ForeWord Reviews

Kid Carolina: R. J. Reynolds, Jr.: A Tobacco Fortune and the Mysterious Death of a Southern Icon

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For much of his life, Richard J. Reynolds, Jr. was dogged by publicity, most of it bad. Even his death produced lurid speculation and rumors. People paid attention because the man was filthy rich. Yes, that's Dick Reynolds, the son of R.J. Reynolds, the American tobacco titan.

In Kid Carolina, author Heidi Schnakenberg has a story so full of bad conduct, weak character, and profligate living that one could imagine it had been concocted by the staff of the National Enquirer as a scenario for Dynasty. That the story is true makes it more compelling.

Reynolds (1906-1964) was one of the wealthiest men in America, and one of the most public. Besides the family's tobacco fortune, he helped create Delta and Eastern Airlines. Another family member produced a little product called Reynolds Wrap. There was plenty of money, and Dick Reynolds spent a lot of it on a variety of excesses.

Yachtsman, world traveler, war hero, philanthropist, politician, and hedonist of the first order, Reynolds was a fascinating, contradictory personality, and undoubtedly one of the most self-indulgent public characters you're likely to run across.

At the top of his list of favorite indulgences was booze. Reynolds was a champion alcoholic, capable of spectacular binges or simply disappearing for days at a time and turning up in some low haunt, treating one and all to non-stop partying. Reynolds was emotionally, and later, perhaps, mentally unstable, partly because of a brother's questionable suicide.

Then there were the women. Reynolds married three times and screwed all of his wives in more ways than one. Besides being unpredictable and unfaithful, he cunningly trapped them into unexpected divorces where he could cheat them out of any rightful share of his fortune. One divorce generated a marathon court battle in which dirty laundry was paraded out in embarrassing detail. Along the way, Reynolds managed to treat his six sons as if they belonged to someone else.

Reynolds's fourth and final marriage, to a German woman who ended up with much of his wealth, proved to be one of the most unusual. If his death was not quite the tantalizing murder mystery the subtitle of this book suggests, there are still plenty of unanswered questions.

The author's prose is mostly efficient and readable, despite occasional clichés and hints

of journalese. Credit her diligent research and admirable organization, which serve to keep the story moving even in the rare passages where her subject is on his best behavior.

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