ForeWord Reviews

HISTORICAL

November 22, 1963
Adam Braver
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History can fill the memory. If asked, “Where you were on September 11, 2001?” readers will no doubt remember exactly where they were and what they were doing. “Where were you on November 22, 1963?” This reviewer was teaching a speech class in a high school in Missouri. The principal’s voice came over the loudspeaker: “Boys and girls, the president has been shot.” It’s an indelible memory. Some readers are also familiar with Stephen Sondheim’s musical play, *Assassins*, in which John Wilkes Booth tells Lee Harvey Oswald how to be remembered.

Although the assassin does not appear in Adam Braver’s spellbinding novel, the reader meets real people coping with history. Braver’s technique is to get inside them as he tells the stories of, among others, a traumatized Jackie Kennedy determined to model the president’s funeral on that of Abraham Lincoln; Bobby Hargis, the Dallas motorcycle cop assigned to the motorcade; Abe Zapruder, whose home movie documented the moment of death; the Kennedy children’s nanny, to whom is given the awful assignment of telling Caroline and John that their father is dead; Lady Bird Johnson trying to get Jackie to change out of her blood-stained pink suit; the medical photographers documenting the autopsy; and the mechanic in charge of the limousine, who uses his pocketknife the scrape blood off the leather seats.

Though there are flashbacks and flash-forwards, the book takes readers from early morning in the Hotel Texas to about four o’clock the next morning, when Jackie Kennedy returns to the White House with her husband’s body. It’s not a conventional novel with rising action, climax, falling action, but a mesmerizing tidal wave of facts, portraits, episodes, and stories. Braver, who is the author of previous biographical novels loosely based on history and a writer in residence at the New York State Summer Writers Institute, has done his research well (his sources are given at the end of the book) and also interviewed some participants. But he doesn’t just give the facts; he gets inside the people. The narration of the story is elastic—sometimes omniscient author, sometimes first-person (the White House staff wondering about their jobs), sometimes second person (a phone interview with Hargis), and, most often, intimate third-person accounts of people trying to do their jobs on that awful day.

It’s a memorable novel about a day the nation would like to forget and needs to remember.

Barbara Ardinger