



# Books

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## LITERARY HORIZONS

### The Generation of the Assassination

AT ONE session of the University of Chicago's conference on "The Arts and the Public" (SR, Nov. 19) three novelists — Wright Morris, Reynolds Price, and Richard Stern — opened the discussion by talking about their own most recent books. The fact unexpectedly emerged that each of the novels had been significantly affected by the death of President Kennedy. The death is, of course, the center of Morris's *One Day*, the event which makes that day different, for the people in the book, from any other day. In Stern's *Stitch* the assassination takes place only five or six pages from the end, but, as Stern pointed out to the conference, the tragic occurrence served his purposes as a novelist by permitting him to bring together the various themes with which he had been engaged. In Price's *A Generous Man* the assassination does not figure at all, but, as he explained, it was responsible for the shape his novel took. He had been working for some time on a "story of waste and self-destruction," and it wasn't going well. Then came the assassination, "and the great wave of blank waste which rolled over all of you of course included me and added to my own sour taste of idleness and failure." In despair for days, he suddenly got an idea for a different sort of book, a funny book, a book that would be an antidote to his unhappiness, and he went to work on it with enthusiasm. But it turned out to be a sad book after all.

Not many Americans were unaffected by the assassination, though it had various meanings for various people. Vance Bourjaily in *The Man Who Knew Kennedy* (Dial, \$5.95) is examining the meaning of the event for the generation to which Kennedy belonged, and his novel is the story of a part of that generation.

When the incredible news comes over the radio the narrator, Barney James, and his wife are flying to San Juan, where

they are to meet an old friend, Dave Doremus, and his new wife, with whom they plan to take a week's cruise on a chartered boat. All Barney knows is that he wants to get home and be with his children, and he insists on abandoning the cruise in spite of Dave's pleas. On the trip back he can think of nothing but the tragedy. He remembers that when he heard of Roosevelt's death he had just returned from a routine flight (he was in the Air Force in England). "Roosevelt's death had brought an hour of sadness for an old hero, gone to rest. We were ready for it, even if we didn't know we were. But I am no more ready for Jack Kennedy's death, I thought, than I am for my own."

Through Barney's recollections of Dave we learn about the relationship between the two men—their meeting in high school and their subsequent adventures, an idyllic cruise after the war with two beautiful and obliging sisters, and the ups and downs of their friendship through the years. Although Dave is the man who knew Kennedy, and it is his story Barney sets out to tell, they are of equal importance in the novel. In the *Literary Guild Preview* Bourjaily says that he had learned, living in exurban Connecticut, that not all businessmen were "Babbitts, or tyrants, or dupes, or operators," and in Barney James he tried to show "one of the good guys, the kind I liked." By and large he has succeeded. Barney is a small manufacturer, with reasonably high ideals and relatively broad interests, including jazz, Elizabethan poetry, and bird-watching. He dislikes Madison Avenue and tries to protect his children from television. His marriage is less than ideal, but, as he says, he knows how to get along with his somewhat promiscuous wife even if he doesn't always love her.

Dave, the more venturesome of the two, has led a less conventional life than Barney. Trained in the law, he has

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worked as an industrial consultant and has done well. He has also had a brief fling in politics. Although he knew Jack Kennedy only for a week or so, when they were in the same hospital during the war, he has known about the Kennedy family all his life, and has dreamed of doing as well as Jack Kennedy—or better. However, in the years before the story opens, before the assassination, he has had bad breaks, including a serious involvement with a young singer who is a drug addict.

As he is thinking about Kennedy, Barney suddenly remembers a man who was in college with him, a man to whom everyone looked up, a man who seemed to have everything, a man who possessed all the virtues of the moneyed families on the Eastern seaboard. The man in Barney's life was named Tom Angus. "Tall Tommy, hell, that was it. That was it; I knew Kennedy. We all knew Kennedy. He went to college and the war with all of us." Dave Doremus, he thinks, belonged in a way to the Kennedy type, and might have gone on to greatness if he had had better luck. Even Kennedy's luck, he reminds himself, didn't last: when he was on top of the world, he was struck down by "a screwy, jittering little clown." "Every man, even

the most blessed, needs a little more than average luck to survive this world."

In an earlier novel, *The Hound of Earth*, one I have always liked, Bourjaily also made a historic event his center—the explosion of the atom bomb over Hiroshima. It is the story of a young scientist who tries to resign from the world when he discovers what it is he has been working on. Bourjaily's most recent novel, on the other hand, *Confessions of a Spent Life*, seems to grow almost entirely and directly out of his own experience. His strength, whether his approach to a novel is subjective or objective, is his familiarity with American manners in the postwar world. It is really, of course, only a small segment of American experience that he presents in *The Man Who Knew Kennedy*; but, such as it is, he gives it life.

The book is extremely readable, and in part, despite its solemn theme, it is charming. The Jameses and the Doreuses do take a cruise in the end, and though the days they spend on the ocean are full of emotional complications, Bourjaily writes with warm affection of the voyage itself. After the others have disembarked at Nassau and Dave has gone to his destiny, Barney and the skipper sail *The Bosun Bird* along the inland waterway to Long Island Sound, and the account of this trip, too, is written *con amore*.

