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“With a Friend Like This, She Needs No Enemies”

Reviewed by DAVID J. GARROW

THE SEDUCTION OF HILLARY RODHAM, by David Brock (Free Press, \$26, 452 pp.)

This unintentionally may be the funniest book of the year - and in more ways than one. David Brock, who three years ago achieved notoriety for attacking Justice Clarence Thomas' principal accuser in "The Real Anita Hill," now tries his hand at a biographical analysis of Hillary Rodham Clinton. However, "The Seduction of Hillary Rodham" is so incoherently paradoxical that most readers will be left befuddled rather than enlightened.

The most underwhelming and incongruous passages in "Seduction" come in the first 100-plus pages, where Brock's attempt to portray Hillary Rodham as a leading 1960s radical is so unpersuasive as to be inadvertently hilarious. Back in "The Real Anita Hill," a book that contained some valuable reporting and analysis, Brock erred most embarrassingly when he tried to paint Hill as "a full-fledged campus radical." In striving to do the same thing with Hillary Clinton, Brock's results are similarly unsuccessful.

Writers or activists in whom Rodham took an undergraduate or law school interest are unconvincingly inflated into major influences on her life, and whatever dubious political affiliations they once had are trotted out in order to illuminate her own supposed ideological pedigree. This proves so tendentious as to give "guilt by association" an even worse name than before, but Brock continues the tactic even after she has reached adulthood. For example, he says that "while Hillary chaired" the board of the Legal Services Corporation, a national, federally funded legal aid network, "the organization forged close links with the National Lawyers Guild (NLG), which had been founded in 1937 with the assistance of the International Labor Defense, the American section of the International Class War Prisoners Aid Society, an agency of the Comintern." Similarly, a West Coast attorney with whom she worked briefly is said to have "dedicated his entire legal career to advancing the agenda of the Soviet Communist Party and the KGB." The latter characterization may be actual libel, but the rest of this laughable drivel tells us nothing about Hillary Clinton, though it may speak volumes about David Brock.

Everyone - even Brock - ought to realize that a book on Hillary Clinton's weaknesses that never mentions Jean ("Let's Talk to Eleanor") Houston or Michael ("Politics of Meaning") Lerner while fantasizing about leftist subversion is going to be taking up shelf space in bookstores and warehouses for many months to come. But then, one-third of his way through "Seduction," Brock executes an odd change of course that's "funny" in another way - so curious as to be almost downright bizarre.

Once Hillary Rodham makes the profound mistake of marrying Bill Clinton, Brock's professed sympathy for her grows by leaps and bounds. His hilarious hyperbole about her radical proclivities ("throughout the 1970s and 1980s ... every major initiative of the left-wing legal activists ... bore the stamp of Hillary Rodham") is replaced by an outsized

concern that her principled leftism is being traduced by the political and sexual inconsistency of her often-wayward husband.

Here too, however, Brock's attempts at intelligent analysis often fall rhetorically wide of the mark. Brock offers a generally competent retelling of the many Arkansas political tales that have appeared in previous books about the Clintons, but there's virtually no new factual information here, and anyone looking for salacious details about Bill Clinton's involvements with Gennifer Flowers and company will be sorely disappointed.

In contrast to other journalists who know the Whitewater story far better than he does, David Brock insists that Hillary Clinton should be viewed first and foremost as an unwitting victim of her husband's character flaws and poor taste in close friends. Efforts to make her "the arch villain" of Whitewater are simply "wrong," he says, for "the roots of the problem can be traced not to Hillary, but to the Ozark mob into which she had the misfortune to marry."

Anyone who has paid more than passing attention to the Whitewater story will find Brock's insistent efforts to deflect blame from her, and rechannel all of it toward her husband, extremely unpersuasive. Even Brock admits that the White House "Travelgate" scandal inescapably reflects very badly upon her reputation for probity, but Brock's ironic glee in giving her a better report card than she's receiving from more liberal journalists overwhelms his interest in weighing the evidence. "The Seduction of Hillary Rodham" is so hilariously incongruous a book that perhaps David Brock is just toying with this material in order to promote his own persona.

David J. Garrow is the author of "Liberty and Sexuality" and the Pulitzer Prize-winning "Bearing the Cross."