

Books of The Times

Behind the Assassination

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

WINTER KILLS. By Richard Condon. 304 pages. Dial. \$7.95.

I gave up bothering with Richard Condon's books about five novels ago when in "Any God Will Do" he led me all the way through his snobbish hero's search for royal forebears, only to reveal at the end that said hero was actually the offspring of dwarfs. It seemed to me that Mr. Condon was making his point through overkill, just as he had done in his previous novel, "An Infinity of Mirrors," a one-dimensional attempt to exploit our revulsion with Nazism. The verve and cleverness that produced "The Manchurian Candidate" seemed drained. And what little I was able to read of the four novels that followed "Any God Will Do" failed to dispel this impression. Either Mr. Condon had burned himself out, or the atmosphere of the times had passed him by. But when I dutifully began to read his 11th and latest novel, "Winter Kills" (the title comes from "The Keeners' Manual": "Spring seduces, Summer thrills, Autumn sates, Winter kills."), and I discovered that it concerns a young oil entrepreneur named Nick Thirkield whose father, Tom Kegan, is one of the wealthiest men in America and whose older half-brother, President Tim Kegan, was shot to death from the sixth floor of the TV Center warehouse while riding in a motorcade through Hunt Plaza in Philadelphia on Feb. 22, 1960, I did a slow double-take.

Surprise on Surprise

When I learned that one of Nick's crane operators had suffered a fatal accident and was confessing on his deathbed that he had been the second rifleman on that fateful day in Philadelphia; and that there had been a third sniper, a police buff named Joe Diamond, who had shot from a grassy knoll in front of the motorcade; and that the first gunman, who had been caught by the police and shot to death in captivity by Joe Diamond, had never fired any shots at all and had merely been the fall guy, I began to turn the pages of "Winter Kills" faster.

And by the time I reached the end of the novel's incredibly complex plot and had followed Nick Thirkield through the



Richard Condon

many blind alleys and trapdoors that eventually bring him face to face with the person behind his brother's assassination, I was a Richard Condon fan once more.

The reasons for my reconversion seem fairly simple. First, Mr. Condon has contrived his plot so that the shocking surprises never stop coming. Hardly has Nick located the murder weapon that confirms his dead crane operator's story, when the weapon disappears and the other five people who know about it are reported dead. Hardly has Nick tracked down the leading suspect—a Texas billionaire named E. K. Dawson—and convinced himself that the suspect is guilty, when he discovers that the man he has interviewed is not E. K. Dawson at all. And such surprises keep coming until the very end.

Alternate Scenario

Second, Mr. Condon has taken full advantage of the recent history that his story so obviously departs from. That history is still very much alive in our imaginations, so there is something gratifying about playing games with it, even if the games are outlandish. And they don't seem so outlandish. Even for those of us who accept the conclusions of what Mr. Condon refers to as the Pickering Commission report, there is a certain satisfaction in playing out alternate scenarios, if only in our imaginations. And there may even be a touch of truth to Mr. Condon's tenet "that in our modern society truths [do] not matter. The illusion of truths, the appearance of truth, indeed, let us say the application of the techniques of fiction playing like searchlights upon a fanciful facade of truth . . . entirely suffice."

Finally, there is the atmosphere of Presidential politics in the nineteen-seventies, to which the story inevitably addresses itself. It may not be true that the man on whom President Tim Kegan is roughly based made deals with the rich and powerful. It may not be true that America is run by a small, conspiring oligarchy. It may not be true that things happen in the White House at the whim of movie stars and labor leaders, of courtesans and generals. But the possibilities are no longer inconceivable. At the very least, Mr. Condon gratifies our paranoia.

In short, "Winter Kills" is grand entertainment. If my only complaint is that I caught on too early what the ultimate outcome would be, I can let it pass because there are so many surprising twists before that outcome is realized. For my money, this is the best book Mr. Condon has written since "The Manchurian Candidate." The times have caught up with him, or vice versa, and I'm happy to be on his fanwagon once again.