What mildly bothers me about the book is that parts of it seem to me a little slick in a way that Bourjaily's earlier novels haven't been. Perhaps it is hard to write about the upper middle class in this age of affluence without either being angry or seeming smug. Bourjaily, who has written angry books, wanted to keep anger out of this one, and in that he was wise. I don't know exactly what would be the right tone, but I'm afraid he hasn't got it.

—GRANVILLE HICKS.

**FRASER YOUNG'S  
LITERARY CRYPT No. 1226**

*A cryptogram is writing in cipher. Every letter is part of a code that remains constant throughout the puzzle. Answer No. 1226 will be found in the next issue.*

DUIMI OMI ZIF CLMMLFC, ULF-  
INIM BLYJWOWD, YW FUYHU O  
JLLT YWHLAI YC LZ WL ONOYR.

—R. B. CAYDU

**Answer to Literary Crypt No. 1225**

*I regard reviews as a kind of infant's disease to which newborn books are subject.*

—LICHTENBERG.

## LETTERS TO THE Book Review Editor



### Ciao Africa Addio

ON HEARING THAT A SEQUENCE of the purportedly documentary film *Africa Addio* showed the shooting of three Congolese youths, the Italian government brought charges of participation in willful murder against the makers of the film. Approximately one year later, Jacopetti and Prospero were happy to see the charges dismissed when footage turned up portraying the "victims" in the best of health and spirits, getting into position to be shot . . . by the cameras. Several other sections of the work were proven to be equally fraudulent.

Following its release, twenty African nations and other interested or well-meaning parties have demanded that the film be withdrawn from circulation, claiming that it is not only unauthentic but also hate-inspiring.

To this I would say that, since hatred is in the eye of the beholder, people's feelings, whatever they may happen to be, will not be changed by the outrageously uncouth piece of camp conceived by Jacopetti and Prospero, promoted by John Cohen's text (commissioned by the film's distributor), and highly recommended by your reviewer Charles Miller [SR, Jan. 14], provided that it is not passed off as a true, documented account, but as—I quote the definition coined by Mr. John Cohen's American publisher—"a factual camera-eye story," and a tall one at that.

HAIKY SCAFETTA.

New York, N.Y.

### New Campus Individualists

IT IS PERHAPS WORTHWHILE to correct any false assumptions which might have been drawn from the statement in "New Look for the Campus Bookshop" [SR, Jan. 14], that "Ayn Rand . . . is popular with the new campus conservatives." To those who are not familiar with the writings of Miss Rand this might leave the impression that she herself is a political "conservative," a term which, unfortunately, represents as great a disappointment to the admirers of Miss Rand as does the current term "liberalism."

It might have been more accurate to call Ayn Rand's readers the "new campus individualists," as opposed to those students who merely defy convention and order of any nature for the sake of acceptance by the new breed of educators who wish to destroy the concept of true individualism.

It would have been even more accurate to refer to this group of young people as did Miss Rand herself—that is, as the "new intellectuals," as opposed to the members of the several literary, educational and political groups who are regarded as the intellectual élite of American society, and who at the same time are attempting to prove the helplessness of the intellect over such vague

concepts as "society"—"culture"—"environment" and other favorite escapes from the concept of individual responsibility.

MARTHA RATHER.

Starkville, Miss.

### To Bogart

I HAVE HAD A COMMUNICATION from a friend whose address is—and will continue to be for some time—Leavenworth, Kansas, and who is not permitted to write to editors. I quote:

I read the review of *The Riot* [SR, Jan. 7] and almost blew my top. It was the most unfair thing I can ever remember reading. If not that, the reviewer was ignorant. Elli had each of his characters modeled after a type common in all prisons, and except for the protagonist they were necessarily two-dimensional, or they'd have detracted from the protagonist. The reviewer said it reminded him of Jimmy Cagney movies. Of course it did! That's the role 50 per cent of the men inside are playing. Gangsters learned how to act like gangsters from the movies. In prison slang, to intimidate is to Bogart—revealing in itself. Men with twenty to thirty years of their lives spent in prison read *The Riot* and to a man said it was the most realistic and honest prison story they'd ever read.

From the horse's mouth . . .

DAN MARLOWE.

Harbor Beach, Mich.

### Negative and Positive Forces

I MUST TAKE SERIOUS ISSUE with Harry Schwartz's assumption in his review of *The Jews of Silence* [SR, Nov. 26] that "in every century it has been the anti-Semites who have guaranteed Jewish survival by provoking a stubborn reaction" from Jews who might otherwise have left their faith. This negative view of Jewish history cavalierly disregards Torah, Jewish learning, the Holy Land, charismatic leadership, strong family life, and, in America, a growing network of *yeshivot* and day schools as positive forces in Jewish survival. Does Mr. Schwartz really believe the cliché, long discounted by serious thinkers, that without anti-Semitism there would be no Judaism?

In his oversimplification, Schwartz also does an injustice to two other important positive elements in Judaism: the mystery of the election of Israel, and the stubborn belief in a God who is not dead.

Incidentally, would Schwartz suggest that we in Israel import a few thousand anti-Semites to insure our survival here? This is one aspect of our culture in which there is, fortunately, a grave shortage.

RABBI EMANUEL FELDMAN.

Ramat-Gan, Israel