

A national tragedy that wa

By Mickey Friedman

"I wanted to say, this is a man as much as the guy he killed." That's the way Priscilla Johnson McMillan, author of "Marina and Lee," looked at the task of portraying Lee Harvey Oswald, the assassin of President Kennedy.

Assassins, McMillan said, have

been treated as if the atrocity of their actions strips them of all humanity. But they have stories to be told, as their victims do. In "Marina and Lee," McMillan tells that story for Oswald.

As important, or even more important, is the story she tells for Marina, Lee's Russian-born wife, who at the time of Kennedy's death

was 22 years old and couldn't speak English. McMillan, who speaks Russian and had worked as a translator and correspondent in Moscow (where she interviewed Oswald when he defected to the Soviet Union), met Marina shortly after the assassination, obtained the rights to her story, and lived with her for seven months. The memories Marina shared with her then

form the backbone of "Marina and Lee."

McMillan makes no secret that she feels friendship for Marina, although she does not believe her portrayal was biased. "I didn't know whether I was being favorable or unfavorable," she said. "I wrote as it seemed to me. I tried not to judge her or Oswald. History has passed such a heavy judgment already."

Marina has read the book, which delves into the most private, personal recesses of her life, and remains a friend, McMillan said. "She waived her right to approve the book. She gave me a free hand. She felt she owed something to the American people."

After their initial intensive work together, McMillan didn't see Marina again until last summer. Through the years, the author continued working on the book. "I needed to be at a distance," she said. "I wanted to fix for the book her past life and her life up to the assassination."

Meanwhile, McMillan was going to other sources to piece together the details of the Oswalds' life. "I talked with the members of the Russian emigre community in Dallas-Fort Worth, looked at postmarks on letters and time sheets for all the jobs Lee had, corresponded with his typing teacher, relatives, landlords and landladies every place he lived," she said. "I did everything I could to put together a picture of what he was like."

The result is a meticulously detailed portrait — not only of the Oswalds' marriage, but of Marina's entire life. "I really wrote two books," McMillan said. "The first was Marina's life until she met Oswald. Everybody who has been a correspondent in Russia wants to do a book on Russia. In some ways, that was the book I was supposed to do."

"Marina and Lee" traces Marina's unhappy girlhood as an illegitimate child whose stepfather was hostile to her and her uncertain adolescent years when her mother died and she felt out-of-place and unwanted. On March 17, 1961, Marina met Lee Harvey Oswald, an American defector known as Alik, at a dance at the Palace of Culture in Minsk. A little more than a month later, on April 30, Marina and Lee were married.

McMillan treats Lee's early life



Examiner Photo by Mike Musura

Priscilla Johnson McMillan, author of 'Marina and Lee'

also, but not in as much detail. For the two and a half years of the Oswalds' marriage, however, she accounts for practically every day. Her book has alienated the assassination conspiracy theorists because she has left almost no space of time unexplained, thereby making it less likely that Lee could have been involved in clandestine meetings. "I don't take on the conspiracy theories head-on, but I did account for his time," she said. "I did that as closely as I could."

McMillan is convinced that Oswald schemed alone, as is Marina and almost everyone else who knew him. In "Marina and Lee," she writes, "Since it is difficult, if not impossible, to prove a negative, it

cannot be established that conspirators did not ever contact him, or he them. But for anyone who was contemplating something serious, Oswald would appear to have been too conspicuous, especially in the Southwest, for he was an ex-defector to Russia who flaunted his Russian and had a Russian wife, he was an almost inevitable magnet for the FBI's attentions, and he was a young man who blatantly sought publicity instead of avoiding it. And if his outer characteristics rendered him an unlikely recruit, his personality rendered him unlikely still . . . He had proven that he was capable of taking drastic action and dangerous risks — but always

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alone." —From preceding page

McMillan tells a compelling story in "Marina and Lee." The accretion of sordid, pitiful details is almost numbing as it leads to the conclusion the reader knows is inevitable. Lee Oswald insulated himself from a world where he couldn't make it by retreating into delusion. Unfortunately, he also insulated his wife, making her a

participant in his own skewed fantasies. He forbade her to learn English, adding to her isolation in a strange country; he beat her, cowering her through fear; he lied to her constantly. Still she clung to him, torturing herself with the fear that he no longer loved her. The story is at once pathetic and horrifying.

Step by step, McMillan traces the building of pressures that led to Oswald's ultimate loss of touch with

reality. One of the main events contributing to the final snap was FBI agent James Hosty's visit to Marina, at a friend's house in Irving, Texas, where she had been staying: "To Oswald, this apparently meant only one thing — he was about to suffer retribution for all his sins, both those he had actually committed and those which existed only in his imagination," McMillan writes.



AP Photo

'I don't take on the conspiracy theories head-on, but I did account for his time'

Lee Harvey Oswald was 'capable of taking drastic actions and dangerous risks'

Other contributing factors, she said, might have been an argument that Marina and Lee had when she discovered he was living at a rooming house under an alias; the announcement of the route of the presidential motorcade, which would go by the School Book Depository where Lee worked (meaning to him that he had been chosen to kill Kennedy); and Marina's refusal, three times, to move back to Dallas with Lee.

Although apparently she often showed her temper, Marina is

portrayed as willingly dependent — of having such a poor opinion of herself that she accepted mistreatment. "She has been angry with Lee for what he did to the country," McMillan said. "But not as angry as she should have been for what he did to her." When the Harper and Row editors read the book, McMillan said, "They hated Marina so much and their comments about her were so negative, I went to bed and cried for two days."

Marina remains an insecure person, McMillan said. "Like most Russians, she has no sense of time or money. She has no shell, which

makes her life a continuing saga of pain. She has never become an American citizen because she's afraid of failing the test. She doesn't want to be rejected. I'd love to see her get a better image of herself."

Marina now lives outside Dallas with Kenneth Porter, whom she married in 1965 and divorced in 1974, but who remains her common-law husband. She and Oswald had two daughters — June, now 15, and 14-year-old Rachel, and she and Porter have an 11-year-old son, Mark. "All three children are very protective of Marina," McMillan said.