

BOOK REVIEW

R.F.K. Must Die! ROBERT BLAIR KAISER. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1970. Pp. 634. \$9.95.

On March 20, 1970, the Supreme Court of New York was asked by Mary B. Sirhan to enjoin publication of a book dealing with "personal, private and confidential information pertaining to the lives of the Sirhan family." The suit asked two million dollars damages, an accounting and revocation of the contract between the convicted man and a free-lance writer who served as investigator for Sirhan Sirhan's lawyers. The suit contended that publication of the book would prejudice the defendant's chances of a fair hearing if he were subsequently granted a new trial. The court disagreed.

We approach the "assassination series" suspicious of over-commercialized exposés and wary of the influence on any author who splits his earnings with his subject, despite the noble purpose in this case of paying defense counsel's fees. But any anticipation of this book being an "authorized" version is unwarranted. Kaiser has written a meticulously honest book. It has its problems, though, as the author confuses his roles as chronicler, defense aide and psychiatric "buff." The book is important as a vital narrative of the concatenation of events that reveal the portrait of a man so far out of touch with reality that he baffled the doctors, the lawyers, the public, and from his Rorschach tests in the book, himself.

The fundamental facts of the Kennedy assassination are enshrined in video tape and in the memory of the nation. The killer's identity, the weapon, his diaries and the capture are as vivid today as were the details of the Lindbergh kidnapping some forty years ago. The question that escaped observation is why he did it; that is what this book is all about.

Sirhan himself offered an explanation, "but the story of why he killed—which he propounded at the trial—didn't make any sense," writes Robert B. Kaiser. The author's efforts to explain why Sirhan killed Robert F. Kennedy will be as successful as the reader's acceptance of the psychiatric approach to the theory and therapy of criminal behavior. Kaiser has made Dr. Bernard L. Diamond, defense psychiatrist and a founder of the theory of diminished capacity, a sub-hero in the book.

It has been suggested that to know Sirhan better is not to love him more. He complained to police upon his arrest that they should be

more "accommodating." His smirk was noted throughout the trial and he has never indicated remorse or contrition for his act. His quote to the author after sentencing has to epitomize the distortions of his mind: "Hell, I gained something. They can gas me but I'm famous. I achieved in a day what it took Kennedy all his life to do." When the late Senator's brother, Edward, wrote for clemency, Sirhan reportedly sneered, "It's just politics."

But perhaps Sirhan is the most misunderstood defendant in the annals of modern crime. Kaiser explores his subject and asks, "Was he his own man?" The Arab refugee had said of Kennedy, "I'd vote for him for God," and "I wish he were alive, sir, just to be President." At one point in the hours of interview, the author and others concluded that the use of the word "sir" was a tip-off to the lie that was coming.

Kaiser portrays Sirhan as a psychotic trying to picture himself as a hero by claiming he was an Arab patriot who killed Kennedy because he promised to send jet fighters to Israel. In a good piece of scholastic reporting, Kaiser points out that Kennedy did not say this until May 26th and in a virtually unnoticed speech, and Sirhan had written in his diary on May 18th, "R.F.K. must die."

The defendant insisted in his meeting with Kaiser and others that he had no recollection of writing these injunctions to himself, though he admitted the handwriting to be his. The question then becomes not one of conspiracy, à la Garrison, but whether Sirhan was under some type of hypnosis. No one ever explained the mysterious mention of money in the scribblings next to the dictate, "R.F.K. must die." One message read, "Please pay to the order of Sirhan Sirhan . . . the amount of 15 15 15 death life 15. \$15,000. Must die. Die. Die. Die. \$ life and death." Kaiser's study reveals that such money phrases appear only in the notebook on the "Kennedy pages."

Supporting the theory of some type of hypnosis, self-imposed or otherwise, is a statement by a police officer who found, when beaming a flashlight in Sirhan's eyes, that the pupils were "dilated and remained so . . . an indication that the gunman was either drunk or drugged." The prison doctor's observations of Sirhan shivering in a normal temperature room became significant when the psychiatrist later determined that this happened every time he came out of hypnosis.

It was the author's hero, Dr. Diamond, who probed the defendant most deeply and discovered his susceptibility to hypnosis. Diamond demonstrated Sirhan's ability to carry out post-hypnotic suggestions such as climbing the bars of his cell. When finding himself, much to

his own surprise, up on the bars, he would explain he was merely exercising.

Kaiser is a true believer in psychiatric ideology, and in the preface he writes, "My reporter's dream was complete when . . . the chief psychiatrist for the defense turned to me as the chief repository of knowledge about the case and began taking me into Sirhan's cell with him for his analysis. . . ." But even under hypnosis, Sirhan could not recall any of the events of the shooting. There were inconsistent and unusual blanks. Diamond asked him, "Did you think this all up by yourself?" Sirhan waited for five seconds, then answered, "Yes." Again Diamond asked him: "Are you the only person involved in Kennedy's shooting?" And then another three second pause before Sirhan answered, "Yes." Kaiser points out, purportedly supporting the "Manchurian Candidate" theory of Truman Capote, that one of the most sinister aspects of hypnosis is that a subject can be programmed to act—and programmed further to blank out of his mind all recollection of how he came to act and who instructed him.

The author, shifting to his role as defense aide, deplures police handling of witness Thomas Vincent Di Pierro, son of one of the maitre d's at the Ambassador, who confirmed reports of a polka dot dressed girl accompanied by a man running down a fire escape after the shooting. Kaiser finds Di Pierro one of the most accurate eyewitnesses with an exact story credible in every respect—but allegedly discredited by police to cover up their own inability to find the girl.

The Sirhan trial and its aftermath is a conflict between the defendant's apparent efforts to enhance his importance by attributing political significance to his act, and efforts by Diamond, Kaiser and others to diminish Sirhan's importance by asserting his diminished capacity, thus robbing the act of any significance. This illustrative statement was made by Dr. Diamond after the trial:

He claims to be ready to die in the gas chamber for the glory of the Arab people. However, I see Sirhan as small and helpless, pitifully ill, with a demented, psychotic rage, out of control of his own consciousness and his own actions, subject to bizarre, dissociated trances in some of which he programmed himself to be the instrument of assassination, and then, in an almost accidentally induced twilight state, he actually executed the crime, knowing next to nothing as to what was happening.

One of the psychologists for the defense supported this with the opinion: "This is not the performance of a healthy Arab but of a very sick, young American."

The sociologist's contention that society is the epic antagonist and co-conspirator, thus proving collective guilt and collective madness, is unfortunately inadmissible in mitigation. Time Magazine said: "Many see this event as the unleashing of a dark latent psychosis in the national character." One reviewer sadly pointed out that killing a famous person is one of the few remaining ways for an extra in life to become a star. But then, sentence to death guarantees a type of immortality. Thus, Sirhan has knowingly or otherwise forced a bargain upon us by his willingness to trade his life for Kennedy's. We are damned if we accept and execute, and damned if we don't.

The final chapter of Kaiser's book implies volumes to come, as it quotes Roger La Jeunesse, the FBI agent in charge of the Sirhan investigation: "The case is still open."

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