafford reports on the third day, the day on which she accompanied Mrs. Oswald to her son's grave.

Although Mrs. Oswald, as seen in this book, is as grotesque a character as one can find in Miss Stafford's fiction or almost anyone else's, I have known women a good bit like her—energetic, efficient in small matters, capable of great devotion to a cause, and infinitely resourceful in self-justification. Such women, if you don't listen carefully to what they are saying, seem to be making sense, and if you do listen carefully and point out their inconsistencies, they pay no attention to you. These women can make themselves believe anything they want to believe, and if you aren't careful they'll make you believe it too.

Whatever else may be true of Mrs. Oswald, she could not have had a stabilizing influence on her children. Only a psychologist with a vast amount of information at his disposal could say for certain what the connection was between Lee Harvey Oswald's upbringing and his crime. Miss Stafford doesn't pretend to have done anything like that, but she has given us an unforgettable picture of what is (I'm afraid) an unforgettable woman.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

**FRASER YOUNG'S
LITERARY CRYPT No. 1178**

A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1178 will be found in the next issue.

U ABWT BW LCFKWR FW XC-
EYZC FKC ZCMCHP WV NHR WZ
WNBWJUWYX PHTX XW CVVCE-
FUIC HX FKCUZ XFZUBOCBF CJC-
EYFUWB, —Y. X. OZHB

Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1177

It is a principle of human nature to hate those whom you have injured.
—TACITUS.

**LETTERS TO THE
Book Review Editor**



Influence of the Rector

I READ GRANVILLE HICKS's review of Louis Auchincloss's *The Embezzler* [SR, Feb. 5] with interest. I thought the review was a poor one. One of the comments was that *The Rector of Justin* was about an aged headmaster of a fashionable preparatory school and was remote from the everyday problems of today.

I wonder whether Mr. Hicks is aware how many educators and teachers have read this book and have been affected by it in their relationships with their pupils; of how many mothers and fathers who have been to preparatory schools have given the story attention and have thought of the implications, the advantages, the disadvantages that their sons and daughters are subjected to; of how many students in all schools and colleges have read the book and what effect it has on them. . . .

ARNOLD D. KATES.

New York, N.Y.

Invisible Man

TRUMAN CAPOTE got two million and his heroes got the rope. This conspicuous irony has not (to my knowledge) been shown in any assessment of *In Cold Blood* [SR, Jan. 15]. That book, for all practical purposes, was completed before the deaths of Smith and Hickock; yet, had they not died, there would have been no book. The author surely realized this, although within his pages it is stated that fifty thousand might have saved them—that only the poor must hang. . . .

Now I am suggesting no irresponsibility on the part of Capote other than as a writer: I am less concerned with ethics than with art. Certainly his reportage engrossed and scared me (as does Agatha Christie), and certainly he presented as good a case against capital punishment as Camus, say, or Koestler. But something rang false—or, rather, didn't ring at all. And his claim to an unprecedented art form gives cause for wonder.

For me an artist must, at any cost, expose himself: be vulnerable. Yet Capote the man, in his recent work, is invisible. Could it be that—like the Ortolan-eaters so admirably depicted in Janet Flanner's recent *Paris Journal*—he is hiding his head in shame?

NED ROREM.

Salt Lake City, Utah

GRANVILLE HICKS's review of *In Cold Blood* ends where it should have begun. I . . . felt cheated by the final sentence: "I will point out, however, that although this is a very, very good book, *Crime and Punishment* is a great one."

Since we'll all end up reading *In Cold Blood* or seeing the movie, we hardly need reviews that merely quote, summarize, and

praise. There are plenty of those on the market. What we want is a critic to discuss its place in the world of literature, and Granville Hicks is our man. In spite of encomiums ("highly successful," "subtle," "fascinating," "extraordinary skill") he indicates in his closing sentence that he has judged the book by some higher standards and found it wanting.

I will point out, however, that, until Mr. Hicks will tell us what these standards are, he will remain a very, very good critic, but not a great one.

BARBARA GEORGE.

Putney, Vt.

Accusations

I SHOULD LIKE to express to you my displeasure over the fact that you have seen fit to publish the review by Mr. Franz Schoenberger on Ernst Nolte's *Three Faces of Fascism* [SR, Feb. 5]. The reviewer's insinuations, backed up by out-of-context quotations, violate the ethical and professional standards of scholarship, to which I should think you consider yourself committed.

Quite apart from this question, the book is one of the most challenging and controversial works in the field of contemporary history. I would have hoped that Mr. Schoenberger had addressed himself, however critically, to its substance. . . .

Professor Nolte is one of the young European intellectuals who deserves our courtesy and respect.

K. VON KLEMPERER.

Northampton, Mass.

By Force of Numbers

IN AGREEMENT WITH ERIN EVANS's letter in SR Jan. 15, I too am concerned with "why is 'She writes like a man' the highest bit of praise that can be accorded" a woman writer. And this same deplorable condition is true in all the fine arts as well as all other intellectual fields. But the fact is, the arts were mainly established by men. Men have always been actively involved in them in greater numbers than women; hence it is not surprising that they set the form and the standards. . . .

MARTHA ALF.

San Diego, Calif.

Unfamiliar Locale?

YOUR SUBHEADING of Daniel Stern's review of James T. Farrell's *Lonely for the Future* [SR, Jan. 22] says, "returns to the author's familiar locale of Chicago in the 1930s." Mr. Farrell's new novel is set in the 1920s. None of his novels are set in the 1930s with the exception of the *Bernard Clare* trilogy and the last novel of the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy.

MEL CEBULASH.

Maywood, N.J.

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